

## Foreword

THIS BOOK IS A highly significant study on the concept of Christian discipleship as it was forged in response to the Nazi tyranny. There is no shortage of studies on the stances of the German churches under the Third Reich, a scenario which continues to excite debate and controversy today. Paul Spanning's contribution however is unusual and indeed quite original, for from that traumatic period he brings into mutual relation German Lutheranism's most famous figure of resistance and martyrdom and an almost unknown Baptist pastor who in his own and rather different way also rejected the idolatry of blood, race and soil.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), executed at Flossenbürg barely a month before the Second World War ended, by now hardly needs any introduction. His record of brilliant theological acumen began to be written even during his student days, followed by his role as theological teacher and seminary director in the Confessing Church, that section of the historic Reformation churches of Germany which resisted the nazification of the gospel and Christianity. Bonhoeffer, however, went much further than most Lutheran pastors in actual political resistance, becoming in a small but decisive and fateful way a participant in the plot to overthrow Hitler.

By contrast, the name of Arnold Köster (1896–1960) will be new to almost all readers. A German Baptist pastor with (in comparison with Bonhoeffer) relatively little formal theological education but of deeply studious mind and a voracious reader, in 1929 he went to serve as pastor in Vienna, remaining there after the *Anschluss* of 1938, then throughout the war and its aftermath until his death. His ministry was largely confined to his own modest congregation, centered on his Sunday preaching and weeknight Bible studies and lectures. He sought no overtly active political role but in his preaching and teaching persistently warned against the seductive appeal of the prevailing ideology. It is well said that in a totalitarian state there is no apolitical existence. Köster, the evangelical preacher who welcomed Jews at

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his services, said and did enough to make him familiar to the Gestapo yet remarkably survived.

Bonhoeffer and Köster, though both were German and wore the “Protestant” label, were in important respects very different people not least in their ecclesial backgrounds. Bonhoeffer the Lutheran belonged to a historic national church entrenched in German culture and tradition and up until 1918 secure in the tie of “throne and altar.” Köster the Baptist belonged to one of the free churches, very much a minority movement in Germany and Austria, dating there only from the first half of the nineteenth century, rejecting any ties with the state, decidedly pietistic and other-worldly in ethos, and widely regarded in Germany as an alien missionary import from Britain and America. There was little love lost between the main historic churches and these newer arrivals who in Lutheran and Reformed eyes resembled the dangerous “enthusiasts” of the radical Reformation four centuries earlier.

Yet both Bonhoeffer and Köster markedly stood out from their respective traditions. Bonhoeffer came to reject what Lutheranism had made of Martin Luther’s own distinction between the *zwei Reiche*, the spiritual and the secular realms, church and world, gospel and law, the inward and the outward. That had led in Bonhoeffer’s time to a dangerous abnegation of responsibility by the majority of Christians who were content to let Hitler get on with it in the world without challenge in the name of the gospel. Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics* sharply attacked this “thinking in two realms”: in Christ, God and the world are united and that determines the responsibility of faith. For his part, Köster was much more prepared than his typical fellow-Baptists to criticize theologically what was happening on the political and cultural scene, and to examine contemporary developments in the light of the Biblical witness. Like Bonhoeffer, he had read his Karl Barth! And for both Bonhoeffer and Köster, discipleship, *Nachfolge*, following Jesus, was the central term for Christian identity. How they came to work this out in practice, and what this meant for their respective understandings of the church, constitutes a major theme of Paul Spanning’s study. It has great relevance to contemporary dialogue between the “free church” and “national” or “people’s church” (*Volkskirche*) traditions, not to mention the renewed interest in the Anabaptist movement of the radical Reformation.

It will be apparent to readers versed in the story of the churches under Hitler how significant a feature of this study is the highlighting of Arnold Köster himself as an exceptional German Baptist of his time. By and large the German free churches, Baptists and Methodists included, acquiesced in the Nazi revolution and the impositions of the Third Reich. There was no Free Church equivalent of the Confessing Church. The shame and guilt of that acquiescence has been fully owned and confessed by the German

Baptists and others since. The darkness of the record is incontrovertible. But that makes it important to note and to study seriously any exception. Köster himself would not have wanted to be hailed as a hero; but he was a Baptist exception and deserves to be recognized and honored as such. It is entirely appropriate therefore that Paul Spanring includes in this volume an imaginary conversation between the famous Bonhoeffer and the inconspicuous Köster. Theology is inherently conversational, and it is important that in our own time when “radical discipleship” is in the air and “the real place of the church” in the world is being debated as vigorously as ever, we should ourselves continue to converse with those who pursued these questions, sometimes at greatest cost to themselves, in their contexts. This might also prove to be a lesson in humility.

Finally, it should be said that no one is better qualified than Paul Spanring to conduct this study. His own Austrian background and personal acquaintance with both the Lutheran and Baptist traditions give him a special perspective enabling him to empathize, though never uncritically in either case, with both Bonhoeffer and Köster. The result is a fine contribution both to church history and to contemporary exploration on what it means to be Christian and church in the world, which deserves to be read and reflected upon as widely as possible in all traditions and in all places.

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