

*Bonhoeffer*

Directed by Martin Doblmeier

First Run/Icarus Films, 2003

2003 has been a stellar year for documentaries. Among the best twenty or thirty films of the year, a significant portion are documentaries, including *My Flesh and Blood*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, *Concert for George*, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons of Robert S. McNamara*, *A Morning Sun*, and *My Architect: A Son's Journey*. Doblmeier's *Bonhoeffer* is not one of them. It is a good film, but not a great film. Yet while the other non-fiction films stand out for their masterful craft, *Bonhoeffer* stands among the best of these documentaries purely for its content: the earnest, straight-forward depiction of one of the true heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Doblmeier's film follows Bonhoeffer from the 1930's, from his education in theology at the University of Berlin, to his postgraduate tenure as a teaching fellow at the Union Theological Seminar in New York, through to his execution at the hands of the Nazi's in his German homeland toward the end of Hitler's reign. Everything in between is a human drama of epic proportions. He is a beacon of hope for a failed age and, as many would argue, a martyr for justice and human dignity.

Bonhoeffer's activism began with the organization of the Confessing Church, a protestant church that was outlawed by the Nazis in the late 1930's due to its vocal opposition to National Socialism. Bonhoeffer was not deterred, and in fact quickened his participation in the resistance by participating in several plots to assassinate Hitler. During this time, Bonhoeffer worked on his book, *Ethics*, until he was arrested by the Nazis after a failed attempt to take Hitler's life. There is no question that Bonhoeffer was faced with many difficult choices. As the film chronicles, he was a pacifist who was faced with a fundamental moral dilemma: he had to reconcile his pacifism with his conviction that he was morally obligated to take action against the evils of the Nazis, and this action would have to come in the form of violence. Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* attempts to reconcile Bonhoeffer's real-life dilemma by acknowledging the absolute lack of moral certainty for responsible action while, at the same time, asserting that the Will to God demands opposition to evil. This paradox, in part, led Bonhoeffer to reject any abstract ethical theory,

which he felt could not do justice to the contextual complexity of concrete, moral engagement in the world. It is a paradox that he must have wrestled with in the darkest of solitudes during the key moments when he was faced with the decision to participate in the resistance. But his *Ethics* is not an ethics of despair; it is, on the contrary, an ethics of hope, namely a hope in Christ. Christ, for Bonhoeffer, reconciles the disparity between the profound moral uncertainty of finite human being and the absolute clarity of the transcendent, contemplative Divine. This reconciliation is discovered through concrete, ethical action in the world through the imitation of the life of Christ. And we can only assume that it was through the emulation of Christ that Bonhoeffer was able to withstand the overwhelming compulsion to cower in the face of evil and instead take decisive action to resist it.

Indeed, Bonhoeffer's story is high human drama. Unfortunately, this does not come across very well in the film. The film is brimming with talking heads, including former friends of Bonhoeffer, family and some prominent figures, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Few of them shed much light on the subject. Perhaps the film could have benefitted from more historical and/or theological exegesis and less humdrum biographical detail. One is left wondering, for example, how Bonhoeffer may have reconciled his pacifism with his activism, but these important conceptual details are largely absent. There is little discussion of Bonhoeffer's thinking on the matter of ethics, religiosity, or God. In this respect, the film fails to properly examine the most essential matters and most dramatic elements of Bonhoeffer's story. Further, the film lacks in technical mastery. Static images and myriad voice overs do not infuse life into the images on the screen. There is a spark of life missing.

One might have hoped that Bonhoeffer's story would have been told with as much passion and skill as McNamara's in *The Fog of War*, but perhaps one would be asking for too much. Doblmeier's film is, after all, well worth the wait, even if it isn't Errol Morris behind the camera. Doblmeier certainly seems to have a knack for turning his shortcomings into opportunities. This past year, Bonhoeffer was rejected by the Sundance Film Festival. Rather than accepting defeat, however, the filmmaker enlisted local churches to show his film during the festival. The church viewings, in the end, generated far more press than the film would have garnered as a part of the festival. If *Bonhoeffer* does nothing more than

generate further interest in the fascinating character it chronicles, it has garnered all the reward it should ever require.

*Reviewed by Brent Dean Robbins, Allegheny College*