

After Ten Years: Bonhoeffer's Reflections on Life in Hard Times

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How fast time passes is relevant to one's age and stage of life. The years between 10 and 20 bring about unimaginable changes. The years between 20 and 30 bring about many firsts—first full time job, living away from family, marriage, children, etc. The years after 50 seem to condense as decades fly by.

Background of Bonhoeffer's Life

Bonhoeffer was a 27 year-old lecturer in Theology when Hitler came to power January, 1933. Hitler quickly and efficiently consolidated political power:

April, 1933	First Jewish Boycott
Late 1930's	-Imprisonment of Communists, homosexuals; -Professional Jews now unemployed. Those who could emigrate were doing so; -Synagogues destroyed; - Civil organizations were dissolved or under Nazi control; - Germany attacking neighboring countries; -
By 1939	- Invasion of Poland officially launched WWII; - Young men conscripted into military duty; - Young women conscripted into labor to sustain war effort and being encouraged to have Aryan children for the country.

With his career plans on hold, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, attorney Hans von Dohnanyi, recruited him to serve in the Abwehr, an underground conspiracy to replace the Nazi regime with a new government. Bonhoeffer began his work with Nazi Military Intelligence Unit for the purpose of gathering information to overthrow the Nazi government and stop Hitler.

Bonhoeffer wrote his paper "Ten Years" for friends on the 10th anniversary of Hitler's rise to power in January, 1943. The theme is that ten years is a long time in the life of a human; immeasurably much has been lost in the previous 10 years. But the intensity of the experience of these years meant that the time itself was not lost—not wasted.

Summary of Essay on "Who Stands Fast?"

Six types of people could not stand fast against the insanity of the Third Reich:

1) Reasonable People

- ∞ Reason fails when evil masquerades as light, charity, necessity, or social justice.
- ∞ Reason is powerless against insanity.

2) People of Ethical Principles.

- ∞ Their principles lead them to fight the symptoms and symbols rather than the evil one generating the symptoms and symbols.
- ∞ Principles are tools in the hand of God to be thrown away when they are no longer of any use.

3) People of Conscience.

- ∞ Such people are isolated, with only their own inner guidance.
- ∞ They are overwhelmed by the seductiveness of the evil all around them.
- ∞ There is no morally pure position available in the face of such evil.

4) People Obedient to Duty.

- ∞ Duty is a core value of the German people; obedience to authority; to the military, to producing Aryan babies, to working for the war efforts, etc.

5) People with a presumed inner personal freedom.

- ∞ This is the raw material of tragedies.

6) People who value virtue.

- ∞ Private virtue of those who isolated themselves as much as possible from the surrounding tragedies.
- ∞ Self-knowledge of personal inadequacies will rob peace of mind or be condemned to be delusional.

Conclusion: The times required abandonment of all these positive characteristics in favor of total trust in God and only God.

Summary of Essay "On Success"

- ∞ Perspective of a German soldier, "We have to win this war. If we lose, then may God be merciful to us! The lust for revenge among the peoples where we have swept through will be great indeed."
- ∞ Perspective of Bonhoeffer, "I have come to the conclusion that I must pray for the defeat of my people."

Summary of Essay "On Stupidity"

- ∞ Stupidity is a moral rather than intellectual issue.
- ∞ Some with high IQ are stupid.
- ∞ Some with lower IQ are wise.
- ∞ Stupidity has to do with emotional intelligence of herd instinct vs. ability to self-differentiate from the crowd.
- ∞ Abuse of power results in outbursts of stupidity or mob psychology behavior.
- ∞ The powerful depend on 'stupid' people to blindly follow.
- ∞ The 'stupid' masses need a powerful leader to follow.

∞ What is the cause-effect reciprocal relationship?

* Does changed behavior lead to changed thinking and feelings?

* Does changed thinking and feelings lead to changed behavior?

Bonhoeffer concluded “What will really matter is whether those in power expect more from people’s stupidity than from their wisdom. Leadership does matter! Leaders have profound influence on the wisdom or stupidity of those who follow them.”

Summary of Essay on “Sovereignty of God in History”

I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose [God] needs people who make the best use of everything. I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to help us to resist in all time of distress. But [G] never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on [God] alone. A faith such as this should allay all our fears for the future. I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are turned to good account, and that it is no harder for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds. I believe that God is no timeless fate, but that [God] waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible actions.

Summary of Essay on “Trust”

- ∞ An act of political will to decide to overcome the suspicion in the air they breathed in order to establish the bonds of trust with each other.

Summary of Essay on “Are We Still of Any Use?”

Bonhoeffer wrote, “We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?”

- ∞ Had to fake allegiance to that they sought to destroy.
- ∞ Used deception and deceit even toward those they loved and sought to preserve.
- ∞ Concerned they had become so dishonest they could never again function in open, honest circumstances and thus wondered if they would be of any use when this was finally over.
- ∞ Call to moral self-awareness—we face moral compromises still. What criteria do we use to decide which ones to compromise?
- ∞ Call to be transparent to God—to have faith deeper than doubt.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Take a few minutes to summarize the highs and lows of your own past decade. What were some of the major decisions? Challenges? Accomplishments?

- 2) Discuss what you consider to be the political highs and lows of the past decade.
Where have you seen progress on a local, regional, national or global level?
Where have you seen cause for concern in these same areas?
- 3) What do you think about Bonhoeffer's conclusions about people who could not stand fast in the time of tyranny in Germany? Do you see any application of these characteristics in today's political climate?
- 4) What does it mean to be both a faithful citizen of a country and a challenger of national policies and practices?
- 5) What applications do you see in our context for Bonhoeffer's theories about stupidity vs. wisdom?
- 6) What are some circumstances facing you personally or people you work with that would require total trust in God and in God alone?
- 7) How can trust be restored once it's been violated?
- 8) Do you believe people can overcome a life based on deception and deceit? If so how?