

## **Crossings Table Talk**

# **“Who is Jesus Christ for us today: Inspiration from the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”**

**by  
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What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words – whether with theological or with pious words– is past, as with the age of inwardness and of conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether. We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.

*(April 30, 1944 letter to Eberhardt Bethge, Letters and Papers from Prison (Ed. John W. deGruchy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8: Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010), p. 362.)*

With all the international “buzz” about Bonhoeffer these days—the movie, the Metaxas impact, the statement of the International Bonhoeffer Society, the statement of the Bonhoeffer family members, and the statement of the actors in the Bonhoeffer movie -- it would be helpful to take a fresh look both at our own environment, both nationally and ecclesiastically, and to freshen our knowledge and opinion of Bonhoeffer, who struggled with his own faithfulness to Christ within the challenges he faced in Nazi Germany in the 1930’s and 1940’s. And then to ask ourselves the question “Who is Bonhoeffer for us today?”

One of the most helpful perspectives come from Victoria Barnett in the November 20, 2024 Christian Century:

***...Bonhoeffer wrote in his Christmas 1942 letter, “After Ten Years”: “Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?” This letter is a stunning indictment of what Germany had become under Nazi rule. But it also illustrates Bonhoeffer’s profound sense of obligations to a broader humanity – and to history itself. That, I believe, is his real significance for us today: here was a man who over a period of 12 terrible years reflected with remarkable honesty and poignancy on the nature of the Christian faith and witness in evil time. Although he could not have known the impact his writings and his life would have on future generations, he already had a sense of what he owed them. “The ultimate responsible question,” he wrote in that 1942 letter, “is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living.”***

Some years ago while I was in Berlin to speak at a German national fundraising conference, my wife and I toured what is commonly called “the new holocaust

museum". That is not the name of the museum. Its name is "The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" (<https://www.visitberlin.de/en/memorial-murdered-jews-europe>). I interpret this naming as an articulate national confession of the great shame of that period of German history.

During Hitler's reign, those Protestants who swore allegiance to him were called *Deutsche Christen* – German Christians. One notable Christian pastor who did not fall in that category was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A profoundly gifted academician/theologian/pastor, he spoke out publicly against Hitler and was secretly involved (maybe!) in a plot to assassinate him and in helping Jews to escape from Germany. For this he was hanged by Hitler on April 9, 1945, 21 days before Hitler committed suicide and the Allies liberated Germany.

The aforementioned museum was dedicated in 2005. The Germans did not repent of their sin of racial purification in 1945. They were decimated in 1945. How long does repentance take?

I believe it is time for America to repent of its original sin of racial genocide, both of native Americans and of African Americans (though racial issues are not limited to those two groups). That original sin has produced a 400-year pandemic among us, which hopefully now seems to be in a process of sober diagnosis. The literal meaning of the biblical word for repentance, is to change the mind, to proceed in a totally different direction. It is time.

We should not confuse America's original sin with the more universal fact of original sin which affects and pollutes all of us of every race. We see that pestilence active daily on all, regardless of race. And America's original sin certainly fits within that tapestry of devastation.

Add to that our country's wholesale drinking the cool-aid of narcissistic stupidity (see Bonhoeffer's paragraphs on this in the same "After Ten Years' letter). Have we bred a new generation of "Amerikanische Christen?"

What is the nature of the crisis we face in the Church today? Hear these words from Walter Brueggemann, who, incidentally, stood at the bottom of the hill at 801 De Mun Ave on Feb. 19, 1974 to greet us as we walked out of Concordia Seminary to form Seminex:

***The crisis in the U.S. Church has almost nothing to do with being liberal or conservative; it has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism and settling for a common generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence and part affluence.***

Walter Brueggemann, [A Way other than Our Own: Devotions for Lent](#)

In our day, in our country, in our church, what can we learn from Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

During the early Seminex years, I remember hearing some folks (and I don't remember who) make the point that Seminex could be compared to the underground seminaries in Germany overseen by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Nazi years in the 30's. I thought that was interesting but maybe a bit dramatic. But maybe not. Later on an expert in that connective dynamic made that comparison very real.

One of my joyous avocations these past ten years is service on the board of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section.

I discovered that Bonhoeffer-Seminex connection by accident in a 1986 newsletter of the International Bonhoeffer Society (1986 IBS Newsletter issues #33 and #34 edited by Robin Lovin; Managing Editor – J. Patrick Kelley). There is a quote there from Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's dearest friend, biographer, and the one who preserved the lion's share of what we now have as the 17 volumes of DB's theological works. Bethge wrote:

“At Zingst one first met one of the five ‘Seminex’ institutions set up by the Council of Brethren to complete our training as ministers of the Confessing Church. This one was led by the extraordinary young Director, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, just called back from his brief pastorate in London...”

Bethge transposed the Seminex name back onto the German underground seminaries of the 30's!

I also think I can tell you where that came from. Kurt Hendel can tell you about the time Eberhard visited Seminex (it was before I was on staff there). Ed Schroeder wrote this about that timeframe in one of his Crossings reminiscences:

"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. 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!'"

Perhaps we especially have a responsibility to be “Bonhoefferian” in our pursuit of discipleship - following Jesus Christ!