



Rebirth in Harlem

by Jonathan Aitken

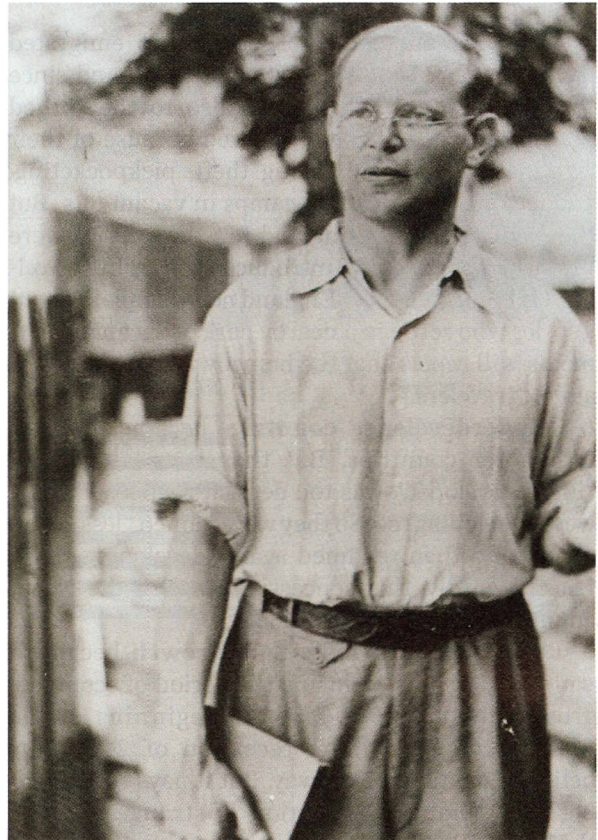
SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AGO THIS SUMMER, on July 27, 1945, a remarkable memorial service was held in one of London's great churches, Holy Trinity Brompton. It was in honor of a then obscure German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His life's story, as outlined by Bishop Bell of Chichester in the sermon, was the absolute antithesis of the populist slogan that had been on many British lips during the war that had ended just a few weeks earlier: "The only good German is a dead German." For Bonhoeffer was not just a good man. He was one of the moral and spiritual giants of the 20th century.

Bonhoeffer's historical reputation has been rising steadily. It will be further enhanced by an excellent new biography (the first in 40 years), *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy—A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich*. The author is Eric Metaxas, and the publisher Thomas Nelson.

This is a fast-paced portrait of a life lived courageously as well as theologically. Although Bonhoeffer's spiritual classics such as *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison* are given ample attention, it is the power of the narrative material so well researched and presented by Metaxas that makes this book a page turner for the general reader as well as an essential resource for scholars.

Certain as Bonhoeffer was of his theology, he was sometimes confused about his own identity. This complexity is movingly captured in his poem "Who Am I?" written in his prison cell shortly before his execution for his involvement in an unsuccessful plot against Hitler. The last lines reflect both the ambivalence and the authenticity of his journey:

*Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,*



*Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions
of mine.*

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

Bonhoeffer was never a "woebegone weakling." Whenever he came to a high hurdle he jumped it fearlessly. The outstanding example of his moral courage came in 1933 when as a rising 27-year-old scholar he published an essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question," which challenged the German religious establishment's acquiescence in Hitler's persecution of the Jews.

At a time when most Catholic and Protestant churches were dismissing their pastors and employees of Jewish blood, Bonhoeffer not only denounced them for their cowardice, but also called for outright opposition to a regime that was breaking the commandments of Christianity. He argued that the churches of Germany must support Hitler's victims "even if they do not belong to the Christian community." For good measure he added that Christians might be called upon not only "to bandage the victims under the wheel" of oppression but "to put a spoke into the wheel itself."

Such opposition to the evil philosophy of Nazism set Bonhoeffer on the path that would lead him to the gallows. But his audacity preceded Hitler's rise to the Reich chancellorship. A year before the notorious "Aryan Paragraph" (the law banning anyone of Jewish descent from state-funded employment) was enacted, Bonhoeffer was a revolutionary young voice crying out in the wilderness of the German church. When he preached to Berlin's most important and influential Protestant congregation on Reformation Sunday in 1932, he told the congregants that they were a disgrace to the memory of their church's founder, Martin Luther.

When and where did this fire start in the precocious Pastor Bonhoeffer? He came from a privileged background, and there were few clues in his early years of traditional theological training at Tübingen that he would become a challenger of the established church's stultifying hierarchy. This is where Metaxas's biography breaks new ground.

In a fascinating chapter, "Bonhoeffer in America," Metaxas tracks his subject's journey through New York's Union Theological Seminary and various liberal churches such as Riverside and Park Avenue Baptist. "There is no theology here" was the conclusion of the 24-year-old German observer, as he wrote home complaining of never having heard the gospel of Jesus preached in fashionable Manhattan.

But then Bonhoeffer went to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, whose 14,000-strong congregation made it the largest Protestant church in the United States of the 1930s. He was inspired by the preaching of Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and by the friendships he formed with his African American contemporaries in the church. Of these the most important was a fellow Union student, Frank Fisher, who traveled to Washington, D.C., and other cities with Bonhoeffer, introducing his German friend to "Negro spirituals" and "Negro literature."

There is little doubt that Bonhoeffer's American experiences, especially the appalling racial prejudice he encountered, laid the foundation for what Metaxas calls "The Great Change" in his subject's character. The aloof, patrician intellectual who had arrived in New York departed a committed churchgoing Christian on fire with the gospel and despising what he called the "religionless Christianity" of the German church. Metaxas speculates that Bonhoeffer was "born again" in his Harlem period. The book's new material suggests that a major personal and spiritual transformation took place as a result of his attendance at the Abyssinian church. Without that transformation it is unlikely that Bonhoeffer's most influential theological ideas on "cheap grace" would have been formed.

ONE OF THE MOST POIGNANT sentences ever written by Bonhoeffer was "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." For him this was no abstract theological metaphor. It summed up the outcome of the sacrificial action Bonhoeffer took to join a group of conspirators, led by Admiral Canaris, who began plotting to kill Hitler in 1942.

Metaxas provides a fascinating description of the mounting pressures on Bonhoeffer and his deepening Christ-centered commitment during the last three years of his life. Ambivalence and deception were needed for a pastor of the Confessing Church who was covertly supporting the assassination of the head of state. But Bonhoeffer was too fearless to cover his tracks. So eventually he was arrested and after a painful prison journey (which produced some of his finest writing), he was executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945, just one month before the war ended.

Metaxas concludes his powerful account of this martyrdom with the words of the camp doctor who was moved by the spiritual courage of the unidentified figure he watched going to the scaffold: "At the place of execution he [Bonhoeffer] again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God." ❧

Jonathan Aitken is most recently author of *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan: From Communism to Capitalism (Continuum)*. His biographies include *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway)* and *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)*.