

Some Reverie Brought on by Renate Bethge's Bonhoeffer Book

Colleagues, Reviewing Renate Bethge's book last week got old tapes turning. Here's some anecdotage to go along with my dotage.

Reverie #1

Renate is a personal friend. We met her and her late husband Eberhard when they visited Seminex a quarter century ago. Both of them were guest lecturers. Eberhard, as you may know, catalyzed the Bonhoeffer boom with his publication shortly after WWII of DB's "Letters and Papers from Prison." That title was apparently chosen for English-language marketing purposes, but didn't at all say what the German title said: "Widerstand und Ergebung." [Something like "Resisting and Being Defeated." I.e., we tried, but we didn't succeed.]

Possibly because we could "schwaffel" with the Bethges in German on that occasion—though both spoke excellent English—Marie and I got invited to visit them "the next time you're in Germany." Which we eventually did as guests in their home in Wachtberg near the Rhine. We saw the Bonhoeffer originals—took in hand and read some of the famous ones. Also paged through Bonhoeffer's copy of the Lutheran Confessions [The Book of Concord], and turned to his marginal scribbles at Formula of Concord Article 10, which so fascinated Bob Bertram. The Lutheran lingo about "status confessionis" comes from FC 10. It talks about "a time for confessing." During our days at Seminex Bertram helped us see our own slice of church history as such a "time for confessing." [The second full book Bob never got out of his

computer before death carries that title. There's a full chapter on Bonhoeffer. Mike Hoy is working on exhuming it for us all.]

FC 10 was central for Bonhoeffer in the Church Struggle [Kirchenkampf] of his day. Confessing was the core concept of the "Bekennende Kirche," the Confessing Church, that arose in protest against Aryan theology invading the "Evangelisch" [Protestant] churches during the Hitler era. "Confession" has always been a big word for Lutherans ever since Augsburg (1530). The Aryan addenda that Naziism urged upon the German churches snapped that time-for-confessing trip wire. For Lutherans that revived study of FC 10 and its language about situations in church history that force Christians into a "status confessionis." Such a situation (status) is one where you are called to make public confession of the "true" Gospel contra the "Gospels-with-addenda" that are regnant in the church. The Aryan addenda made that "perfectly clear" to some Lutherans (DB included), but not to all. Hence the "Kirchenkampf" was first of all within the church itself—and not just with Hitler.

N.B. this "time for confessing" (tempus confessionis) in Germany 1933-1945 was not a time when you stood up and told Hitler off. Instead FC 10 defines times for confessing as inner-churchly—a time to stand up to fellow Christians, usually church leadership, and 'fess up to the genuine Gospel in the face of the phony Gospel-with-addenda that the leaders are hustling. Confessing is tough talk because false Gospels finally merit the apostolic anathema—and somebody's got to tell them. Consequences, of course, can be serious, sometimes lethal. No wonder that making such witness (martyria in Greek) can lead to martyrdom.

Well, Bob learned all this with an assist from Bonhoeffer and taught it to the rest of us, helping us see the wars of Missouri in the 70s as such a time to confront a Gospel-cum-addenda with

a Gospel “pure” from such add-ons.

Just how important the Lutheran Confessions were in Bonhoeffer’s theology is a current hot topic in the Bonhoeffer Society. Bob was one prominent yea-sayer in the society in this debate. The accepted wisdom has been that Karl Barth, DB’s friend and sometime ally, was more his mentor than Luther was. I’m an outsider to the Bonhoeffer Society, but from what I hear the debate continues, now with some of Bob’s former students prominent players at work to “save Bonhoeffer from the Barthians.” It’s not a turf war, but a substantive effort to show and tell the Gospel-grounded character of DB’s theology and then use it for Gospel-confessing today.

Reverie #2 (shorter)

I think it was at a 50th anniversary celebration of the Barmen Declaration (the charter document of the Confessing Church from 1934) that someone asked Eberhard Bethge to reminisce about the Confessing Church’s underground seminary at Finkenwalde in Pomerania. Bonhoeffer was the director, Bethge a student. Here’s where the two of them bonded in a freindship so solid that Bethge began to show up regularly in the Bonhoeffer family home back in Berlin. So often was he there that he finally noticed DB’s niece Renate next door . . . and . . . and . . . and eventually Eberhard did indeed become a member of the family.

Bethge electrified the audience with his memories of Finkenwalde at this 1984 Barmen anniversary conference. Then someone asked if he’d ever encountered anything close to that since those days. “Only once,” he said, “at Seminex. Especially in the chapel. The singing, the singing!”

Reverie #3 (not so short)

Seminex granted four earned doctorates in systematic theology in the course of its 10-year history. One of those was to a Korean

Presbyterian pastor, Keun Soo Hong. Keun Soo went back home and got into trouble for his own kind of confessing—much of it in the public arena that impacted actions by the South Korean national government. Like Bonhoeffer, Keun Soo finally wound up in prison. After he served his two year sentence, he was released and returned to his pastoral work. Somehow his congregation juggled things so that Marie and I could actually visit him in prison when we were in Korea in 1992 together with a bunch of Crossings folks from St. Louis. Here's Marie's journal entry for that incredible day, a "Letters and Papers from Prison" entry with a Korean twist. Yes, Bonhoeffer does figure in. Read on.

April 30, 1992 – We two went with Prof. Jong-Sun Noh and Pastor Kim from Hyang-rin church (Keun-Soo Hong's congregation) by train to Kun San prison, where Keun Soo was being held. It's almost a 3-hour train ride south of Seoul.

Prof. Noh talked about possible reasons why Keun Soo was arrested and not he, though he holds the same opinions and has said the same things. He said that Keun Soo was in the U.S. for 18 years, during the worst years of persecution under S. Korean president Park Chung Hee. When he returned, he had become Americanized enough to think he could say what he wanted anywhere and everywhere, whereas those who had stayed in Korea knew almost instinctively how to choose both their words and the places they could say them. When Keun Soo said some comparatively good things about North Korea on a popular late-night call-in radio show, the government really had to go after him.

When we arrived at Kun San we took a taxi about half an hour to the Kun San correctional institution. At the prison we walked inside to the first building, where we waited in a waiting area until the man in charge of such special visitors returned from

lunch and could deal with us. We sat and waited, watching the young guards behind the counter do their paper work. The official returned and ushered us into the room on the other side of the counter, past the young guards, and into his office. There we sat and waited again.

Eventually we were ushered out of the first building, through another very smelly building where guards had to unlock steel gates for us, to a third building which lay across the exercise area. Up on the second floor we sat on vinyl stuffed chairs around a coffee table. An older guard sat at a nearby desk with pencil and paper, ready to take notes, and two young soldiers sat against the wall by the door. We waited a few minutes again, and finally Keun Soo came in the door and walked over to us. I got tears in my eyes watching him and Ed hugging each other. He was very surprised to see me there, too. We sat down on the chairs and talked.

Keun Soo explained that when special visits are arranged like this, it has to be for some educational reason, so we would have to sound educational somewhere along the line. We showed him pictures of children and grandchildren, and a picture of him and his wife with Ed and our daughter Anne when we were in Seoul four years ago. He told us about a poem he's been writing about the dead depending upon the living: when Jesus was in the tomb he was completely dead, completely dependent on the living God to raise him. In the same way he, Keun Soo, though not dead, is completely dependent on others; he can't even open his own room. Others have to unlock the door, others determine when he can eat, exercise, read, write. But he says he is really treated very well, especially by some Christian guards who honor and care for him. In return he is able to minister to them and to fellow prisoners. In fact, some have begun calling him "Honghoefffer," echoing Bonhoeffer's similar ministry in prison in Nazi Germany.

When we had first written to Keun Soo to see if we could visit him, he wrote back asking us not only to come and see him, but also to bring the English translation of Bonhoeffer's biography written by Eberhard Bethge. So there in the prison Ed brought it out of his briefcase. But before Keun Soo could take it, it had to go first to a guard, who gave it to the man at the desk. Keun Soo explained that the official would have to check it over and make sure nothing extra was put in it, that it was only a book.

He looks good, even in the loose blue shirt and pants, even with a number (993) over his heart. All of this conversation (well, maybe 30%) Prof. Noh translated for the guard at the desk – he couldn't do it all because the guard wouldn't be able to write it all, and besides, some of the things we said the guard didn't need to know. "I told him the truth," said Prof. Noh. Keun Soo said, for instance, that he is studying Luke in particular right now, because it is "the most political" of the gospels. Well, with all the talk and laughter we overstayed our time, and then Pastor Kim had to ask him about something at church, so we didn't leave soon enough to catch the 3:25 train from town. We rushed to get a taxi and the taxi drove fast, but the distance and the traffic were too much. So we waited at the train station for the next train at 4:06, and got back to Seoul Station about 7:45.

When this ThTh gets posted—if things go as planned—we'll be in SE Asia for the mission stuff described in ThTh 318. On our way home we intend to visit "Honghoeffer" in Seoul. Keun Soo is now retired, but from what we've heard he keeps on confessing. He says he learned it at Seminex. Perhaps. But some of it was the gift he brought to us.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder