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Founder's Scholarship Essay

It was 1938 in Nazi Germany. Hitler had been in power for 5 years. The unspeakable evils occurring in concentration camps were beginning to become well-known. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German theologian, had just been banned from Berlin by the Gestapo for insisting that Christ, not the Fuhrer, was the infallible head of the Christian church. The previous year, the Nazi government shut down the seminary which he had been directing. No matter where Bonhoeffer went, he was confronted by the evil of the Nazis and he could not remain silent. As he considered his future, on the eve of World War II, one verse from the Bible continued to occupy his thoughts: "Neither know we what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee" (2 Chronicles 20:12 KJV). The times required great wisdom and unshakeable faith. Bonhoeffer was unsure what his future would hold, but he knew that regardless of the situation, he would continue to set his eyes upon God.

From a young age, Bonhoeffer demonstrated a commitment to whole-hearted truth-seeking. The entire family valued intellectual honesty, often discussing controversial topics, even those political and religious ideas which they passionately disagreed with. At age 14, fascinated by thinking and philosophy, Bonhoeffer declared his intention to become a theologian. His family did not agree with his choice, believing that he would waste his intellect on an impractical field of study. However, they could not have anticipated the transformative impact his theological and political work would have on German society.

Bonhoeffer enrolled at the University of Tübingen shortly after his 17th birthday. He loved learning and thrived in his new intellectual community. He studied under the best theologians of all denominations and sought to learn everything possible from their tutelage. Bonhoeffer loved rigorous academic work because it reflected his value of truth-seeking. He

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earned the respect of the academic community by graduating with his first doctorate from the University of Berlin at age 21. Berlin, where Bonhoeffer studied, was like the New York City of Germany, and he rubbed shoulders with the greatest minds in the nation. Later in his life, Bonhoeffer would leverage the relationships he formed at university in his work against Hitler's Third Reich.

At age 24, after completing his second doctorate, Bonhoeffer spent a year as a visiting scholar at Union Theological Seminary in New York. His experience in New York shaped some of his most foundational beliefs about Christian living. After arriving at Union, he struggled to find a gospel-centered church which fueled his spiritual growth. In one letter, Bonhoeffer wrote, "In New York they preach about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed, or is addressed so rarely that I have as yet been unable to hear it, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross, sin and forgiveness, death and life." (Metaxes 99). However, one Sunday, a friend from Union invited Bonhoeffer to join him for an African-American service in Harlem, at Abyssinian Baptist Church. This church was the spiritual highlight of Bonhoeffer's time in America. Bonhoeffer immediately became a regular attendee at Abyssinian, even teaching weekly Sunday School for a class of young African-American boys. This was unconventional work for a German student with two doctorates, but Bonhoeffer did not even consider abstaining. He took advantage of every opportunity to serve his community and support the work of the gospel during his time in New York.

Additionally, as Bonhoeffer observed how the African-American church responded to systemic racism, he developed his beliefs around political and social activism. American Christians were actively involved in lobbying and awareness efforts, passionately working to bring justice to society. Bonhoeffer came to believe that in situations of cultural evil, Christians

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must take action. “God wants to see human beings, not ghosts who shun the world,” he argued, and Christians should “serve the times” by speaking out against injustice and using their skills and connections to advocate for change (Metaxes 80).

In 1933, Hitler rose to power and swept through the government, eliminating dissenters at every turn. Within the year, Hitler had claimed unilateral governing authority, established the first concentration camp, and condemned Jews as an infection in German society. The Nazis soon escalated to direct confrontation with the church, requiring that German Christians recognize the Fuhrer’s supreme authority on religious matters. Unfortunately, many German Christians were complacent, choosing safety over truth. They allowed Hitler to dictate what could be preached in sermons and who could attend services, and in so doing, they compromised the truth of God’s word.

As the Nazis grew in power, Bonhoeffer believed that the church could not remain silent if the tide of evil was to be stemmed. If Christianity is God’s redemptive truth for the whole world, he reasoned, it cannot be hidden under a bushel, especially in a time of great turmoil and injustice. In his work titled “Ethics,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “The love of God does not withdraw from reality into noble souls secluded from the world. It experiences and suffers the reality of the world in all its hardness.” (72). As his friends and family were imprisoned, and the situation in Germany became more dire, Bonhoeffer declared the truth of God, without fear for his own safety. He tirelessly wrote anti-Nazi declarations for the Confessing Church and spoke at international conferences, condemning the Nazi’s co-option of German Christianity. Bonhoeffer also leveraged his academic connections to find refuge for those persecuted by the Nazis. He spent a year in London doing ecumenical work, using his international church contacts to help Jews relocate and to raise awareness about the oppression occurring in Germany.

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Bonhoeffer soon realized that the evil of the Nazi's was so great, the only way to stop the impending genocide of the Jews and the theological perversion in the church was to remove Hitler from power by any means necessary. Beginning in 1939, he served as a courier for the resistance movement, negotiated possible peace terms with the allies, and supported the assassination planning. Imagine this young pastor, just a few years removed from university, working as a spy for the German resistance! Until now, Bonhoeffer's path, though difficult, had been relatively clear. He had preached the gospel, advocated for the Confessing Church, and condemned the Nazis when they targeted God's people. But when Bonhoeffer began working as a spy, he was entering unprecedented territory. His best friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge wrote, "[Bonhoeffer] entered the difficult world of assessing what was expedient - of success and failure, tactics and camouflage. The certainty of his calling in 1932 now became an acceptance of the uncertain, the incomplete, and the provisional.... To be engaged for his times, where he stood, was...open to misinterpretation, less glorious, more confined. Yet this alone was what it now meant to be a Christian." (678).

As a result of his resistance activities, he was prohibited from speaking in public, publishing any writing, or appearing in Berlin. In 1943, he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. Bonhoeffer did not withdraw from reality as a noble soul secluded from the world, rather, he followed God in experiencing and suffering "the reality of the world in all its hardness" (Ethics 72). He would be patient and faithful in prison, continuing his ministry of encouragement wherever he could, until he was murdered by the Nazis in 1945.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer shines as an example of a Christian who lived fully in the world, but who was not of the world. Even though he was an academic, Bonhoeffer's faith was not abstract: he was fully surrendered to God, living out his Christian values in day-to-day life. In the same

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way, The King's College exists to train students who will transform society, not just theorize about it. Our world needs more principled leaders who, like Bonhoeffer, will set their eyes on God and courageously defend the truth with both thought and action in times of turmoil, confusion, and rampant evil.

During the last few months of his life, while in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote poetry exhorting himself to continue in love and faithfulness. His words capture the heart of what it meant for him to live surrendered to God, in both thought and action: "Do and dare what is right, not swayed by the whim of the moment. Bravely take hold of the real, not dallying now with what might be. Not in the flight of ideas but only in action is freedom. Make up your mind and come out into the tempest of living. God's command is enough and your faith in him to sustain you. Then at last freedom will welcome your spirit amid great rejoicing."

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