

Some books central to my development

Doug Olena • Life Together • 9/7/2025

Outline

- *Belief in God in an Age of Science*
-John Polkinghorne
- *The Language God Talks*
-Herman Wouk
- *Letters & Papers from Prison*
-Dietrich Bonhoeffer



Three Books

My Journey

- I chose these books in particular because
 - I thought first that Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* needed a revival in the time of Nazi America for others in nations around us asking why we don't do something about Mr. Trump. The answer is complicated.
 - Broadening our scope to bright non-Christian people in Wouk's *The Language God Talks* would get us some perspective on the broader world of ideas largely unfamiliar to the Church.
 - Focussing on *Belief in God in an Age of Science* from a John Polkinghorne a trained practitioner in Physics and Theology could get us closer to a critical realism that should inform our everyday journey through the world.

My Intention

- First I want to stimulate you to read these books because they tell stories that should happily bear a close reading.
- Polkinghorne because of the training and practice of one who can see the artificial lines we have drawn around our particular worldviews, and he advances Critical Realism for its explanatory force which includes knowledge, fact, and critique in one package.
- Wouk because he is a master storyteller with an inside track to a rabbinic tradition and breadth of personal knowledge of the world. His conversations with Richard Feynman are both telling and charming.
- Bonhoeffer because his insights of a Nazi Germany and the plight of Christianity bear crippling parallels with our own nation and times.

Lesson Plan

- I will be taking the first day of the three weeks at the beginning of September, October, and November to bring a snippet from the books.
- Today I will read Bonhoeffer.

A black and white photograph of a concrete bunker interior. A bright light source, possibly a window or a slit in the wall, is visible on the left side, casting a strong beam of light across the curved concrete surfaces. The rest of the scene is in deep shadow, emphasizing the textures and curves of the concrete.

A passage from *Letters & Papers from Prison*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- No ground under our feet
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- “One may ask whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet — people to whom every available alternative seemed equally intolerable, repugnant and futile, . . .”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer p.3

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- Who stands fast?
- The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts. For evil to appear disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice is quite bewildering to anyone brought up on our traditional ethical concepts, while for the Christian who bases his life on the Bible it merely confirms the fundamental wickedness of evil.

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- “The ‘*reasonable*’ people’s failure is obvious. With the best intentions and a naïve lack of realism, they think that with a little reason they can bend back into position the framework that has got out of joint. In their lack of vision they want to do justice to all sides, and so the conflicting forces wear them down with nothing achieved. Disappointed by the world's unreasonableness, they see themselves condemned to ineffectiveness; they step aside in resignation or collapse before the stronger party.” 4
- Who are these people in our nation?

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- Still more pathetic is the total collapse of moral *fanaticism*. The fanatic thinks that his single-minded principles qualify him to do battle with the powers of evil; but like a bull he rushes at the red cloak instead of the person who is holding it; he exhausts himself and is beaten. He gets entangled in non-essentials and falls into the trap set by cleverer people.
- These look like the Christians who vote the single issue of abortion. Really they have no idea what they’re doing and have left the facts behind in an effort to purify the nation.

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- Then there is the man with a conscience, who fights singlehanded against heavy odds in situations that call for a decision. But the scale of the conflicts in which he has to choose — with no advice or support except from his own conscience — tears him to pieces. Evil approaches him in so many respectable and seductive disguises that his conscience becomes nervous and vacillating, till at last he contents himself with a salved instead of a clear conscience, so that he lies to his own conscience in order to avoid despair; for a man whose only support is his conscience can never realize that a bad conscience may be stronger and more wholesome than a deluded one.
- Who in our nation does this remind you of?

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- From the perplexingly large number of possible decisions, the way of *duty* seems to be the sure way out. Here, what is commanded is accepted as what is most certain, and the responsibility for it rests on the commander, not on the person commanded. But no one who confines himself to the limits of duty ever goes so far as to venture, on his sole responsibility, to act in the only way that makes it possible to score a direct hit on evil and defeat it. The man of duty will in the end have to do his duty by the devil too.
- Who does this look like?

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- As to the man who asserts his complete freedom to stand four-square to the world, who values the necessary deed more highly than an unspoilt conscience or reputation, who is ready to sacrifice a barren principle for a fruitful compromise, or the barren wisdom of a middle course for a fruitful radicalism - let him beware lest his freedom should bring him down. He will assent to what is bad so as to ward off something worse, and in doing so he will no longer be able to realize that the worse, which he wants to avoid, might be the better. Here we have the raw material of tragedy.
- Who can relate this to a tragedy that is part of our intellectual inheritance?

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- Here and there people flee from public altercation into the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But anyone who does this must shut his mouth and his eyes to the injustice around him. Only at the cost of self-deception can he keep himself pure from the contamination arising from responsible action. In spite of all that he does, what he leaves undone will rob him of his peace of mind. He will either go to pieces because of this disquiet, or become the most hypocritical of Pharisees.
- Who does this look like to us?

Letters and Papers from Prison

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Stands Fast?” pp. 4-5

- Who stands fast?
- Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.
- Where are these responsible people?