

Book Review



The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
Ed. Isabel Best. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2012.
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(e-book). xxvi + 214 pgs. \$29.95.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's biographer, Eberhard Bethge, has called our attention to the importance of preaching in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church's ministry: "Preaching was the great event in his life; the very strong theologizing and all the critical love of his church were all for its sake, for in it the message of Christ, the bringer of peace, was proclaimed. To Bonhoeffer, nothing in his calling competed with preaching."

This remarkable book is the latest addition to the vast literature on the life and literary legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As such, it takes an important place following the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBW), the collection of his works in new translations and editing of Bonhoeffer. The achievement of Isabel Best, editor, cannot be underestimated. Already a seasoned translator of two volumes of the DBW and segments of other volumes, Best has provided readers with an indispensable tool for understanding more fully Eberhard Bethge's monumental biography through her selection of Bonhoeffer's sermons preached at crucial phases of his pastoral ministry.

Best has illuminated that ministry through Bonhoeffer's sermons now set in their historical context and in Bonhoeffer's forceful resistance to Hitler's lethal infection of both church and state. These are sermons that take us on a compelling journey with Bonhoeffer as he was able to electrify his varied congregations with the Word of God extended even into the recesses of a troubled, war-weary people.

The timeless quality of this collection is carefully augmented by Victoria Barnett's "Foreword." Barnett, the General Editor of the DBW, points out that it is impossible to understand Bonhoeffer the "German Resistance Movement" hero or Bonhoeffer the theologian without understanding Bonhoeffer the Preacher.

Best has organized Bonhoeffer's sermons chronologically, beginning with his preaching on "God is With Us" delivered in 1928, during his internship in Barcelona, and extending into her final selection, "Death is Swallowed Up in Victory," delivered on Remembrance Sunday, November, 1939. The collection is enhanced by Best's careful analysis of the historical setting, as well as the probable mood, hopes and concerns of his audience.

Best's "Introduction" is highly instructive of the biographical connections with the cares and, at times, the anxie-

ties of the German people, whether they were graduating students, seminarians, veterans of the Great War, worried Germans living abroad, ordinary people overwhelmed by the demands on their faith in troubled times, or especially pastors in training to live and minister in the midst of their enemies.

There is a vibrancy and passion that Bonhoeffer invested in his sermons that Best has captured well in both her selection and in her analysis of each entry. The sermons have benefitted from the fact that each sermon has been taken with care from the DBW in which all the collected writings of Bonhoeffer have been translated with fully authenticated accuracy and coupled with careful annotations that are faithful to Bonhoeffer's original German and his personal intent.

What is additionally remarkable in this collection of Bonhoeffer's sermons is the relevance, depth, and never-ending application of his words, whether analyses and insights based on the Bible or pointed challenges to the faith of his people, that live on today. Bonhoeffer's sermons transcend the time and audiences of their delivery. There are words such as his "Advent Sermon" calling people to their being "confronted with the terrifying reality: Jesus is at the door, knocking, in reality, asking you for help in the figure of the beggar, in the figure of the degenerate soul in shabby clothes, encountering you in every person you meet. Christ walks the earth as long as there are people, as your neighbor..." (p. 11) Or, in a latter sermon in the London phase of his ministry, there is his declaration that "Christianity stands or falls by its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and by its *apologia* for the weak...Christianity...should give much more offence, more shock to the world than it is doing." (p. 169) So many of these sermons are filled with the challenges that persons in today's world can take to heart and thereby appreciate their never-ending invitation to follow Jesus Christ in the costly grace of discipleship. In training his seminarians in the ministry of preaching, Bonhoeffer had told them of the awesomeness of their ministry but told them too that "the preacher should be assured that Christ enters the congregation through those words that he or she proclaims from the Scripture." That reassurance comes through dramatically in this encounter with Bonhoeffer's sermons now made accessible and captivating through Isabel Best's excellent, superbly edited collection.

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Isabel Best has contributed translations to a number of volumes in the DBWE, including Letters and Papers from Prison, vol. 8, Berlin:1932-1933, Vol. 13, and Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932, Vol. 11. She is also the translator of Ferdinand Schlingensiefen's Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance.