Review of new Bonhoeffer movie by Rev Dr Thomas K Johnson
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Since 2010 the Claremont School of Theology has hosted annual Bonhoeffer Festival. As this year's event concluded, I asked a dear friend who is Jewish, what she thought of it. Her response "Why haven't we heard more about this guy? Everyone needs to know his story and be inspired like I am today."

I don't consider myself a Bonhoeffer scholar, but more of a Bonhoeffer evangelist, teaching, preaching and telling whoever would listen to Google Bonhoeffer and be inspired.

The new Bonhoeffer film has sparked plenty of controversy.
The International Bonhoeffer Society and Bonhoeffer's own family members have warned that the movie portrays a Bonhoeffer that advocates for violence, and to label him as an assassin is misconstrued and dangerously misguided.

I tried to keep an open mind as I listened to an interview with the Director (see below) who made it clear he was not influenced by extreme conservative proponents like Eric Metaxas (author of the best-selling book, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Spy and Assassin*). Metaxas has been accused by many Bonhoeffer scholars for manipulating Bonhoeffer to fit his own far-right agenda.

Regardless of one's perspective, I would recommend that everyone takes time to see the movie and judge for themselves instead of boycotting it.

After seeing the film, I would like offer three observations about its accuracy vs dramatic license, and what I believe is lacking and yet how it can provide resource for our faith today.

1) The film is one man's interpretation of a story that has inspired him for many years

(listen to the interview by Tripp Fuller of director/screenplay writer Todd Komarnicki). As with all "historical dramas", he is bound to get some things right and other things wrong. Still, it is an impressive attempt at trying to capture Bonhoeffer's account of standing up for truth, justice and freedom. At times it can feel rather contrived at wanting to portray Bonhoeffer as a superhero, willing to forfeit even his Christian principles to eliminate the threat of Hitler. We miss that Bonhoeffer was a multi-layered and complicated man who struggled to remain faithful to Jesus' command to love even our enemies.

Understandably, the director wants to use whatever dramatic devices possible to keep us engaged for nearly two hours. The plot to assassinate Hitler and the moral dilemma surrounding its justification draws us in to ask ourselves what we would do. Many scholars believe that having Bonhoeffer declare "I am all in" crosses the line and that it is unlikely he would argue that sometimes violence is the only solution.

Instead, it would have been good to have included Bonhoeffer's love for Gandhi, and his desire to go to India and learn from him personally. I don't believe that Bonhoeffer ever gave up on the idea of nonviolent resistance, and its effective power to ultimately change corrupt structures. Some have argued that it is more likely Bonhoeffer was drawn into the conspiracy to kill Hitler out of his support for his family members.

One dramatic device that I found to be effective is introducing us to Bonhoeffer's childhood memories and the significance of his family members, and how he relies upon that love as he confronts the isolation of the prison walls. It reminds me of his Christmas letter to his family and how his memories of their love was a vital resource for him when he encountered bouts of depression.

2) Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran theologian is lacking.

Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by both by Luther's theology and his pastoral example.
It is surprising to me that somewhere in the film there isn't an exchange over Bonhoeffers concern about cheap grace versus costly grace, perhaps in a class setting with the students at Finkenwalde.

How Bonhoeffer incorporated Luther's theology of cross versus a theology of glory would have been enlightening --- especially since one could argue that this is where Metaxas and other evangelical conservative proponents of Bonhoeffer go astray.

The pastor, Adam Clayton Powell, from the Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem, asks Bonhoeffer - when he met Jesus. This question seems strange to Bonhoeffer, and it should be, since Lutheran theology emphasizes that it is God who meets us right where are and accepts us by grace just the way we are.
Still Bonhoeffer admits that he becomes truly a Christian through his experience of the black church in Harlem. It also clear that Bonhoeffer never abandons his Lutheran core values and theological framework, but rather he reassess the distinction between religion and faith.

3) Bonhoeffer as Pastor could have been shown fully.

This is how Bonhoeffer saw himself, and his calling to pastoral ministry was his top priority. Yes, we see Bonhoeffer as preacher and the importance of being prophetic, speaking out to the evils affecting his flock.

For me it was moving to see Bonhoeffer react to his confirmation students now dressed in the Nazi brown shirts, marching in formation, ignoring him completely. That would be deeply distressing for a pastor who cares for his sheep.

In *Life Together* Bonhoeffer demonstrates he is even Pastor to his students.
His identity as Pastor directly influences all the decisions he makes throughout his life.

His constant care for the welfare of his church members could have been expressed more clearly in the movie. One quote I missed was that “the church is not the church unless it exists for others.” His passion to identify with the underside and vulnerable, those who are being oppressed and excluded.

It was this realization that led him to conclude that Christ was to be found in the Jews, who were being “deported” and made the scapegoats for all of society’s problems. I wonder if the proposed policies of deportation of migrants and refugees should challenge us in the same way.

I believe Bonhoeffer’s role as pastor also transformed him from being a sometimes rather arrogant, self-centered person to one who lived out his faith with compassion and caring acts. This was captured by the final communion scene with the prisoners and Bonhoeffer emphasis that all are welcome to the table.

Obviously, it is a monumental task to capture the life and character of Bonhoeffer in a two hour movie.

There have been other attempts, such as *Agent of Grace*, which also includes Bonhoeffer relationship to his fiancée Maria. It also focuses more on his decision to return to Germany in order to be a part of what he had hoped would be the restoration of Germany.
Martin Dobelmeier’s docudrama *Bonhoeffer* on Bonhoeffers life is exceptional in regards to accuracy and first hand testimonials.

I write this with the people in the pew and my interfaith friends in mind, who have asked me about the film and whether they should see it. I deeply care about how they struggle with the profound moral and political challenges that they face today.
My utmost concern is to provide inspiration for their faith and give them the resources to have the courage to speak out for those without a voice.

I would not hesitate to recommend this movie as a resource for that inspiration.
And of course, I would also want to remind them that this is just one person’s interpretation of an exciting story and sometimes filmmakers can get it right and sometimes they can get it wrong.

But regardless, as with any good story, this film provides a reflection on our own story. And we should ask ourselves how are we being faithful, with whom are we aligning ourselves and where do we find the liberating love of God today?

Rev Dr. Thomas K Johnson

<u>Note from the reviewer</u>
The past 12 years I have organized and hosted a Bonhoeffer festival at Claremont, California. Also, for 12 years I taught a graduate course entitled

"The role of Prophet and Pastor: An Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer" at Claremont School of Theology, where I served as the Director for the center of Lutheran Studies for 25 years. At the same time I served a local Lutheran congregation and have been an ordained Lutheran pastor for 42 years.

There are plenty of other reviews of the film out there (see Christian Century – Reggie Williams and Christianity Today).
Here are few articles that express the concern over
Metaxas "hijacking" Bonhoeffer for his own right wing agenda
Be sure to listen to the two interviews of the Director of the film.

Bonhoeffer family and scholars warn against Metaxas
and Christian nationalists
baptistnews.com

There's no such thing as a Bonhoeffer moment
christiancentury.org

Check out these Bonhoeffer resources (many free online)**:**

Films and Interviews

Tripp Fuller's interview with the writer and producer, Todd Komarnicki
https://processthis.substack.com/p/listen-now-director-of-the-new-bonhoeffer?utm_campaign=email-half-post&r=3c1qq&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

Forbes interview "Resistance And Redemption: Todd Komarnicki and Angel Studios Bring Bonhoeffer To The Big Screen"https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClREpHIZMNc

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories And Perspectives 2003Documentary, Oliver Osterberg, director
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfygwFwUsIc

Bonhoeffer full movies 2003 Documentary, Martin Doblmeier, director
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9vqxljH6Ok

Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace film drama 2000, Eric Till director
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2325_APzy6c

Articles and books

A Reader's Guide to Bonhoeffer Biographies
https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/a-readers-guide-to-bonhoeffer-biographies

A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Geeffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson

Bonhoeffer the Assassin?: Challenging The Myth, Recovering His Call To Peacemaking (2013) by Mark Thiessen Nation, Professor Emeritus, Eastern Mennonite Seminary

Attachments area

Preview YouTube video Resistance And Redemption: Todd Komarnicki And Angel Studios Bring Bonhoeffer To The Big Screen



Preview YouTube video Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories And Perspectives (2003) | Full Movie | Oliver Osterberg



Preview YouTube video Bonhoeffer (2003) | Full Movie | Martin Doblmeier | Klaus Maria Brandauer | Adele Schmidt



Preview YouTube video Bonhoeffer: Agent Of Grace (2000) | Full Movie | Ulrich Tukur | Johanna Klante | Robert Joy

