

# DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S LIFE: 10 KEY TURNING POINTS

**“WHAT KEEPS GNAWING AT ME IS THE QUESTION, WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY,  
OR WHO IS CHRIST ACTUALLY FOR US TODAY?”**

*LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (DBWE, VOLUME 8: 362)*

## **Objectives:**

- Introduce Dietrich Bonhoeffer through key turning points in his life and historical context.
- Encourage participants to think about critical turning points in their own life stories.
- Identify key turning points in Bonhoeffer's life and historical context.
- Recognize the humanity of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## **Outcomes:**

By engaging in this session, participants will learn (more) about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and will recognize that his life choices were shaped by his faith commitments, family values, life experiences, deep reflection, and a particular historical context. They will consider the ways their own choices are shaped in the same way, paying particular attention to their own historical and political context.

## **Notes:**

# HANDOUT

## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S LIFE: 10 KEY TURNING POINTS

	When	What Happened?	Why is it a Turning Point?
1	April 28th, 1918	Impacted by the death of his brother, Walter, who was killed in action in WWI.	Walter's death raised profound questions for 12-year-old Dietrich that contributed to his decision to study theology.
2	1930	Studied at Union Theological Seminary in NYC on a Sloane Fellowship (1930-1931).	Bonhoeffer studied with social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr and studied American philosophy (pragmatism) with Eugene Lyman. He also developed important friendships (with Jean Lassere, Paul and Marion Lehmann, and Erwin Sutz) that transformed his thinking.
3	1930	Attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, NYC, while a student at Union. It was during the Harlem Renaissance.	Bonhoeffer participated in worship and community with this dynamic, politically engaged African-American church, and saw - through his friendship with fellow Union student Albert Franklin Fisher - the horrors of racism.
4	1933	Hitler appointed Chancellor in January; Enabling Act signed in March; Dachau Concentration Camp opened in March; Anti-Jewish Boycott & "Aryan Paragraph" adopted in April.	These political developments fundamentally changed Bonhoeffer's context, and that of the whole world. He immediately recognized the dangers of a leader who becomes an idol of the people, and issued a public warning against making Hitler into one (via the radio). He also pushed back against the Nazification of the church.
5	1935	Directed the Confessing Church Seminary at Finkenwalde.	Bonhoeffer was appointed the director of pastoral training at the newly formed (underground/illegal) seminary at Finkenwalde. He gave up an opportunity to study non-violent resistance with Mahatma Gandhi to take the post. One of the seminarians, Eberhard Bethge, became Bonhoeffer's best friend, theological confidant, and (eventual) biographer.

	When	What Happened?	Why is is a Turning Point?
6	Nov. 9, 1938	Witnessed <i>Kristallnacht</i> - The Night of Broken Glass.	Bonhoeffer was horrified by the Nazi terror carried out against Jewish communities vandalizing and destroying Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues. He was also horrified by the silence of the churches in the aftermath. Bonhoeffer's worldview was forever changed by the November pogroms.
7	Summer 1939	Traveled to NYC, but returned almost immediately to Germany. WWII begins with the German invasion of Poland on September 1	In June, Bonhoeffer returned to NYC at the insistence of his friends and colleagues who were worried about his safety, but he was unsettled and felt that his place was in Germany, in the midst of the crisis. On July 7th, he boarded a ship heading back to Europe.
8	Oct. 30, 1940	Appointed Secret Agent of the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) - the seat of the resistance to Hitler and the Nazis.	Bonhoeffer knew about the plans for a coup before he left for America in 1939, but did not join the effort - as double agent for the Abwehr - until the fall of 1940. He was prepared to sacrifice his life on behalf of others. At the same time, he continued to support pastors in the Confessing Church and work on his Ethics. He faced and wrote about real, concrete ethical challenges.
9	April 5, 1943	Arrested and imprisoned at Tegel Prison in Berlin.	Bonhoeffer was arrested on tenuous charges unrelated to the conspiracy. During his time at Tegel Prison, Bonhoeffer continued to write and think through new theological ideas, including the idea of religionless Christianity, which he recorded in letters and sent to Eberhard Bethge.
10	July 20, 1944 April 4, 1945	Failed attempt on Hitler's life at the Wolf's Lair.  Executed at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp.	When the attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20th, 1944 failed, it sealed Bonhoeffer's fate. The resistance group's secret files were discovered in September, and Bonhoeffer was implicated in the plans. In October he was moved from Tegel to the Reich Central Security Headquarters, then to Buchenwald, and finally to Flossenbürg, where he was executed by hanging.

# HANDOUT

## 10 KEY TURNING POINTS IN YOUR LIFE

What childhood or family events and experiences shaped you?  
What educational and career choices did you make?  
Which friendships or relationships formed you?  
Who influenced or mentored you? Who have you influenced or mentored?  
What political or social events impacted your life, your convictions, and/or your actions?

	When	What Happened?	Why is it a Turning Point?
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

	<b>When</b>	<b>What Happened?</b>	<b>Why is it a Turning Point?</b>
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Additional notes: