

## Cities role in a martyr's life

*"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 cost a man His life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."*

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

**D**ead at 39 years old. Executed April 9, 1945, because he believed in costly grace.

In the 1930s, Bonhoeffer, pastor-theologian, watched in disgust and horror as the Nazis took over his nation. His fellow German churchmen began siding with the Nazi party. In radio broadcasts, before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer called Germans to reject the Nazis and defend the rights of the Jewish minority.

By 1935, he was a leader in the state church wing that remained faithful to orthodox Christianity, struggling against the increasing Nazification of a German version of Christianity. He established an underground seminary teaching not only the Bible and theology but principles of non-violent resistance.

The Gestapo closed the seminary in 1937, jailing many of the ministers who were brothers in arms with Bonhoeffer.

In 1941, he joined an underground resistance and rescue movement helping Jews escape to Switzerland. By 1942, his involvement led to a difficult decision to join a plot to assassinate Hitler. A committed pacifist, he wrestled with the tension between murder as always wrong and the German state committing mass murder on a scale unprecedented.

Arrested in April of 1943 for being part of the underground movement, the Gestapo didn't know of his involvement in the assassination plot. He spent the next two years in prison.

The morning of his execution, the prison doctor found Bonhoeffer kneeling, praying with an intensity that left the doctor wondering if he even knew of his presence. It's the bitter truth. Days before the allies would reach him, the rope was placed around his neck and the floor dropped from beneath his feet.

We are all molded by "where." Where we were born. Where we grew up. Where we were educated. Where we were saved. Where we had significant experiences.

Three cities played a significant role in shaping this pastor, prophet, martyr.

Dietrich was six years old when the Bonhoeffers moved to Berlin. Tourists from around the world flocked to the city, famous as the sex capitol of Europe. The homosexual population multiplied with writers, artists, and intellectuals drawn to this tolerant and vibrant city. The starving unemployed stood in sharp contrast to the nouveau riche business people driving around in large convertibles. Indulgence co-existed with intellectual rigor and academic exploration.

Bonhoeffer's father, a renowned psychiatrist, was dismayed when teenage Dietrich decided he wanted to be a theologian.

The Bonhoeffers moved into Berlin's Grunewald district, a prestigious neighborhood where many of Berlin's distinguished professors lived. Dietrich studied in Berlin seven semesters earning his doctorate at age 21 in 1927. The theological faculty was headed by Adolph Von Harnack. Bonhoeffer met and was mentored by Karl Barth.

Berlin shaped Bonhoeffer intellectually, academically, theologically, and socially.

In 1930, Bonhoeffer arrived in New York City for a year's study at Union Seminary. The battle between liberals and fundamentalists was in full swing. Union students had a front row seat. Bonhoeffer writes:

*"There is no theology here ... They talk a blue streak without the slightest substantive foundation and with no evidence of any criteria. The theological atmosphere of UTS is accelerating the process of the secularization of Christianity in America.*

*"In New York City they preach about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed, or is addressed so rarely that I have as yet been unable to hear it, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross, sin and forgiveness,*

*death and life."*

The one notable exception Bonhoeffer observed was "in the Negro churches."

There is no indication that Bonhoeffer had been born again at this point. Eric Metaxas writes, "The Abyssinian Baptist Church, pastored by Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., became Bonhoeffer's spiritual home. Powell was active in combating racism and minced no words about the saving power of Jesus Christ." For the first time, Bonhoeffer heard the gospel preached and saw it lived out.

To all appearances, Bonhoeffer was born again as a result of the Abyssinian ministry.

He also found the Word of God fearlessly preached in New York City by Dr. McComb, a reviled fundamentalist. Bonhoeffer stood with the so-called fundamentalists against their adversaries at Union Seminary and Riverside Church. He boldly equated the fundamentalists with the confessing church in Germany.

London also factors into Bonhoeffer's life. Invited by Theodor Heckel, the head of the churches' foreign office, to pastor a German-speaking congregation there, Bonhoeffer hoped to escape the scrutiny he was under in Germany. Heckel hoped to blunt some of Bonhoeffer's criticism of the German church. London gave Bonhoeffer a freedom he didn't have in Berlin. He made sure that whatever positive image Hitler's Germany might have in the English press was quickly corrected with facts. He soon influenced German pastors in London. Here he resigned as youth secretary protesting the World Alliance's failure to speak out for the Jews. Here the divide between him and the state church at home became unmistakable and raw.

Three cities. And each metropolis left a mark on the man. The man became a martyr and left his mark on the world.

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