

PREFACE

“Knowledge cannot be separated from the existence in which it was acquired.” (DBWE 4:51)¹

This insight from Dietrich Bonhoeffer goes to the heart of why he has become so well known worldwide. Bonhoeffer’s life and thought are so integrally connected that the unusual course of his life makes people curious about his theology, and vice versa: his theological theses are deeply imbued with the experiences of his life. Whoever becomes preoccupied with Bonhoeffer as a person cannot avoid dealing with his theology, and whoever wishes to understand his theology must take note of his life story.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the leading Protestant theologians in the resistance against National Socialism in Germany, recognizing very early the threats posed by Nazism. He was involved in the founding of the Confessing Church and later became director of one of its preachers’ seminaries. During the war years he belonged to the group of political conspirators planning the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. Imprisoned by the National Socialists, he spent the last two years of his life in prison. Shortly

1. Translator’s note: here and throughout the volume “DBWE” stands for Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Edition (the seventeen-volume English translation of his collected writings) followed by the respective volume number and page number.

before the end of the war he was hanged in the Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer was too radical for some in the Confessing Church, and in the early postwar years his political resistance met with a lack of understanding among many Christians. Later, however, the picture of him became almost universally positive. While there are still voices that dispute the academic quality of his theology, his writings remain widely read today. In church circles he is a welcome source of inspiration, and he is the research focus of countless historians and theologians. The reverence for him has gone so far that Bonhoeffer is sometimes portrayed as an unquestionable hero or a timeless source of wisdom. In the process, a picture of him has emerged that has little to do with the real person and his work.

In contrast, this book is an attempt—with the awareness that over seventy years have passed since his execution—to portray Bonhoeffer in the context of his times, not avoiding the critical questions about his life and work. This is a chronologically written biography that traces the development of his thought. The epilogue sketches the reception of Bonhoeffer and concludes with an inquiry about his contemporary relevance.