

The Plot to Kill Hitler: Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Spy, Unlikely Hero

By Patricia McCormick

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Adolf Hitler, a baptized Catholic, had once described Jesus as “our greatest Aryan hero.”

But now he decided that Christianity, which preached “meekness and flabbiness” was not in keeping with Nazi ideals of “ruthlessness and strength.” Germans needed a more “positive” religion.

Under Hitler’s plan, the Reichskirche, or new National Church, would immediately stop publishing and preaching the Bible and declare that the Fuhrer’s Mein Kampf was the greatest of all documents. They would also be required to remove all crucifixes, Bibles, and pictures of saints from the altar and put nothing on the altar but Mein Kampf. The swastika would replace the cross.

Church leaders were deeply divided. Some enthusiastically embraced Hitler’s plan to strip all “Jewish” elements from their religion and to ban pastors with any “Jewish” blood, like Bonhoeffer’s friend Franz Hildebrandt. Others considered this heresy.

Hitler was confident he could turn the German church into a Nazi church. “They will submit,” he said. Clergy are “insignificant little people, submissive as dogs, and they sweat with embarrassment when you talk to them.”

But a handful of these “insignificant little people,” including Bonhoeffer, Franz Hildebrandt, and others, had begun to quietly fight back. They could scarcely believe that the church had not only failed to

stand up to Hitler, but had now become an instrument of his oppression.

Bonhoeffer and the dissenters didn't want to create a schism; they wanted to form a wing of the church that would put allegiance to God ahead of allegiance to the Nazi party, one that would give aid to those hurt by the new anti-Jewish laws and one that rejected the Aryan Paragraph. More than six thousand ministers signed on to a protest letter written by Bonhoeffer and Hildebrandt.

Bonhoeffer sent out a letter warning this group of dissenting pastors to be on the lookout for undercover Nazi spies visiting their churches. He asked them to let him know immediately if Hitler's men tried to interfere with congregations. Somehow, this letter fell into the wrong hands.

On July 2, 1933, two Gestapo agents arrived at Bonhoeffer's door. Stop making trouble, he was told, or he would be sent to a concentration camp. Bonhoeffer was unbowed. He would soon take even bigger risks, but he would not put his fellow pastors in harm's way.