

Theologian, Pastor, Double Agent, Prisoner, Martyr. All of these apparently contradictory roles came together in the unusual and inspiring life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born into a difficult time, where a nation and a church were wrestling with their identity, ultimately making decisions with tragic consequences. In this time of nationalist fervour that gripped the population, including the church, Bonhoeffer made a resolute stand, with his words and life, for a Christ who calls into question all worldly allegiances.

Theologian, Pastor, Double Agent, Prisoner, Martyr. All of these apparently contradictory roles came together in the unusual and inspiring life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born into a difficult time, where a nation and a church were wrestling with their identity, ultimately making decisions with tragic consequences. In this time of nationalist fervour that gripped the population, including the church, Bonhoeffer made a resolute stand, with his words and life, for a Christ who calls into question all worldly allegiances.

Bonhoeffer, in his early adult years, seemed destined for a glittering academic career. He wrote his doctoral dissertation when he was just 21.

Karl Barth referred to his thesis as a 'theological miracle'. Alongside his academic pursuits, Bonhoeffer also sought ordination, spending time working with churches in Germany, Barcelona and London.

However, the time that Bonhoeffer lived was going to require of him much more than just a standard academic and ecclesial career. Later in his life he wrote, 'the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation should continue to live.' This commitment to enter the fray began with a bold radio address two days after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. His strong and famous indictment of the Fuhrer [leader] as a Verfuhrer [mis-leader] was cut off mid sentence by the radio station. As it became clear that an aim of the Nazi party was the exclusion of Jews from Germany, Bonhoeffer responded by writing, 'An expulsion of the Jews from the West must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ.'

The accommodation of much of the German church to Hitler and the Nazi party caused deep despair for Bonhoeffer. He responded to this by setting up an alternative underground seminary at Finkelwalde, training pastors with a theology that resisted the contemporary political and ecclesiological landscape. The Gestapo eventually shut down the seminary in 1940.

Bonhoeffer, under orders not to write or speak in public, joined Abwehr, the German military intelligence gathering organization. Rather than gather military intelligence, he used this cover to strengthen the confessing church

**Born:** February 4 1906 in Breslau, Germany

**Died:** April 9 1945 (aged 39) in Flossenberg concentration camp



and build the growing network of resistance to Hitler. He became connected with those in the army who wanted to overthrow Hitler. As some of these activities became known, the Gestapo arrested Bonhoeffer. Whilst he was in prison, the plot to assassinate Hitler failed. All those associated with the resistance movement were executed. Bonhoeffer was hanged on 9 April, 1945.

Bonhoeffer offers a remarkable example of an authentic life lived in pursuit of holiness. Holiness, as Bonhoeffer understood, calls not for escape from the world but rather wholeheartedly following Christ in the world. All that Bonhoeffer was able to do was made possible through his deep commitment to a way of life shaped by Christ through discipline and the formation of virtue.