

Lesson 7: Two Voices in World War II – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and C. S. Lewis

Introduction

On April 9, 1945, pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in Flossenberg concentration camp. Part of the failed conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler—to “jam a spoke in the wheel” trampling victims. Independent citizens, unauthorized by foreign powers, attempting to kill their leader—the ethics involved? Is he a martyr? Is he a patriot? *How should Christians assess his life?*

On November 22, 1963, the same day of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, C. S. Lewis died peacefully. Having written philosophically on *The Problem of Pain* (1940), he died having experienced grief. He had married and loved American author Joy Davidman, who died four years later to cancer (1960): He anonymously wrote *A Grief Observed* as “N. W. Clerk” with eyes “blurred with tears.”

Voices in the World War II Era

Professor Bonhoeffer (b. 1906) had grown up in Berlin, the affluent son of a German professor of psychiatry. The aim from youth: to be a theologian—first dissertation on the church (age 21), second on *Act & Being*. Taught in New York (1930s) and perhaps born again at the African-American Abyssinia Baptist Church. Leader in the confessing church—purposely returned to Nazi Germany on the last ship from America. *The Confessing Church resisted Nazi control by confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, not Adolf Hitler.*

Professor Lewis (b. 1898) had grown up in Northern Ireland, the lonely son who lost his mom to cancer (age 9). With a close brother and distant dad, “Jack” Lewis first got religious at a boarding school of an insane man. After Malvern College, he became an atheist under his dad’s rationalistic tutor William Kirkpatrick. After serving in World War I, he slowly became a Christian through authors and friends in Christianity. Professor in literature at Oxford, he never received a chair due to his “hot gospelling” on the radio: *On BBC radio during WWII, Lewis spoke to 600,000 people—what became Mere Christianity* (1952).

Both men were deep thinkers gifted with the ability to speak theological truths in fresh language.

How interesting that these two voices come from opposite sides of the political world in both WWI and WWII!

Similarities of Bonhoeffer and Lewis

Protestants with Catholic Forms

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran who advocated living in the world with a monastic commitment to Christ. Catholic monasticism withdrew from the world and made it an elite calling of self-righteousness. The call to discipleship is for every Christian: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Bonhoeffer established the illegal seminary of Finkenwalde on this model and wrote *Life Together*. Lewis was an Anglican who advocated an imitation of Christ on the cross dying to oneself. If this habit is not completely formed before death, the Christian must endure purgatory before heaven. His “theory” of the cross in *Mere Christianity* shows a lack of an imposed torment in the wrath of God.

Questionable Views on the Bible

Bonhoeffer was trained by the neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth: The Bible *becomes* the word of God. Lewis was converted through author J. R. R. Tolkien: Christianity is the “true myth.” Lewis denied the Bible’s verbal inspiration, which Bonhoeffer’s “living word” may also have questioned.

Provocative Advances against the Fact-Value Split

Modern times are characterized by a fact-value split between public science and private religion. Lewis agonized between his “baptized” imagination and “thin” rationalism, but the “true myth” united him. Bonhoeffer attacked the secular-sacred divide between church and society.

Emphasis on Joy

Lewis pursued “joy” all the way into Christianity, and Bonhoeffer called discipleship a “joy” (Mt. 13:44). Augustine: “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.”

The Value and Caution in Reading Cultural Theologians

Bonhoeffer challenges us to live radically in believing obedience to Christ in the everyday world. Lewis challenges us to communicate the gospel clearly and beautifully in the modern world:

The Chronicles of Narnia are not an allegory, but a myth—a “what if” Christ came to the *that* world. As an apologist, Lewis quit attacking the reason with arguments and started going “past watchful dragons.” As a convert, his own imagination was first “baptized” with the beauty of George MacDonald’s fairy tales.

Question: *How fitting to the gospel and pleasing to God is this sneaky way of doing evangelism?*