

**The Finkenwalde Circular Letters**  
**Reveal the Heart of a Shepherd in Dietrich Bonhoeffer**  
**By Bryan Galloway**

In the spring of 1980, I was a student at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Dr. John Piper was my Greek professor. One day, he made the announcement to our class that he had accepted the call to become the Senior Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. In this announcement he stated that his true calling from God was to shepherd a local congregation of believers. He said that his heart was always for the local church.

I was stunned as I listened to his words. I actually sat there and disagreed with what Piper said. I thought to myself that that he was a great professor and there was no way that he would succeed as a pastor of a local church. He was a scholar and a professor, not a shepherd. I sincerely believed John Piper made a mistake and that he needed to remain on a college campus where his gifts would best be used.

Of course, history has since proved me wrong. Out of a context of a local church, God has greatly used Pastor Piper to not only shepherd the people of Bethlehem Baptist Church but to also impact the Body of Christ worldwide.

In the same way, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in many respects, was known as a scholar and University professor. He completed his doctoral dissertation in 1927 at the age of 21.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1929, Bonhoeffer was a lecturer in systematic theology at Berlin University.<sup>2</sup> In 1930, he studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York to as a Sloan Fellow.<sup>3</sup> In August

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly and Nelson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Testament to Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 531.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 531.

of 1931, Bonhoeffer was appointed lecturer in theology at Berlin University.<sup>4</sup> He, like all young scholars, was required to complete a second dissertation, in order to secure this appointment.<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation, *Act and Being*, was completed in 1929 and published in 1931. It was approved by the “theological faculty in July 1930 and became the basis for Bonhoeffer’s inaugural lecture at the university, ‘The Question of Man in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology’ delivered July 31, 1930.”<sup>6</sup> His academic pursuits continued the rest of his life through his writings and as the director of a Confessing Church Seminary at Finkenwalde.

No doubt, Dietrich Bonhoeffer could have had a successful career in the University environment. But he also possessed the heart of a spiritual shepherd, a pastor. Even in the midst of academic pursuits, Bonhoeffer was involved in the life of a local church. In 1928, he accepted his “first church position” as an assistant pastor to a German congregation in Barcelona.<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer spent this “dull” year “catering to the “spiritual needs’ of a couple of hundred German businesspeople, in a community already rocked with the destructive waves of the Depression, bankruptcy, and unemployment.”<sup>8</sup>

When he was in New York City in 1930, he preached and taught the catechism at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem on most Sundays and on many evenings during the week.<sup>9</sup> In 1931, Bonhoeffer began to teach confirmation classes at Zion Church in the Prenzlauer Berg

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<sup>4</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 531.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 10.

district of North Berlin.<sup>10</sup> In this “notoriously tough neighborhood”<sup>11</sup>, he was able earn the respect of the “sawed-off hoodlums”<sup>12</sup> through his youthful, athletic built and his “aristocratic bearing.”<sup>13</sup> But it was also his kind and gentle spirit that won the boys over.<sup>14</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a teacher, a lecturer and a pastor. The subject of this project is to show that the pastoral side of Dietrich Bonhoeffer can also be seen in his circular letters to his former Finkenwalde students. The Preacher’s Seminary of Finkenwalde was one of the five Confessing Church seminaries.<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer was the director of the Finkenwalde seminary from 1935 to 1937.<sup>16</sup> In September of 1937, all the Confessing Church seminaries were closed by the Gestapo.<sup>17</sup>

After the seminaries were closed down, Bonhoeffer continued to correspond with “his Finkenwalde seminarians, many of whom had been conscripted into the German military. The others were serving in a variety of contexts on behalf of the Confessing Church.”<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 531.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 130.

<sup>12</sup> Metaxas, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Metaxas, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Metaxas, 132.

<sup>15</sup> Mark S. Brouck, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16; Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Brouck, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Brouck, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Brouck, 7.

not only sent letters to his former students. He also mailed books to them.<sup>19</sup> In December of 1940, Bonhoeffer sent out “ninety such packages and letters.”<sup>20</sup>

Circular letters were not permitted. On July 12, 1940, it was decreed that civilians were forbidden “to send publications of any kind to members of the armed forces.”<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer and his close friend, Eberhard Bethge produced all the Finkenwalde circular letters on a typewriter, “circumventing the decree by sending them as personal letters. By using carbon copies, they were able to speed the process along. The name of each addressee was written by hand at the beginning, and Bonhoeffer signed each letter.”<sup>22</sup>

Pastoral ministry always involves the ministry of the Word and prayer, but a true spiritual shepherd will also invest time to nurture and care for the sheep under his care. Bonhoeffer committed much time to not only type out and copy the letters but also to address and stamp envelopes and then mail them. The circular letters revealed the pastoral side of Bonhoeffer. Mark S. Brocker, the editor of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16: Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945* writes:

These seven Finkenwalde circular letters are some of the most moving writings and a testimony to his pastoral sensitivity. Here we witness him caring for his seminary students in a profound way as they struggle with the challenges of living a faithful life during the war, whether on the front lines or at home. At the beginning of several of these letters, he lists the names of those who have fallen in battle and offers heartfelt reflections on their life and ministry. Although the brothers were scattered and unable to gather, it

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<sup>19</sup> Metaxas, 373.

<sup>20</sup> Metaxas, 379.

<sup>21</sup> Brocker, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Brocker, 4.

was almost as if Bonhoeffer were speaking at a memorial service for each fallen brother.<sup>23</sup>

In Volume 16 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, the seven circular letters are included.<sup>24</sup>

Bonhoeffer's "letters from this period also reveal some of the key issues his seminarians raised in their correspondence with him."<sup>25</sup>

The difficulty of reconciling a daily order of Christian life with daily duties at the front; what constitutes an authentic Christmas celebration; the difficulty of comprehending God's purposes in the deaths of so many young pastors; the significance of duty "behind the lines" in comparison to those doing their duty "on the front lines"; how to engage in meditation in unsettled circumstances; whether it was permissible to accept legalization under the official church government; and how to avoid becoming internally numb in the face of so much suffering.<sup>26</sup>

In the circular letters, Bonhoeffer tackled real issues his former students faced. These letters clearly reveal the shepherd's heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eric Metaxas writes in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* that Bonhoeffer's "correspondence with so many is a testament to his faithfulness as a pastor. Although not on the front lines himself, he heard from many of the brethren who were, encouraging them by return mail and by praying for them."<sup>27</sup>

Bonhoeffer would also receive the news that former students were killed in the war. Such news caused him to grieve. It hit him hard when he heard that Gerhard Vibrans was killed: "I

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<sup>23</sup> Brocker, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Brocker, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Brocker, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Brocker, 7-8

<sup>27</sup> Metaxas, 384.

think the pain and feeling of emptiness that his death leaves in me could scarcely be different if he had been my own brother.”<sup>28</sup>

Many of the Confessing Church pastors were required to quit their pastorates so that they could do something more “useful” for the cause of Hitler’s Germany.<sup>29</sup> It reached the point where the Nazis treated Confessing Church pastors as criminals.<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer’s heart went to his former students whether they were on the front lines or not.

Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson write that “the letters become a witness to Bonhoeffer’s standing by these young ministers in the harsh conditions of being a minority struggling for truth and justice, of military life, and in the repugnant actions forced upon them in combat.”<sup>31</sup>

The shepherd’s heart of Bonhoeffer emerged to the surface in three ways in the Finkenwalde circular letters.

### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer Deeply Cared For His Students**

The heart of a spiritual shepherd will reflect the heart of Jesus, the Chief Shepherd. Jesus said in John 10:14 that he was the good shepherd who knows his sheep and the sheep know him. Jesus’ care for his sheep is a template for pastors and their congregation. Bonhoeffer followed in the steps of Jesus at the Finkenwalde Seminary because he genuinely loved and cared for his students. He was the spiritual shepherd of Finkenwalde.

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<sup>28</sup> Metaxas, 385.

<sup>29</sup> Metaxas, 385.

<sup>30</sup> Metaxas, 385

<sup>31</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 434.

This care and love for his students was also expressed later in the Finkenwalde circular letters. For example, in the May 1940 letter, Bonhoeffer wrote of his “pleasure” when he received letters from his students.

Dear Brothers,

Today I must thank all of you collectively for the recent greetings and letters that I have received from you. Otherwise I shall be unable to work through all my correspondence, and I do not want you to wait even longer for my thanks. Every greeting and longer letter has given me pleasure and made it possible for me to focus again on each of you.<sup>32</sup>

Each letter began with either “Dear Brothers” or “Dear Brother...” The circular letters make it clear that at Finkenwalde, he took to the time to get to know his students. This was especially evident when he wrote of former students who were killed in battle. His August 15, 1941 circular letter is an example of this. He gave the names of four former students who were killed on the eastern front: Konrad Bojack, F.A. Preub, Ulruch Nithack, and Gerhard Schulze.<sup>33</sup>

Bonhoeffer then went into great detail about their faith and ministries:

Konrad Bojack was with us in the summer of 1935. He became a pastor in Lyck (East Prussia), where he leaves behind his wife and two small children. With the earnestness and joy of Christianity, his sermons emerging completely from the Word of God, and his love for the church, the ministry, and the congregation, he was a fine witness of Jesus Christ for us all. As a native of Silesia who chose to make his home his home in East Prussia, he had allowed the questions and needs of the German border region to grow dear to his heart. He proved his love for this new homeland as a faithful pastor of his congregation. He found his mission and his congregation’s salvation in the authentic preaching of Jesus Christ. He was killed on June 22 close to the East Prussian border. We grieve the loss of this quiet, honest brother. In this life, he trusted in Word and sacrament. Now he may behold in which he believed.

F.A. Preub was with us the same time as Konrad Bojack. He became a pastor in Landsberger Hollander in Neumark, where he leaves behind his wife and two children. In him we had a brother who was always friendly and joyful, whose faith in Jesus Christ was secure, who attended faithfully to the office entrusted to him even under difficult

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<sup>32</sup> Bocker, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Bocker, 44.

conditions, and who served his congregation with great love and devotion. Now Christ has called him to his own heavenly congregation.

Ulrich Nithack was with us in the summer of 1938. No one who met him could have failed to experience his radiant happiness and inner confidence, rooted his faith in Christ. His never-failing readiness to serve other members of the community and his thankfulness for the smallest things brought him the love of all the brothers. His pursuit of a personal life of sanctification through Jesus Christ emerged from a faith that was in the best sense childlike. For him, prayer was at the center. In a certitude that strengthened all of us, he saw his path and calling to be entirely within the Confessing Church, which he loved with all his heart. He gave himself completely to every task assigned to him. With his death some of the light of Jesus Christ, which we are given to glimpse here and there through one another, has gone out for us—but only so as to shine all the more brightly in the eternal sun of Jesus Christ.

Like Ulrich Nithack, Gerhard Schulze was with us in the summer of 1938. He came from a conflict-ridden congregational post in which he represented the concerns of a church bravely and clearly. With his lively, cheerful, winning manner he quickly found friends and community wherever he went. He desired to devote his life completely to the Confessing Church's struggle. God led him in a special way through depths and heights; he was allowed to experience the power of the grace of God in his life more powerfully than others. He wished to proceed in his future ministry from within this experience. His death affects many friends who accompanied him through his life. Yet a life so rich in grace fills us anew with the certainty that the mercy of God has no end.<sup>34</sup>

Bonhoeffer must have spent significant time with his students to know about their backgrounds and families. His relationship with his students also went beyond their years together at Finkenwalde since he also was aware of certain details of their lives after the seminary was closed. In an era long before e-mail, Facebook, Skype, cell phones and text-messaging, Bonhoeffer invested the time through good-old-fashioned face-to-face conversations and letter writing in order to get to know his students.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not an aloof theologian who put up walls between his students and him. The Preacher's Seminary was not your typical seminary where students went to class and heard a lecture and then went to their dorm room, library or to the cafeteria. Finkenwalde

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<sup>34</sup> Brocker, 206.

was an opportunity for Bonhoeffer to put into the practice his thoughts on authentic Christian fellowship.

His understanding of Christian community was impacted in March 1935 when he spent a week at the Anglican Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, England.<sup>35</sup> His experience at Mirfield reinforced his conviction that the church is to be a community of believers who live out the biblical principles of fellowship. John de Gruchy writes that:

Under Bonhoeffer's leadership, Finkenwalde thus became an experiment in Christian community. This was something unprecedented in the German Evangelical Church with its historic wariness of anything that looked like a Catholic monastery. But Bonhoeffer was convinced that the church and its pastors could not minister to the world, especially a world in crisis, unless the 'body of Christ' became a reality. 'For the Word to be heard in Germany there needed to be a community in which it would become audible, one whose life together would call other Christians to responsibility in their own local communities, a community who would stand uncompromisingly apart from the national delirium in solidarity with the victims.'<sup>36</sup>

Bonhoeffer's classic books, *Life Together* was written a year after the seminary at Finkenwalde was closed. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer tied together his "reflections on Christian community."<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer's goal for Finkenwalde was for authentic Christian community to be formed. This experiment allowed Bonhoeffer to genuinely love and care for his students. Life at Finkenwalde was both "festive and serious."<sup>38</sup> Life together included common prayer, worship, scripture reading, scripture meditation, worship and meals together along with leisure activities.<sup>39</sup> This allowed much interaction between Bonhoeffer and his students.

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<sup>35</sup> John de Gruchy, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>36</sup> De Gruchy, 26-27.

<sup>37</sup> De Gruchy, 178.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 25-26.

Bonhoeffer loved his students and he invested the time to get to know them. The seminary was first located in Zingst, an island in the Baltic Sea.<sup>40</sup> Eberhard Bethge arrived in the last days of April of 1935. He arrived “just after the evening meal.”<sup>41</sup>

He immediately ran out to the beach where everyone was playing soccer, as they often did at that part of the day. He greeted his three friends from his hometown of Magdeburg and asked where *Herr Direktor* was. They pointed out Bonhoeffer. Bethge had never heard of him before and knew nothing of his leadership in the church struggle. Bethge was surprised at how young and athletic Bonhoeffer looked, and at first he found it impossible to differentiate him from the students. When Bonhoeffer finally realized that another ordinand had arrived, he left what he was doing, greeted Bethge, and invited him to take a walk along the beach.

Bonhoeffer asked Bethge about his family and upbringing...and his experiences in the church struggle. Bethge was taken aback that the head of this new seminary would ask such personal questions and take such a sincere interest in him. The ordinands were used to a great gap between them and their teachers, and when Bonhoeffer, a few days later, asked them not to call him *Herr Direktor* but *Bruder* (Brother) Bonhoeffer, they were amazed.<sup>42</sup>

“Brother” Bonhoeffer’s “availability carried over into the daily life of the seminarians.”<sup>43</sup>

Bonhoeffer was the director of the seminary, but he was also their friend and their pastor. A well-known Bonhoeffer quote about Christian fellowship is found in his classic book, *Life Together*: “the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”<sup>44</sup>

Bonhoeffer truly enjoyed being with his students. He knew that the whole purpose of redemption in Jesus Christ was to save the enemies of God throughout the world, and in

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<sup>40</sup> Metaxas, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Metaxas, 263.

<sup>42</sup> Metaxas, 263-264.

<sup>43</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 19.

anticipation of eternal life, believers “are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians.”<sup>45</sup> Finkenwalde was that “visible fellowship.”

By the order of the Gestapo, the Finkenwalde seminary was closed down in September of 1937.<sup>46</sup> Yet, during the short period the seminary was open, a picture of Christian fellowship was established:

The students of Finkenwalde past and present were welded into a community of Christian brothers who found in their unity a source of strength and a shared treasury of spiritual riches. It was an experience which to this day shows its profound effect on those who survive, and what Finkenwalde might have meant for the Christian life of Germany if it could have continued into the present may still be conjectured.

Its achievement in the less than three years of its existence was prodigious, and its influence was extended not only through the young pastors who went out from it, but also by means of those missions in surrounding parishes...<sup>47</sup>

Mark Devine writes that Bonhoeffer sought to establish a genuine fellowship that would bring blessing both in this life and in the life to come:

Freedom to worship and serve our Lord in the visible church with our brothers and sisters is a great blessing, a special mercy. It constitutes a concrete anticipation of and dress rehearsal for the true and permanent fellowship of the saints in the next world... We were made for one another, and our relationship with Christ includes our divinely created and sustained connection to one another.<sup>48</sup>

These relationships that were established during the Finkenwalde years between the director of the seminary and the students continued well past the closing of the seminary.

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<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 533.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 183.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Devine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at All Costs* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2005), 82.

Bonhoeffer's love for his former students can be seen in the closing remarks of his August 15, 1941 circular letter:

Every letter and sign of life from you, of course, gives me and many others with me heartfelt joy. I have received greetings from Brother Bojack and Brother Nithack immediately before their deployment, for which I am especially grateful today. Please let me know right away of any changes in your address. So often things come back as undeliverable—a book or a letter. That always give me sorrow because then one more thread has been ripped away. At that point it is generally very difficult to get the correct address again.

I commend all of you to the One who can protect you day and night, who can give you power in your service, who will lead you and us all into his kingdom.

Greetings from your faithful

D.B.<sup>49</sup>

### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer Encouraged His Students to Live For Jesus**

Since Dietrich Bonhoeffer possessed the heart of a shepherd, he guided and encouraged his students to live for the glory of Jesus Christ. In the context of the Finkenwalde community, the students had few distractions. Their days were structured to pursue holiness in Christ. That all changed when many of these same students became soldiers in the German army. The Christian environment of Finkenwalde and the local church was replaced with the environment of the battlefield.

The Bible does not condemn serving as soldiers. In Luke chapter 3, verse 14, soldiers who repented of their sins went to John the Baptist and asked him: “And we, what shall we do?” John answered: “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content

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<sup>49</sup> Brocker, 209.

with your wages.” John did not tell them to resign. Rather, he said that their lives were to reflect the fact they repented of their sins. They were to avoid the sins of their profession.<sup>50</sup>

Serving as a soldier is not morally wrong. A Christian soldier is to represent Christ even in the trenches of the battlefield. Yet, it is hard to imagine the pressure the former students of Bonhoeffer went through. These students who were trained to carry on the cause of Christ in the local church were drafted in the Nazi Army. Their earthly “Commander in Chief” was Adolf Hitler!

Bonhoeffer made the decision that he could not serve in the military under Hitler. This put him in a “strange position.”<sup>51</sup> Eric Metaxas writes that Bonhoeffer “had always been a man of seeming contradictions, and the war would magnify them. He knew he could not fight for Hitler’s Germany, but he was extraordinarily supportive when it came to the young men who did not see things his way.”<sup>52</sup> This moral climate of the day was described by Albert Schonherr, a former student of Bonhoeffer’s at Berlin University<sup>53</sup>:

Through the Nazi propaganda and the whole blurring of the situation, we had the feeling, well, in the end we really must step in; the Fatherland must be defended. Not with a very good conscience, of course not. Above all not with enthusiasm...After all, it was very clearly the case that whoever refused the draft in the case of the war would be beheaded, would be executed. Was this the point as which we should give up our lives, and thereby also our care for our family, and everything which was important to us? Or was it not yet the point?

Bonhoeffer did not say, you may not go...If you see it from today’s perspective you see it much more critically. Above all, because we now know everything which happened. But

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<sup>50</sup> Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary: Luke* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 134.

<sup>51</sup> Metaxas, 349.

<sup>52</sup> Metaxas, 349.

<sup>53</sup> Metaxas, 126.

at the time we didn't perceive things with complete clarity. I know that Bonhoeffer himself was sad that he supported a man who completely refused the draft and then was executed. It was a very strange situation in which we all stood.<sup>54</sup>

Serving in the Nazi Army brought to the forefront a host of moral challenges and dilemmas. In his circular letter dated November 22, 1941, Bonhoeffer encouraged his former students to strive to depend on God's grace regardless of their role in the war effort:

Each one of us is drawn into the actuality of this war on different levels, for the dimensions of this war are so incalculable. It is a different reality if we experience the war fighting on the front line, whether as an officer or a simple soldier or a stretcher bearer or a chaplain, or whether we are ordered to some duty behind the front lines without the possibility of being particularly tested, stretched, distinguished, or whether we do our duty quietly at home, or whether we were given our place in some faraway country. To be sure, none of us is spared the hours in which our life seems meaningless to us and our time wasted, because we cannot share in the monstrous experience of the war at the front lines. This also rings through some letters of brothers who are stationed behind the front in some sort of seemingly inconsequential duty.<sup>55</sup>

Bonhoeffer went on and explained how God allows danger, experience and testing to come into people's lives. But God provides the grace for the moment for the soldiers on the front lines as well as those behind: "But God knows what can be demanded of us, and in God's own time it surely will be demanded. For this hour let us prepare ourselves by accepting the measure of danger and testing granted to us humbly and faithfully each day."<sup>56</sup>

In the chain of command, there were orders given that were morally wrong. For example, on June 6, 1941, Hitler gave the "notorious Commissar Order" when he launched his campaign against Russia on the eastern front.<sup>57</sup> This order "instructed the army to shoot and kill all

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<sup>54</sup> Metaxas, 350.

<sup>55</sup> Brocke, 238-239.

<sup>56</sup> Brocke, 239.

<sup>57</sup> Metaxas, 381.

captured Soviet military leaders.”<sup>58</sup> Warfare is always brutal, but there were always codes that limited the brutality.

Hitler had allowed the army to avoid the most gruesome horrors in Poland. He knew that didn’t have the stomach for it, and the soulless SS *Einsatzgruppen* had done the foulest and most inhuman deeds. But now he ordered the army itself to carry out the butchery and sadism in contravention of all military codes going back for centuries. The generals took notice. Even the weakest-willed among them saw that they had been gaily riding along the back of a tiger.<sup>59</sup>

Major General Hennung von Tresckow reacted to the Commissar Order by saying that: “the German people will be burdened with a guilt the world will not forget in a hundred years.”<sup>60</sup> Metaxas writes that “as Germany’s armies moved toward Moscow, the barbarism of the SS had been given the freedom to express itself. It was as if the devil and his hordes had crawled out of hell and walked the earth.”<sup>61</sup> This “barbarism of the SS” brought out the very worst of human nature:

In Lithuania, SS squads gathered defenseless Jews together and beat them to death with truncheons, afterward dancing to music on the dead bodies. The victims were cleared away, a second group was brought in, and the macabre exercise was repeated. As a result of such things, many more in the army leadership were driven to the conspiracy.

At one point officers came to Field Marshall Bock and begged him with tears in their eyes to stop “the orgy of executions” in Borisov. But even Bock was powerless. When demanded that the SS commander in charge of the massacres be brought to him, the civilian commissioner, Wilhelm Kube, laughed defiantly. Hitler had given the SS free rein, and even a field marshal could do nothing about it.<sup>62</sup>

If officers in German Army were struggling in following orders from Hitler, then so were many of the soldiers below them. The Christians in the Nazi Army, no doubt, struggled intensely

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<sup>58</sup> Metaxas, 381.

<sup>59</sup> Metaxas, 381.

<sup>60</sup> Metaxas, 382.

<sup>61</sup> Metaxas, 387.

<sup>62</sup> Metaxas, 387.

in their souls as the slaughter of innocent life continued. These soldiers were “were trapped in a situation of ethical impossibilities.”<sup>63</sup>

In light of the monstrous evils being committed all around, what could one do and what should one do? In letters from his ordinands, we read how tortured they were in knowing when to protest and when to accede, when to go to war, even if they knew it was unjust, and when to take a stand. One of them wrote to Bonhoeffer about having to kill prisoners and was obviously torn about it, knowing that if he didn’t comply, he would himself be killed. This sort of thing had become commonplace.<sup>64</sup>

How does one remain devoted to Jesus when the Commander in Chief is an evil madman? The solution, according to Bonhoeffer, is “to do the will of God, to do it radically and courageously and joyfully.”<sup>65</sup> In his circular letters, he encouraged his former students to remain steadfast in their commitment to Jesus. Many former students who were soldiers on the front struggled in their devotion to Jesus on the battle field. In the circular letter dated May 1940, Bonhoeffer wrote:

Indeed, I think the time has come once again to say something about the freedom of our Christian life and the grace of God. Quite a few of you who are on the front write something dejectedly about the difficulty of reconciling an order for the Christian life with the daily duty that claims you completely. For many the time and leisure for reading scripture and for prayer and intercession are simply not available.<sup>66</sup>

There was the added pressure that some put on these soldiers to continue their “ministry” even on the eastern front. Of that, Bonhoeffer wrote: “At present I do not know if it is entirely right when people keep on writing to you that you on the front also are and must be ‘in the

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<sup>63</sup> Metaxas, 470.

<sup>64</sup> Metaxas, 470-471.

<sup>65</sup> Metaxas, 470.

<sup>66</sup> Brocker, 45.

ministry.”<sup>67</sup> Bonhoeffer grappled over this issue for his former students: “Certainly none of us is ever released from the responsibility of being a Christian, and we dare not deny that we are pastors. But this is something different from saying as a matter of course that even on the front you are ‘in the ministry.’ In my opinion you are not, in fact, and cannot be.”<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer continued with his answer:

I am wary of an illusion that will become a rigid law for the serious-minded, one that will rub them raw and eventually cause them to founder. Perhaps you will reply that it is your ordination itself that lays such a law on you...Opinions vary on this point. But one thing is certain: ordination is given to us for comfort and as a grace to make us certain in our ministry. It is not intended to torment us so that we despair of it, and in any case it is certainly not intended to do this to you now.

It seems crucial to me to state this outright. In this matter we must protect ourselves carefully against fanatical ideas that may sound nice for a while but can be quite dangerous over time and can throw our faith into total confusion. When one of you writes in distress that he is only able to be a soldier among other soldiers and that in the process he tries to remain a Christian but has no strength to do any more than this, I want to console him and all who live in this way.

I can see no unfaithfulness to your ministry in that. One cannot as a soldier simply go on leading the life of a pastor, and one should not torment oneself internally about this. Naturally it is marvelous when duty allows time one needs for the word of God. But generally you yourselves are not personally responsible for whether this is the case.

Naturally it is heartening to be able to affect something and be of assistance in conversations. But clearly we alone are not to blame for the limits that we run up against in this regard. Naturally it would be good if we could gain some influence on certain expressions and conversations in our surroundings.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, Bonhoeffer encouraged his former seminarians read the Bible and prayer whenever they can. And even in the chaos of war, they were to be a witness for Jesus whenever they can. Through his circular letters, Bonhoeffer’s goal was to help his former Finkenwalde students to

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<sup>67</sup> Brocker, 45-46.

<sup>68</sup> Brocker, 46.

<sup>69</sup> Brocker, 46.

stay as focused as possible on the Lord Jesus even though they daily faced unimaginable pressures in the Nazi Army. Kelly and Nelson write that the circular letters were an attempt to “keep alive the communion of Finkenwaldians and Confessing pastors, not with memories of their past peace and idyllic community life but with the freshness of God’s Word speaking through the Bible, their prayers, and even their experiences.”<sup>70</sup>

As the war progressed, the suffering both on the front and at home increased. Bonhoeffer wrote that even in the suffering, God’s comfort and joy can be experienced. This can be seen in his November 29, 1942 circular letter:

Dear Brother...

At the beginning of a letter that in this solemn hour is meant to call you all to true joy, there necessarily stand the names of those brothers who have died since I last wrote to you: P. Walde, W. Brandenburg, Herman Schroder, R. Lynker, Erwin Schutz, K. Rhode, Alfred Viol, Kurt Onnasch, Fritz’s second brother; in addition to them, and presumably known to many of you, Major (Hans) von Wedemeyer and his oldest son, Max, my former confirmand.<sup>71</sup>

This was the longest list of names in the seven circular letters. Hans von Wedemeyer and his son, Max were the father and brother of Maria von Wedemeyer, Bonhoeffer’s fiancée.<sup>72</sup>

Bonhoeffer then wrote how in the midst of suffering, God can give us joy:

We are glad for them; indeed, should we say that we sometimes secretly envy them? From early times the Christian church has considered *acedia*—the melancholy of the heart, or “resignation”—to be one of the mortal sins. “Serve the Lord with joy” (Psalm 100:2)—thus do the scriptures call out to us. For this our life has been given to us, and for this it has been preserved for us unto the present hour.

This joy, which no one shall take from us, belongs not only to those who have been called home, but also to us who are alive. We are one with them in this joy, but never in melancholy. How are we going to be able to help those who have become joyless and

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<sup>70</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 434.

<sup>71</sup> Bocker, 373.

<sup>72</sup> Bocker, 373.

discouraged if we ourselves are not borne along by courage and joy? Nothing contrived or forced is intended here, but something bestowed and free.

Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts open closed doors. A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart's pain, anguish and dread; it does not last; it can only numb a person for the moment.<sup>73</sup>

Bonhoeffer encouraged his former Finkenwalde students to experience the joy of the Lord in their lives so that they can be an encouragement to others who were discouraged. The Apostle Paul wrote of that in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we are comforted by God." Bonhoeffer then explained how the joy from God can be experienced even when life is full of pain:

The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it.

What matters is this joy that has overcome. It alone is credible; it alone helps and heals. The joy of our companions who have been called home is also the joy of those who have overcome—the Risen One bears the marks of the cross on his body. We still stand in daily overcoming; they have overcome for all time. God alone knows how far away or near at hand we stand to the final overcoming in which our own death may be made joy for us. "With peace and joy I now depart..."<sup>74</sup>

Bonhoeffer also acknowledged that the suffering of some people is more severe "because they are internally deadening themselves against so much suffering, such as these who bring in their wake. One person said to me recently, 'I pray every day that I may not become

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<sup>73</sup> Bocker, 377-378

<sup>74</sup> Bocker, 378.

numb.’ That is by all means a good prayer.”<sup>75</sup> The ultimate answer is to look to Jesus who “was able to suffer along with others because he was simultaneously able to redeem from suffering. Out of his love and power to redeem people came his power to suffer with them.”<sup>76</sup>

Bonhoeffer stated that no one is called to take upon themselves the suffering of the world because no one has the power to redeem. Only Jesus Christ, the Redeemer has done this. Thus, we are to look to Jesus:

We are called only to gaze full of joy at the One who in reality suffered with us and became the Redeemer. Full of joy, we are enabled to believe that there was and is One to whom no human suffering or sin is foreign and who in deepest love accomplished our redemption. Only in such joy in Christ the Redeemer shall we be preserved from hardening ourselves where human suffering encounters us, and from being resigned under the experience of suffering.<sup>77</sup>

Bonhoeffer himself served as an example in both his life and his death. He lived well and he died well. During the Finkenwalde years, he displayed intensity during theological debates with his students, and yet he deeply cared for each of them. His assistant, Wilhelm Rott wrote that Bonhoeffer “always had time for the brethren.”<sup>78</sup> His compassion for his fellow believers grew out of his own passionate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>79</sup>

Of course, his own death at the gallows was an example of one who focused on the Savior to the very end. Early in the morning on April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging. Mary Bosanquet writes:

So the morning came. Now the prisoners were ordered to strip. They were led down to a little flight of steps under the trees to the secluded place of execution. There was a pause.

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<sup>75</sup> Bocker, 378.

<sup>76</sup> Bocker, 378.

<sup>77</sup> Bocker, 378.

<sup>78</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 145.

For the men about to die, time hung a moment suspended. Naked under the scaffold in the sweet spring of woods, Bonhoeffer knelt for the last time to pray. Five minutes later, his life was ended.<sup>80</sup>

The camp doctor was an eye-witness of Bonhoeffer's final minutes:

Through the half-door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.<sup>81</sup>

### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer Offered Words of Comfort in Times of Great Sorrow.**

The Chief Shepherd Jesus offered words of comfort to his confused disciples on the night that he was betrayed. In John 14:1, He said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me." Jesus pointed his disciples to a personal trust in God. Simon Peter was one of the disciples who heard Jesus speak these words. Around thirty years later, he would write, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Peter 5:2).

Through his circular letters, Dietrich Bonhoeffer shepherded the flock that was assigned to him by God (Acts 20:28). Even as the war progressed and the number of former Finkenwalde students killed in action increased, Bonhoeffer continued to bring words of comfort to the students who still remained. Again, in the circular letter, dated November 29, 1942, he began his letter with the words: "at the beginning of a letter that in this solemn hour is meant to call you all

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<sup>80</sup> Bosanquet, 15.

<sup>81</sup> Devine, 36-37.

to true joy, there necessarily stand the names of those brothers who have died since I last wrote to you.”<sup>82</sup>

Bonhoeffer then listed off the names of eleven people. Of the seven circular letters in Volume 16 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, four of them contained names of former Finkenwalde students who lost their lives. The total number of “brothers” killed in action was 22.<sup>83</sup> Emotionally, this had to be extremely draining on Bonhoeffer to receive the news that his dear friends have fallen in battle and then to pass the news on through the letters.

The pastoral side of Bonhoeffer took over when he typed these letters. In the circular letter dated, March 1, 1942, he began by writing: “Our dear brothers Bruno Kerlin, Gerhard Vibrans and Gerhard Lehne have been killed in action.”<sup>84</sup> Bonhoeffer then wrote that even in times of sorrow, there is hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus:

With all the brothers who have gone before them they are now sleep awaiting the great Easter Day of resurrection. We see the cross, and we believe in the resurrection; we see death, and we believe in eternal life; we experience sorrow and separation, but we believe in an eternal joy and community.<sup>85</sup>

Bonhoeffer then wrote of the faith and witness of Kerlin, Vibrans and Lehne. Concerning Kerlin, he wrote “in the cheerfulness of his faith, in the clarity of his being, in his brotherly readiness for service, Bruno Kerlin has been for us a witness of this Easter faith for whom we

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<sup>82</sup> Brocke, 377.

<sup>83</sup> Brocke, 205, 237, 253, 373.

<sup>84</sup> Brocke, 253.

<sup>85</sup> Brocke, 253.

thank God.”<sup>86</sup> Of Lehne, Bonhoeffer wrote: “he performed his service to the church in devoted faithfulness.”<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer devoted more space to Gerhard Vibrans:

Gerhard Vibran was hit by an aircraft bomb just as he was about to sing with his comrades from *Ein neu Lied*.<sup>88</sup> All who knew this single-hearted, selfless brother, in whom simplicity and maturity were joined in a way that elicited the trust of all kinds of people, know what we have lost with him.

The interpretative verse for the day of his death (February 3), Revelation 1:14,<sup>89</sup> particularly moved me. The life of this brother stood beneath the “flame of fire” of the eyes of Christ; it was a reflection of this purifying fire. I shall never forget that he taught me the hymn of Claudius, “Ich danke Gott und freue mich,”<sup>90</sup> and through his own life gave me a convincing interpretation of this hymn.<sup>91</sup>

Bonhoeffer then wrote that “it was a surprising experience for me that precisely in recent weeks that there has been an increase in the voices, both from the front and at home, requesting new assistance in meditation. I confess that I would not have dared on my own to talk you into this. I didn’t want to add something more to the daily burdens you bear”<sup>92</sup> During the Finkenwalde years, Bonhoeffer required that the students spend a half-hour meditating each morning “on a short passage of the Bible...to listen to what the text spoke, to pray over it and to interpret their lives according to it.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Brouck, 253.

<sup>87</sup> Brouck, 254.

<sup>88</sup> The Songbook for Protestant youth, *Ein neues Lied* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1933), was used at Finkenwalde.

<sup>89</sup> “His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow, his eyes were like a flame of fire.”

<sup>90</sup> “I thank God and rejoice” written by Matthias Claudius, the melody by Hohann Abraham Peter Schultz.

<sup>91</sup> Brouck, 253-254.

<sup>92</sup> Brouck, 254.

<sup>93</sup> William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Dayton: Pflaum Press, 1967), 94.

Meditation on God’s Word was a difficult activity for the students. Eberhard Bethge “has remarked that whenever Bonhoeffer was away, this period of meditation was quickly dropped.”<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the students eventually saw the importance of meditation. Bonhoeffer went on to explain how meditation on the Word of God can bring peace in a world of chaos:

So even today I desire nothing other than to say a few words about the precious gift given to us with meditation—and about one aspect that is particularly important for us today. For me the daily silent reflection on the word of God as it applies to me—even if only a few minutes—tends to become the crystallization of all that brings inner and outer order to my life.

With the interruption and dissolution of our previously ordered life that the present age had brought about—with the danger of losing our inner order through the profusion of events, through the all-consuming claims of work and service, through doubts and moral conflicts, battle and unrest of all kinds—meditation gives our life something like constancy.

It preserves the connection with our former life, from baptism through confirmation to ordination; it sustains us in the healing community of the congregation, of the brothers, of the spiritual home; it is a spark of the hearth fire that the congregations at home want to tend for you; it is a fountain of peace, of patience, and of joy; it is like a magnet directing all the available powers for ordering our toward its pole; it is like pure deep water in which the heavens with their clouds and sun are radiantly mirrored.

But it also serves the Most High, in that it opens for God a space of discipline and quiet, of healing order and contentment. Do we not all have a deep longing, however unacknowledged, for such a gift? Could it not become a healing power promoting renewal for us?...May God bless these hours for us.<sup>95</sup>

When Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943, his Bible was taken away from him. Once he received it back, he would read it for hours.<sup>96</sup> He read through the Old Testament two and half times by November.<sup>97</sup> He “also drew strength from praying the Psalms, just as he did at

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<sup>94</sup> Kuhns, 94-95.

<sup>95</sup> Brocker, 254-255.

<sup>96</sup> Metaxas, 438.

<sup>97</sup> Metaxas, 438.

Zingst, Finkenwalde, Schlawe, Sigurdshof, and elsewhere.”<sup>98</sup> Bonhoeffer, like his former students on the front lines, did not pray, read the Bible and meditate on scripture, as consistent as he liked. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer described how he relied on God during an air raid:

Now there’s something I must tell you personally: the heavy air raids, especially the last one, when the windows of the sick-bay were blow out by the land mine, and bottles and medical supplies fell down from the cupboards and shelves, and I lay on the floor in the darkness with little hope of coming through the attack safely, led me back quite simply to prayer and the Bible.<sup>99</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s closing paragraph in the March 1, 1942 circular letter provided words of comfort to his former students:

Today, March 1, is the first day a warm spring sun has shone; the snow is dripping from the eaves, the air is clear, and the earth is beginning to appear again. Our thoughts are with you who in the past months have endured unimaginable things on the front and during the winter, wishing for you that the sun and warmth and earth will soon give you joy again. “He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down hail like crumbs—who can stand before his cold?

He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow” (Psalm 147). God will one day break even the winter and the night of evil and allow a spring of grace and joy to draw nigh. “Summer is at hand, the winter is past, the tender little flowers spring up, the one who has begun this will also complete it” (Luther).

In the confidence and community of this faith I commend you to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Your faithful  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>98</sup> Metaxas, 438.

<sup>99</sup> Metaxas, 463.

<sup>100</sup> Brocker, 255.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer possessed the heart of a pastor. He could have had a successful career as a professor in a university setting. He could have devoted his life to developing his mind as a theologian. But in the last half of his life, he was more concerned about the life within the context of a local church and the fellowship of the church and the preaching of God's Word and the welfare of God's people. Thus, pastoral ministry was more important than his work in the academic world. He served in churches in Berlin, Barcelona and London. Kelly and Nelson write that:

Preaching was central to his understanding of the pastoral role, but he also developed a keen awareness of the multiple facets of ministry, such as leading worship, teaching the tenets of the faith, providing spiritual care, counseling the troubled, visiting the sick, and comforting the bereaved. In Barcelona Bonhoeffer was moved by the poverty many of parishioners experienced during the Depression...<sup>101</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor to the very end. On April 9, 1945, he was put to death by the S.S. Black Guard at the Flossenburg concentration camp. The day before, he led a Sunday worship service for his fellow prisoners. S. Payne Best was one of those prisoners. He wrote:

The following day, Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said: "Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us."

Those words "Come with us"—for all prisoners they had come to mean one thing only—the scaffold. We bade him good-bye—he drew me aside—"This is the end," he said. "For me the beginning of life," and then he gave me a message to give, if I could to the Bishop of Chichester, a friend to all evangelical pastors in Germany, Next day, at Flossenburg, he was hanged.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Kelly and Nelson, 177.

<sup>102</sup> S. Payne Best, *The Venlo Incident* (London: Hutchinson & Co. LTD, 1950), 200.

He died the next day with dignity and calmness. Thus, to the very end, he lived for the glory of the Lord Jesus.