

## *Counting the Cost of Confessing Christ*

Over Thanksgiving I received an early Christmas gift: the biography of a fascinating man whose world was turned upside down.

That book, along with the conviction expressed by several of our young people in their profession of faith interviews, set me to considering the significance of what we do when we stand before God and His saints and declare: *Yes, I believe. Yes, I belong to Him.*

The man of the book – Dietrich, by name – lived in an exciting age of change. When he was a child, his nation was prosperous and respected by the world. Most of the nation called itself Christian, and its leaders spoke highly of the church – although few could be bothered to warm a pew on Sunday.

But as Dietrich grew older and his faith deepened, the faith of his country grew correspondingly more shallow.

It didn't happen overnight, of course. Bit by bit, the theologians dulled the Gospel's sharp edge so that it could neither cut men's hearts nor shape their lives. Tradition guided the church, while the influence of Scripture grew weak. More and more, the nation's leaders justified their actions with arguments about what *works*, rather than appealing to reason or principle or God's Word.

Before Dietrich had turned 30, the government began concentrating power in a few strong-willed men who were willing to do whatever it took to give the people what they wanted. And because those men were willing to say what people wanted to hear, most of the churches were pleased with the promises they heard from these power-hungry politicians.

Dietrich was one of the few who saw through it all. He saw the danger, and he warned against it. Few listened.

It's a terrible thing – to see both the country and the church you love blindly following a path which will lead them to destruction. It's terrible to witness – and worse when they won't listen to your warnings.

That's the situation Dietrich faced. An impossible situation, in many ways. Surely he couldn't "fix" what he saw.

Most people wouldn't bother to try fixing it. The government is so big, so powerful. Among the churches, most are happy to follow the leader and receive the praise of men. Many feel it's best to shrug, sigh, and make the best of it.

In fact, that's precisely what many church leaders did. They shook their heads, sighed, and made their peace with the situation. They resolved to see no evil and to refuse no government hand-outs.

But Dietrich wasn't one of them. He saw that the positions advanced by the government were morally wrong. Those cooperating with the new government were choosing to fear men and to pursue ease rather than to obey God.

And he could not – would not – join them.

That course of action led Dietrich into a hard life. Having been born of a family of means, he was accustomed to the better things of life. But soon he was living the difficult existence of one who has offended the powers of a mighty nation. He was publicly criticized by leaders of church and state alike. He was branded a trouble-maker. He was slandered. He was threatened, then imprisoned like a common criminal. And in the end, he was killed.

All because he wouldn't go along with those who called for *compromise*. Serve God – but on man's terms. Serve God – the way man commands it.

I wonder how many of us would have the courage to follow Dietrich. I wonder if *I* would have that courage. And I wonder, given the direction of our nation, whether we may one day need to find out.

The man was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A brilliant theologian, Bonhoeffer wrote several excellent books, including *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*.

He was a Lutheran pastor in Germany prior to World War II.

If you get an opportunity to read English translations of Bonhoeffer's books, by all means do so. If you want a challenge, pick up the new Bonhoeffer biography, written by Eric Metaxas.

But don't pick up anything that says "Bonhoeffer" on it if you're not willing to face some hard questions. Questions like: "How far am I willing to go for Christ? What price am I willing to pay?"

If the churches throughout the nation began to embrace ideas and policies that were clearly against Christ's commands, would you resist? What if the leaders of the nation insisted? What if it became clear that the result would be imprisonment – possibly even death?

Would you be willing to suffer rather than accept the false doctrines – even though you knew, humanly speaking, that your suffering was unlikely to change the nation's course, even a tiny bit?

It's hard to consider ourselves in such a situation. How does one even imagine such a world; such choices?

Then again, as tragically ugly as Germany became in the years leading up to World War II, the philosophical similarities between its leaders and some of ours are striking. The blindness of its people to their nation's sins is a blindness with which our land is familiar (abortion anyone?). The pragmatic outlook of the politics, the focus on economic policy, the pervasiveness of cultural Christianity – all of it hits far too close to home.

How far are *you* willing to go to be Christ's faithful witness?

Perhaps we won't have to find out. But if we do, I pray that we will look to men like Bonhoeffer, Klaas Schilder, and others of like-faith as our examples.

As Christians, we have no right to expect *not* to be challenged. Our King said, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34) And then He urged His disciples to take up that sword, which bears the shape of a cross, the heft of a Book, the sound of an eternal Word.

"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

Should that day come for our nation, may God grant us the conviction to take up the cross, lay down our lives, and stand by the side of Dietrich and the King whom he followed. May our confession never falter.

And may we find comfort and courage in the promise of our King, who said: "everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32).