

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8: Letters and Papers From Prison

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Reviewed by: Craig Falvo, The Church of Jesus Christ blog

I recently received a copy of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, part of the Bonhoeffer Works series from Fortress Press. The sixteen volume series is claimed to be "the definitive English translation of Bonhoeffer's theological and other writings. It includes a great deal of material that appears for the first time in English, as well as documents discovered only after the publication of the original German volumes." (xvii)

Letters and Papers from Prison contains 206 letters written to or by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from April 11, 1943 to February 28, 1945. It was originally compiled by Eberhard Bethge (August 28, 1909-March 18, 2000), a close friend of Bonhoeffer and a fellow resister of the Nazis. Bethge was also a biographer of Bonhoeffer.

My favorite letter/paper was #187: *Outline for a Book*. This paper was written after the failed attempt on Hitler's life (annotated by Bethge as August 3, 1944). Here, Bonhoeffer outlines a three chapter book:

1. Taking Stock of Christianity; 2. What is Christian faith, really? 3. Conclusions. (499)

In this letter, Bonhoeffer draws some interesting conclusions about what it means to be the church. How the church is supposed to get there is even more interesting.

The church is church only when it is there for others. As a first step it must give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the freewill offering of the congregations and perhaps be engaged in some secular vocation [Beruf]. The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community-not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling [Beruf] what a life with Christ is, what it means "to be there fore others." (503)

I don't know of too many Lutheran pastors who would agree with Bonhoeffer here...at least concerning their vocation...but it's an interesting thought nonetheless. It is a shame that all we have is this paper that contains the rough outline.

This is an excellent resource for those studying Bonhoeffer. There are a plethora footnotes that cross-reference other letters/papers in this volume as well as other volumes in the series. These notes contain other information as well, including information on whether the specific paper/letter was published, or if excerpts were published as well as background context for the letter/paper.. This is the scholar's edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

While not my favorite book in the series to date, this book is an important reference to one of the greatest theological minds of the 20th century.

Disclaimer:

I received this book free from Fortress Press. Providing me a free copy in no way guarantees a favorable review. The opinions expresses in this review are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's [16 CFR, Part 255](#): "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

Despite Dietrich Bonhoeffer's earlier theological achievements and writings, it was his correspondence and notes from prison that electrified the postwar world six years after his death in 1945. The materials gathered and selected by his friend Eberhard Bethge in *Letters and Papers from Prison* not only brought Bonhoeffer to a wide and appreciative readership, especially in North America, they also introduced to a broad readership his novel and exciting ideas of religionless Christianity, his open and honest theological appraisal of Christian doctrines, and his sturdy, if sorely tried, faith in face of uncertainty and doubt. Sympathetic guards helped smuggle his letters out of prison to Eberhard Bethge and others, and these uncensored letters were posthumously published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One of those guards, a corporal named Knobloch, even offered to help him escape from the prison and "disappear" with him, and plans were made for that end but Bonhoeffer declined it, fearing Nazi retribution against his family, especially his brother Klaus and brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi, who were also imprisoned.^[42] All sixteen volumes of the English Bonhoeffer Works Edition of Bonhoeffer's Oeuvre had been published by October 2013. 4: *Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer; John D. Dodsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly, Editors. Originally published in 1937, this book soon became a classic exposition of what it means to follow Christ in a modern world beset by a dangerous and criminal government. 5: *Life Together & The Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms* Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly, Translated by James Burtness and Dan Bloesch. 6: *Ethics* Edited by Clifford J. Green, Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Charles West. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (The first English translation was in 1953 by SCM Press). This edition translated by Reginald H. Fuller and Frank Clark from *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag (1970).