

Reading the Culture: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas sermons

December 9, 2011

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most famous theologians and martyrs of the 20th century. Arrested for plotting the assassination of Adolf Hitler, he was hanged on April 9, 1945, with the sounds of approaching Allied armies in the distance.

British Baptist pastor Edwin Robinson translated and edited [*Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas Sermons*](#) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005). Reading them this Advent season, I have been encouraged and challenged by the brave pastor's triumphant faith. Two of his sermons especially moved me.

In a message delivered on Dec. 2, 1928 (when he was only 22 years old), Bonhoeffer challenged the self-sufficiency of his culture and ours. He rebuked the church for Christmas celebrations that are more secular than spiritual, and he argued that Advent is transforming only for those who admit their need of the One who came for us: "The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come. For these, it is enough to wait in humble fear until the Holy One himself comes down to us, God in the child in the manger. God comes."

In a sermon preached Dec. 17, 1933, Bonhoeffer celebrated Mary's gratitude that God "has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Luke 1:48). He declared: "He loves the lost, the forgotten, the insignificant, the outcasts, the weak and the broken. Where men say, 'lost,'

he says, 'found'; where men say, 'condemned,' he says, 'redeemed'; where men say, 'no,' he says 'yes.' Where men look with indifference or superiority, he looks with burning love, such as nowhere else is to be found. Where men say, 'contemptible,' God cries, 'blessed.'"

Then Bonhoeffer applied this grace to his prideful culture. "When we reach a point in our lives at which we are not only ashamed of ourselves, but believe God is ashamed of us too, when we feel so far from God, more than we have ever felt in our lives, then and precisely then, God is nearer to us than he has ever been."

He concluded: "We cannot approach this manger as we approach the cradle of any other child. But who would go to this manger goes where something will happen. When he leaves the manger, he leaves either condemned or delivered. Here, he will be broken in pieces or know the compassion of God coming to him."

Then he issued his invitation: "Who of us would want to celebrate Christmas correctly? Who will finally lay at the manger all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all pride and all selfishness? Who is content to be lowly and to let God alone be high? Who sees the glory of God in the humble state of the child in the manger? Who says with Mary: 'The Lord has been mindful of my humble state. My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior'?"

Who, indeed?

Jim Denison is president of the Denison Forum on Truth and Culture (www.denisonforum.org) and theologian-in-residence with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.