

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

Author: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Editor: John W. de Gruchy

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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 expressed 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."

For fascination, influence, inspiration, and controversy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* is unmatched by any other book of Christian reflection written in the twentieth century. A Lutheran pastor and theologian, Bonhoeffer spent two years in Nazi prisons before being executed at age thirty-nine, just a month before the German surrender, for his role in the plot to kill Hitler. The posthumous *Letters and Papers from Prison* has had a tremendous impact on both Christian and secular thought since it was first published in 1951, and has helped establish Bonhoeffer's reputation as one of the great religious writers of the twentieth century. *Letters and Papers from Prison* is one of the great religious books of the twentieth century. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Donald S. Lopez, Jr. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison*, Martin E. Marty *Augustine's Confessions*, Garry Wills. FORTHCOMING: *Revelation*, Bruce Chilton. John de Gruchy, Victoria J. Barnett, and Michael West made available the page proofs of volume 8 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis, 2010). It was therefore possible for me to convert translations and references in my first draft, from the 1971 edition, which had become standard in the English-speaking world. The arrival of volume 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, means that only two volumes, 11 and 15, remain in this prodigious undertaking that is now under the general editorship of Victoria Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski and assisted by numerous Bonhoeffer scholars and translators. The entire project relies, of course, on the original German edition, edited by Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer, Eberhard. It is now clear that Bonhoeffer was no passing fad. A large part of the interest in Bonhoeffer rests on his nearly unique response to the horrors perpetrated by Germans under Hitler. Instead of welcoming him, as many Christians mistakenly did, Bonhoeffer opposed Hitler and the Nazi ideology from the start.