

The Finkenwalde Project

BY WILLIAM SAMSON

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's project at Finkenwalde Seminary to recover for congregations the deep Christian tradition is a prominent model for young twenty-first-century Christians. Weary of the false dichotomy between right belief and right practice, they seek the wholeness of discipleship in "a kind of new monasticism."

As he was helping to shape the radical community at Finkenwalde Seminary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his older brother Karl-Friedrich, "The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call people to this."¹ These words remain true today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) stands as one of the great saints of the Church in recent memory, a saint who died at the hands of the Nazi government. One of his crimes, it would seem, was the formation of a community that sought to live out his conception of a *new monasticism*. To understand what he meant by that, it is helpful to briefly revisit his life.

Bonhoeffer did not come from a religious family, and church attendance was not a significant component in his formative years. Indeed, nothing in his family background indicates the kind of pioneering Christian life he would later lead. However, clues to his radical turn can be found in his academic life.

After studying philosophy for a year at the University of Tübingen, the young Bonhoeffer traveled to Rome where he became convinced that the Christian Church was bigger and broader than what he had known. In a letter to his parents he describes how "the Protestant church often seems like a small sect" when compared to the Roman Catholic Church with its richer

liturgy and community life more integrated with the society.²

Returning to study theology at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer encountered important debates about the relationship of theology to social practice. Adolf von Harnack, one of his professors at Berlin, and Walter Rauschenbusch in America were advocating for a social gospel, a conception of Christianity that was less bound to doctrinal purity and more closely connected to Christ-like practice. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, by contrast, chose a fidelity to notions of truth as revealed in Scripture over the practical fidelity advocated by Harnack. Barth's rejection of the more liberal theology was due, at least in part, to Harnack's early support of the German aggression in the First World War. Although he leaned more heavily in the direction of Barth, especially with regard to Barth's conception of grace balanced against the justice of God, Bonhoeffer's writings and life would convey a deepening desire to be faithful in both practice and orthodox doctrine.

For example, in *Sanctorum Communio* (or, *Communion of Saints*), his dissertation completed at Berlin at the age of twenty-one, he relies heavily on sociology to argue that our conceptions of God, especially as revealed through Christ and the Holy Spirit, should shape our view of the Church. In this work he refers to the Church as "the physical manifestation of Christ on earth" and "Christ existing as church-community."³

Bonhoeffer continued to work out some of the sociological and philosophical issues raised by conceptions of God in his second dissertation (which qualified him to teach at the University of Berlin) and in his postgraduate work at Union Theological Seminary in New York. During his time in New York he was exposed to the spirituality of the African American church and came to love its spiritual songs. Upon his return to Germany, he became deeply involved in global ecumenical conversations. During this time as he reflected on the character of God, Bonhoeffer began to recognize the need for the Church to directly engage the great issues of the day. But, it was not until the Nazi Party came to power with the majority support of German Protestants that he moved from radical academics to radical action.

A SECRET SEMINARY

The Nazis quickly exercised their power over congregations. They created a new national church, the German Evangelical Church, prohibited Jewish and non-Aryan clergy, sought to purge all non-German elements from the liturgy, and even went so far as to remove the Old Testament from the Bible. Bonhoeffer was particularly troubled by the theological implications of Nazi control: by seeking control over every aspect of the German church, the regime took on an authority that rightly belongs to God. With a group of leaders from a federation of Confessing Churches that opposed the Nazis, Bonhoeffer helped to develop the *Barmen Declaration* (1934). This influential statement of faith, written largely by Karl Barth, declares that the Church is not "an organ of the state."⁴

Bonhoeffer did not naturally gravitate to the fight for the purity of the German church in light of the Nazi takeover. After the *Barmen Declaration*, he left his homeland to lead a German-speaking congregation in London, a time he would later refer to as his “time in the desert.” His work with the ecumenical movement strengthened during this time, and he received an invitation to study nonviolence with Gandhi. But this was not to be.

The Confessing Church realized that the weak response of many German congregations to Hitler signaled the need for a new generation of church leaders. These new pastors must be trained not only in orthodox doctrine, but also in orthodox practices that respond to Jesus’ call for disciples to “deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23b). Thus, in 1935 the Confessing Church created an underground school, Finkenwalde Seminary, and invited the still-young Dietrich Bonhoeffer to be its first director. In accepting the position, he chose equipping the church in Germany over training in nonviolence from Gandhi.

The concept of “a sort of new monasticism” took form during the first months in the new seminary community. We glimpse an important component of Bonhoeffer’s emerging thought in *Discipleship*, which he wrote during the two years Finkenwalde operated. In this work he contrasts cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace “is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross.” Costly grace is the grace of the gospel: it costs people their lives. “Nothing can be cheap to us,” he emphasizes, “which is costly to God.”⁵

The creation of Finkenwalde Seminary and the outworking of Bonhoeffer’s new monasticism can be seen as rebuilding the church from the ground up. The German Evangelical Church was by this point a subsidiary of the Nazi regime. It could provide no assistance to Finkenwalde and the work of the young, confessing churches. Consequently, the new seminarians could not simply study Scripture – although all accounts indicate it was a place of academic rigor – they had to physically construct the school’s buildings. In this training ground to “take the Sermon on the Mount seriously,” students and faculty engaged their hands as well as their minds in the service of the gospel.

Other distinctive features of the school reflect the direction of Bonhoeffer’s thought about the intersection of belief and practice in the new monasticism. For instance, rather than accepting the more formal title of *Herr Director*, he chose to be called *Brother Bonhoeffer*. “Blessed are the meek” (Matthew 5:5).

Like the classic monastic orders, Finkenwalde developed a strong musical tradition. In addition to teaching members the great hymns of the Church, Bonhoeffer mixed in the African American spirituals he had learned in Harlem. Reportedly he possessed a whole stack of recordings of spirituals from his time in New York, treasuring this music as a link between the oppression of African Americans and the oppression of the Jews. Thus, even the choice of music helped the seminarians to link belief and practice. While many in the confessing churches remained silent as the oppression of the Jews steadily increased, Bonhoeffer sought to bring the seminary into soli-

darity with the suffering of the Jewish people. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” or justice (Matthew 5:6).⁶

Finkenwalde lived on the contributions of the community. The resources of the official state church were not available to the Confessing Church. Built into the project of training new pastors for the work of the gospel was the notion of being “poor in spirit” as well as poor in pocket (Matthew 5:3; cf. Luke 6:20).

Seminarians appreciated the power and conviction of Bonhoeffer’s preaching, for “He was caught by what he was saying,” as one observer noted years later.⁷ His genuine passion for the gospel moved beyond academics and toward a holistic, integrated connection between heart and mind. He truly desired to be caught up in the grace of Christ, a costly grace that would eventually claim his life and the lives of students at Finkenwalde.

The Gestapo, the secret state police, finally closed the seminary in September of 1937. Fearing the radical gospel advocated at Finkenwalde, the Chief of German Police Heinrich Himmler declared the seminary illegal and arrested more than two dozen of its former students. Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945, a few weeks before the end of the war. He was only thirty-nine years old.

A MODEL FOR THE NEW MONASTICS

The Finkenwalde Seminary’s project to recover for congregations the deep and rich Christian tradition is not a remote historical event with little bearing on the life of faith today. Rather, it serves as a prominent model for an increasing number of young twenty-first-century Christians who are motivated by the same impulses as those German seminarians. I have in mind the wonderful members of The Simple Way in Philadelphia, headed by Shane Claiborne, Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, headed by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Camden House in Camden, New Jersey, headed by Chris and Cassie Haw, as three examples of this movement toward a new monasticism. The similarity of these small but growing Christian communities to Finkenwalde Seminary is due, in part, to the fact that they are engaged in similar debates about Christian belief and practice, and participation in the public sphere. These young contemporary Christians, like the seminarians at Finkenwalde, have grown weary of the false dichotomy between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice); they seek the wholeness and integrity of Christian faith and practice in a kind of new monasticism.

They resist their Christian friends today – on the right of current political and theological spectrums – who would have them cleave to orthodoxy with little regard for the orthopraxy of the Church. For without that deep longing of the Church to “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” or justice, how will congregations serve as the “hermeneutic of the gospel” in our culture? How will they interpret for our day the story of the Christ who calls us to transcend categories of race, ethnicity, and gender?⁸

They also resist Christian friends—on the political and theological left—who embrace a social gospel that has, over time, lost touch with the rich theological heart of the Christian message. Certainly, when social action is understood through and motivated by the orthodox witness of the Church, congregations can engage the culture in response to Christ’s call to lay down our lives. But when they lose this theological foundation, how will they maintain their commitment to live in radical service to others?

This is where the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is so helpful in the contemporary conversation. He did not see a divide between social justice and fidelity to Scripture. Under the influence of Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer was fully committed to Jesus, as understood through the Bible interpreted by the Church, and to justice. He thought and lived outside of the categories that currently divide Christians into opposing political and theological camps. He did not check out from the hard work of redeeming society. Neither did he bless activities that clearly violated Christ’s call to justice. He believed the Sermon on the Mount was not given to make us feel incapable, but to inspire us to respond redemptively to the inherent conflicts brought about by society. For him and the Finkenwalde seminarians, the Sermon on the Mount articulated a way of life together that is a very real goal for the Christ-follower.

The evidence linking the Confessing Church and the New Monastic movement is striking. Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), a leading pastor in the Confessing Church, preached a sermon entitled “God is my Führer” (1940), in which he advanced the claim

that God is never content to be a subject under the control of any human nation-state. In a similar fashion, Shane Claiborne, Chris Haw, and friends launched the *Jesus for President* tour in the summer of 2008. In a veggie-grease powered bus they drove to twenty-one cities across the United States to advance the dream of “a world with no kings (or presidents) but Jesus.”⁹

Just as Bonhoeffer’s discipleship was informed by his visits to Rome, Harlem, and London, so these new monastics’ views are being shaped by their experiences of the global church. Shane Claiborne’s internship with Mother Teresa continues to be a major factor in his thinking about the formation of Christian communities.¹⁰ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s visit to war-torn Iraq deeply influenced his desire to create an intentional community in which to live out the principles

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of nonviolent engagement informed by the model of Christ. The name of his community, Rutba House, pays homage to the radical grace that he and other members of a Christian Peacemaker Team received from an Iraqi physician in Rutba, Iraq.¹¹

Often the founders of the new monastic communities are reflective scholars, like Bonhoeffer. Wilson-Hartgrove is a bright young academic who could have made a name for himself in higher education. Haw is a part-time academic who also chooses to engage in carpentry, pottery, and other community-based activities. And Claiborne, a star pupil of Tony Campolo at Eastern University, could easily have followed Campolo's lead into the classroom. Yet each has chosen to have their primary identity connected with their community, much like Bonhoeffer decided to dive headlong into the Finkenwalde project.

And, finally, Finkenwalde Seminary can be seen as the inspiration for the School(s) for Conversion founded by Wilson-Hartgrove.¹² Traveling across the country and being held in congregations and communities that identify with the ideals of New Monasticism, School(s) for Conversion successfully involve a variety of Christ-followers in exploring the relationship of New Monasticism to the orthodox mission of the Church and discovering ways of practical faithfulness that integrate a group's commitments to the Church and to service in their local context. The new monastic spirit is popping up in some quite surprising places. Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, is just such an example. This over one-hundred-year-old inner-city congregation was once one of the largest in America. After suffering from urban flight in the 1970s and 80s, it responded by developing a new monastic community that operates as a pod within the larger congregation. The community's ministries include the nonprofit Englewood Community Development Corporation and shared living arrangements, with common growing space for community gardens and beekeeping. Despite these changes, the congregation maintains its historic commitment to its Christian denomination and the larger Church.¹³

Additionally, it is worth noting the number of people who are reading the works of new monastic leaders.¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, a theological account of the daily life in the seminary at Finkenwalde, is a minor classic of this genre.¹⁵ The books by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Chris Haw, and others are influencing a broad group of people, some of whom are pastors simply asking how they can stay committed to orthodoxy within congregations in North America that seem so deeply accommodated to the broader culture.

New Monasticism, from its earlier manifestation at Finkenwalde to the present experiments across North America, holds the great possibility of equipping the Church to move beyond the divide that exists between fidelity to belief and fidelity to practice. Time alone will prove the permanent shape this movement will take within the body of Christ.

NOTES

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer (January 14, 1935)," in Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds., *A Testament of Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, revised edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 423-424, here citing 424.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "To His Parents (Holy Saturday, April 19 [1924])," in *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 9 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 110-111, here citing 111.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998).

4 The *Theological Declaration of Barmen* is available online at www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm (accessed May 7, 2010).

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 44-45.

6 *Dikaiosunē*, the Greek word translated "righteousness" in this beatitude, is often translated "justice" or "right order" in ancient literature.

7 For a collection of Bonhoeffer's most memorable sermons of this era in the recollection of seminarians, family members, and friends, see Kelly and Nelson, eds., *A Testament of Freedom*, 252-302.

8 The missionary writer Lesslie Newbigin coins this phrase in "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel," in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 222-231.

9 Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw tell the story of this tour in *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), and online at www.jesusforpresident.org.

10 Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

11 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove has told the story of Rutba often. See, for instance, his article "Beatitudes in the Desert," *The Sermon on the Mount*, Christian Reflection, 26 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008), 60-67. Available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

12 For more information, see *School(s) For Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), and the Web site www.newmonasticism.org.

13 For more information about this historic congregation, see www.inglewoodcc.com.

14 Particularly noteworthy is the book series, *The New Monastic Library: Resources for Radical Discipleship*, launched in 2005 by Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. For a current list of books in this series, see www.wipfandstock.com/cascade_books.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996).



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