



The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Edited and Introduced by Isabel Best. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. Hardcover, 240 pages.

✦ In the autumn of 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer assumed responsibility for two German-speaking congregations in London. Standing before his flock for the first time, Pastor Bonhoeffer outlined his calling:

“When a preacher opens the Bible and interprets the word of God, a mystery takes place, a miracle: the grace of God, who comes down from heaven into our midst and speaks to us, knocks on our door, asks questions, warns us, puts pressure on us, alarms us, threatens us, and makes us joyful again and free and sure” (90).

The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a glimpse of Bonhoeffer the preacher. One encounters in this volume a Bonhoeffer who challenges those who would make him the founder of a *religionless Christianity*. Preaching occupied a major part in Bonhoeffer’s life and work. He cannot be separated from his preaching. From the pulpit, he delivered his clearest exposition of thought, faith, and vision for the church.

There are many positive aspects to this volume. Editor Isabel Best gathered an anthology of thirty-one sermons spanning his career. The reader joins the congregations of the early Bonhoeffer and sits among the students of the more mature Bonhoeffer as well. Proclamation of the cross of Christ is prominent throughout: “It is the wonderful theme of the Bible, so frightening for many people, that the only visible sign of God in the world is the cross” (17); and “[I]t is wisdom at its best to recognize the cross of Christ as the invincible love of God for all humankind, for us as well as our enemies” (195–96). Furthermore, there is clear witness to the authority of God’s word. This word of God, for Bonhoeffer, gave life to the church. Far from advocating a *religionless Christianity*, Bonhoeffer’s kerygma unmistakably endorses a Christianity that is historical, orthodox, and classically Lutheran. Often he is reminiscent of Luther: “Let the word and the sacraments and the commandment of God be your weapons” (72). The biblical, sacramental theology of Bonhoeffer is inescapable: “Ultimately, only this remains for you in the world: God’s word and sacrament” (206).

Included in *The Collected Sermons* is a four-part sermon series preached on 1 Corinthians 13:1–13. Speaking to his London congregations, Bonhoeffer explored the meaning of love for the church community. He explained that love is, in the end, the only thing needful for Christians. “Human life is only meaningful and worthwhile to the extent that it has love in it. . . . [O]nly one thing is asked of us—whether we have love” (142). He did not, however, promote a theology of love-righteousness whereby “loving” people are saved. Bonhoeffer stated that salvation is bestowed on those who have *been* loved. “It doesn’t say a *loving person* does this or that, but rather says *love* does this or

that. Who is this love? Whom are we talking about?” (149). Love was not an abstraction for Bonhoeffer, but rather the person of Jesus Christ found in the symbol of the cross.

Isabel Best, a principal translator in the English edition of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, provides an accessible general introduction (xii–xxvi), placing Bonhoeffer’s sermons within the framework of his biographical and theological development. Accompanying each sermon, she offers helpful introductions. Editorial decisions in this volume are not without their weaknesses, however. Best calls attention to her employment of “inclusive language”:

[N]ew sermon translations as published in the Complete Works have preserved Bonhoeffer’s now dated language. We know however, that Bonhoeffer valued and honored women as members of his family, friends, coworkers, and students, although no established church in Germany at that time ordained women to the ministry. Therefore, I have felt that he would want to speak to women of the future in language that we would find respectful of us. This is consistent with his vision of a new church that would treat people as adults. (xxv)

Such scholarship does great injustice to Bonhoeffer’s own position. It is an unwarranted move retrospectively to amend the work of an earlier theologian in order to accommodate one’s own agenda and assumptions. In effect, Bonhoeffer is rendered to say that which he did not; for example: “If only the mission is carried out, in preaching and in life, if only the pastor’s sole concern is to devote his or her life to this master and this commission . . .” (89). By altering his words according to the pretext of inclusive language, some of these sermons give the impression that Bonhoeffer supported women’s ordination. Evidence from his teaching seems to indicate the contrary. Lecturing on 1 Timothy 2, Bonhoeffer told his students, “For Paul the order is clear: Women have a full part in salvation and truth. But they have a different vocation from that of men” (*Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, 330). The reader of this volume should be vigilant and prepared for critical recognition of editorial modification.

Despite such reservations, this volume is recommended to those interested in Bonhoeffer’s legacy. This is a noteworthy resource for laity, pastors, and theologians alike interested in acquainting themselves with this towering theologian. For those unacquainted with Bonhoeffer, this volume serves as an excellent primer. For those more familiar with Bonhoeffer’s theology, this volume has great devotional value. These sermons stand out for their beauty and vivid imagery. His provocative rhetoric challenges readers to abandon entanglements of sin and go the way of the cross. Finally these sermons testify to Bonhoeffer’s own resolute faith:

We proclaim and believe this, against everything that we see around us, against the graves of our loved ones, against the dying nature outdoors, against the death that the war casts

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over us once again. We see the reign of death, but we preach and believe in the victory of Jesus Christ over death. (209)

Through the proclamation of such faith in the victory of Jesus Christ, these sermons continue to bless the greater church.

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