

COMMENT

Bonhoeffer's Luther Bible

by BRIAN SHETLER and RYAN MACLEAN

The Special Collections and Archives department at Princeton Theological Seminary contains more than 100,000 rare books and print materials, thousands of manuscript documents, and more than 500 archival collections covering nearly 6,000 feet of shelving. It is a significant collection in size and scope, especially considering the relative size of the Seminary as an institution. Among the numerous treasures to be found within the collection is *Biblia das ist die gantze Heilige Schrifft deudsch*, a two-volume 1934 facsimile of Martin Luther's German Bible from 1534. Known colloquially as the Luther Bible, this text represents one of the most influential German translations of the Bible and helped to establish the modern High German language. The printing of Luther's translation in 1534 was the first to contain his version of both the Old and New Testaments. Its publication was celebrated in 1934 on the 400th anniversary of its printing with enthusiasm and effusive praise:

The year 1934 marks the 400th anniversary of Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German. This event will be celebrated, not only in Germany, but throughout the world, and not only by Lutherans, but by many other Christians. . . . The people began to clamor for a Bible like Luther's, in which the sense and spirit of the original was faithfully reproduced in the idiom of the common people. The translators began to use it as a model and are still using it as such. Luther is thus the most important factor in getting the Word of God into the languages of mankind and in securing for men the freedom to read the Word without fear.¹

The 400th anniversary carried with it not only hagiographic adulation, but also an increased interest in the physical printing of

the book. Museum exhibitions and library displays were created to showcase and honor the 1534 edition. The printing of a facsimile of the two-volume Bible was a natural outcome of these honors, and provided numerous libraries, churches, museums, and individuals with the chance to own a copy of the Luther Bible. Published by A. Foerster in Leipzig in 1934–1935, the facsimile edition is a beautiful, leather-bound true copy of the original Wittenberg printing by Hans Lufft in 1534. As noted in the colophon, the text used by the publisher for the facsimile was from the 1534 original found in the Leipzig University library.

While a facsimile of the 1534 publication is certainly worthy of a theological library, the particular copy of the facsimile that is housed at Princeton Theological Seminary's Wright Library is all the more special due to its own unique history. In June 2021, the department received a query from Dr. Christofer Frey, Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität. Dr. Frey's query was related to a visit he made to the Seminary library in 1994. During the visit, he recalls seeing a variety of rare books, among which was an interesting copy of a Bible:

I was particularly impressed by the copy of a German Bible (?) that should have come from Paul Lehmann's possessions. On the dedication page, the participants in an illegal course during the Nazi persecution with Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Finkenwalde in 1936 had noted their names.²

The Bible in question, Frey noted, would be of some interest to the International Bonhoeffer Society in Germany and could potentially be the subject of an article about Bonhoeffer and his underground seminary in Finkenwalde. This clandestine seminary, which opened April 26, 1935, operated for five sessions until its forced closure by the Gestapo on September 28, 1937.³ Finkenwalde not only trained seminarians for the hard work of ministry but also intended to bolster the Confessing Church which struggled under the National Socialist attempts to bring the German Evangelical Church into line. Upon leaving Finkenwalde, the lives of these young seminarians proved fraught with danger. Of the seminary's roughly 113 students, 31 of them were killed/missing in action or were killed as

prisoners of war and 27 of them were arrested in November of 1937 for their association with the illegal seminary.⁴ One can only imagine the firm resolve that Bonhoeffer and his young students must have possessed to embark on such perilous ministerial journeys.

The history of Bonhoeffer's work as a youth minister has been explored in particular depth by a Princeton Theological Seminary alumnus, Andrew Root (PhD, 2006). In his book, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together*, Root argues "that a central way to understand Bonhoeffer is as a pastor to youth and/or as a talented thinker who constructed some of the most creative theological perspectives of the early twentieth century with young people on his mind."⁵ Bonhoeffer's work in Finkenwalde is clearly representative of a man whose actions were taken with young people on his mind—even if those actions were detrimental to his own safety and security.

The Bible that Dr. Frey remembered seeing in 1994 was unfamiliar to the new staff in Special Collections and, at first, was difficult to locate. After some searching, the two-volume set was located within the Seminary's rare book collection. Accompanying the volumes was a reference file of material related to the Bible and its history. The notes and correspondence within this file reinforced Frey's assessment of it as an important artifact of Bonhoeffer's work at Finkenwalde, representing his willingness to risk his life to support theological outreach and teaching.

Evidence of Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde students and colleagues, and their gift to him, is present at the front of the two-volume facsimile. The front pastedown contains a dedication to Bonhoeffer as well as signatures of his students and colleagues (fig. 1). The first fly-leaf includes an additional signature and later ownership note from Eberhard Bethge, one of Bonhoeffer's closest friends and a student in his Finkenwalde class (fig. 3). Due to these intriguing marks of former ownership, the history of this facsimile moves from honoring Luther to honoring Bonhoeffer and his pupils.

The "Bonhoeffer Bible" (as it has come to be known at Princeton Theological Seminary) has long been discussed among the staff and faculty at PTS, including William (Bill) Harris, former Head of Special Collections, and Dr. Karlfried Froehlich, Benjamin B. Warfield

Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Emeritus. Correspondence and notes from Harris, Froehlich, and others are included within the Bible's reference file beginning in 1994—perhaps not coincidentally the same year of Dr. Frey's visit.

Among Dr. Froehlich's notes are a transcription of the opening dedication and all 28 names listed on the front pastedown (see fig. 2 for translation and transcription of this text). The gift, to "our dear Brother Bonhoeffer," was given in honor of Bonhoeffer's thirty-first birthday during the fourth course of study at Finkenwalde. Among the names listed are some immediately recognizable as significant theologians and churchmen of the mid-to-late twentieth century, including Eberhard Bethge, Gerhard Ebeling, and Gerhard Krause. These 28 names include not only students, but also colleagues who helped to run Finkenwalde alongside Bonhoeffer, including Wilhelm Rott, who served as director of studies through the end of the fourth course, and his successor Fritz Onnasch.⁶

The birthday gift affirms two important aspects of Bonhoeffer's life, teaching, and ministry. The first is Bonhoeffer's ardent commitment to the centrality of Scripture and its exposition for the life of Christian community. The second is Bonhoeffer's ability to create strong and endearing relationships with colleagues, students, and friends across diverse social and educational contexts. These two aspects are summarized by the use of the title "our dear Brother Bonhoeffer" in the opening inscription. The use of "brother" was not uncommon to these seminarians as Bonhoeffer insisted that this title be used when referring to one another: "All participants, including Bonhoeffer as principal, were asked to call each other 'brothers,' and these brothers were asked to spend significant time each day in meditation on Scripture, periods of quiet, and confessing their sin to one another."⁷ The use of this moniker had become familiar to the students, conferring both respect and a sense of familial care.

The students of the fourth course were subjected to "a semester of rather intensive study of the issue of 'law' and 'gospel' under the leadership of Gerhard Ebeling" who, at the time, was interested in Luther's biblical interpretations.⁸ Ebeling, who is among the signatories, may have been the one to initiate the purchase of the gift.⁹ It was shortly after the fourth course that Ebeling left Finkenwalde for

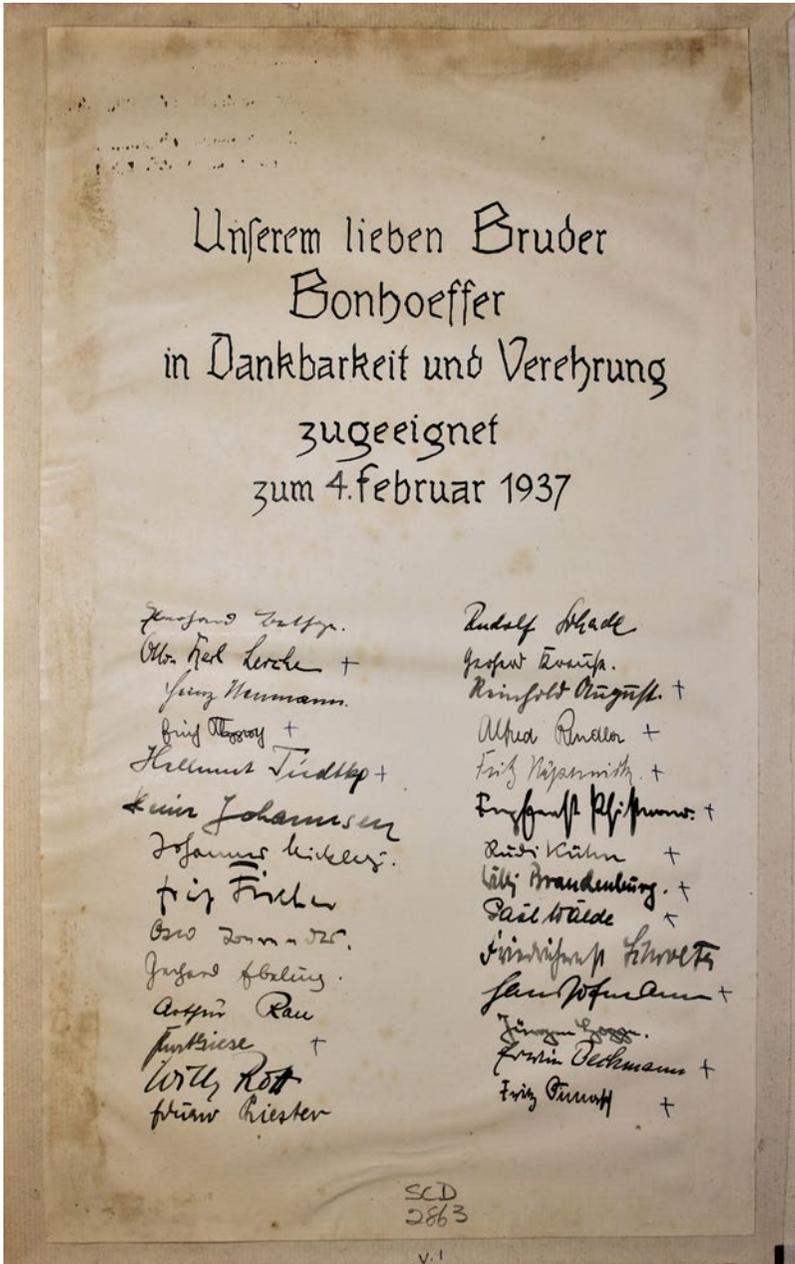


fig. 1. Dedication page and signatures from students at Finkenwalde; located on front pastedown of Volume 1 of 1934 facsimile of *Biblia das ist die gantze Heilige Schrift deutsch*. (SCD #2863) (Image courtesy of Princeton Theological Seminary; photograph by Ryan MacLean).

**To Our dear Brother
 Bonhoeffer
 in Gratitude and Respect
 dedicated
 on February 4, 1937**

Eberhard Bethge
Otto Karl Lerche †
Heinz Neumann
Erich Klapproth †
Hellmut Tiedtke †
Heinz Johannsen
Johannes Mickley
Erich Fischer
Otto Berendts
Gerhard Ebeling
Arthur Rau
Kurt Giese †
Willy Rott
Eduard Priester

Rudolf Schade
Gerhard Krause
Reinhold August †
Alfred Rendler †
Fritz Käpernick †
Franz-Ernst Pfisterer †
Rudi Kühn †
Willi Brandenburg †
Paul Wälde †
Friedrich-Ernst Schröter
Hans Hofmann †
Jürgen Hoppe
Erwin Beckmann †
Fritz Onnasch †

fig. 2. Transcription and translation of dedication page and signatures from Volume 1 of 1934 facsimile of *Biblia das ist die gantze Heilige Schrift deutsch* (SCD #2863).

Zurich in order to continue work on his doctoral thesis under the guidance of Fritz Blanke. In September of 1937, only nine months after the Luther Bible was given to Bonhoeffer, the Finkenwalde Seminary was closed for good by the Gestapo; “fearing the radical gospel advocated” there, Heinrich Himmler declared the seminary illegal and arrested many of its former students.¹⁰

The Bonhoeffer Bible, in many ways, marks the beginning of the end for Finkenwalde and its participants. In addition to being a gift presented during the second-to-last course of study at the illegal seminary, the opening dedication presents a haunting reminder of the realities of instability and war that was tearing through Germany at the time. Of the twenty-eight signatures on the dedication page, fully half of them have crosses drawn next to their names. These crosses, presumably added later by Bethge, indicate those signatories who were killed or missing in action during the course of the war. The fate of nine of these fourteen individuals has been verified.¹¹ Information about the other five names is not available, but one can assume that they were marked by Bethge based on information he had regarding their deaths, possibly through correspondence with family or acquaintances of the deceased.

Like the men who signed it, the two-volume Luther Bible facsimile has gone on its own somewhat unusual journey since it was purchased and presented to Bonhoeffer. Within the reference notes, transcriptions, and reports that accompanied the Bible in the library stacks, there are documents that tell the story of how this copy of Luther’s 1534 Bible found its way from Germany to Princeton.

In June 2001, the Bonhoeffer Bible was highlighted in a brief cover article by Clifford Green that appeared in the newsletter of the International Bonhoeffer Society. Within the article is a brief description of the Bible’s history:

The bible came into Eberhard Bethge’s possession after the war, when he collected the remnants of Bonhoeffer’s library which had been dispersed. Written on the fly leaf of both volumes is “Eigentum [Property], Eberhard Bethge (23 Manor Mount, London S.E. 23)”; this was presumably written as he took up the London pastorate.¹²

Bethge’s ownership inscription (fig. 3) situates the Bible in his possession after 1937, with Karlfried Froehlich noting that the

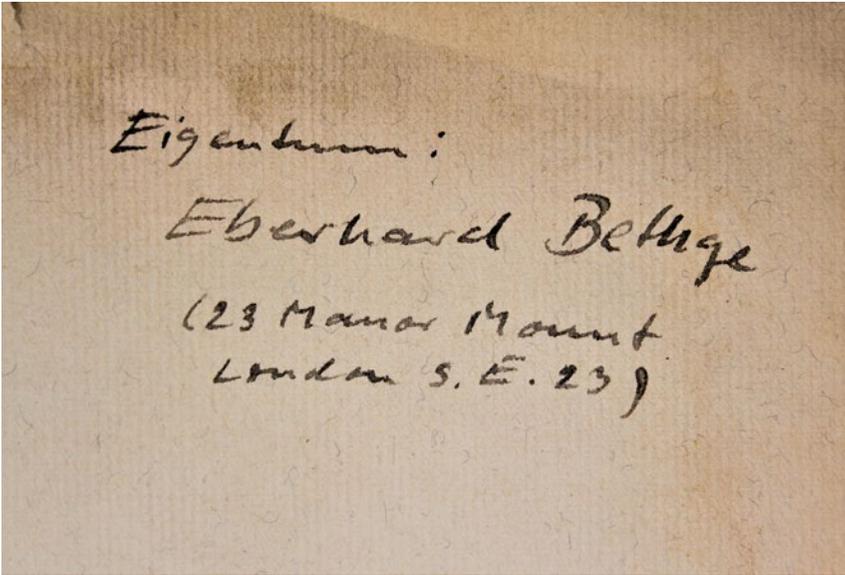


fig. 3. Close-up of signature and address of Eberhard Bethge; located on front flyleaf of Volume 1 of 1934 facsimile of *Biblia das ist die ganzte Heilige Schrift deutsch* (SCD #2863) (Image courtesy of Princeton Theological Seminary; photograph by Ryan MacLean).

location of the address matches that of the parsonage of the German Lutheran Church of St. Paul at Sydenham where Bonhoeffer served from 1933–35 and Bethge served from 1953–60. Based on Bethge's own memoirs, Froehlich concludes that the two-volume Bible was one of a number of Bonhoeffer's books that Bethge took with him to London. These books, Froehlich noted in a letter to Bill Harris, were "collected and catalogued" by Bethge after the war and numbered around 1,000 total volumes.¹³ Bethge confirmed this history in his own letter to Harris regarding the Bible, providing more context for its journey to Princeton Theological Seminary:

Renate, my wife (and the niece of DB) and I remember that we gave Dietrich's Bible in the fifties to Paul as a present for doing so much for us when we started the editing and biographical work on a stipend which he cared for in Harvard Divinity School.¹⁴

The "Paul" mentioned in Bethge's letter is Paul Lehmann (1906–1994). Lehmann was instrumental in helping Bethge and his wife

visit the United States to complete their work on writing Bonhoeffer's biography and editing some of his unpublished works. According to the Rev. Fleming Rutledge, family friend of the Lehmanns, Paul's wife Marion recalls the presentation of the Bonhoeffer Bible to her husband as follows:

Eberhard Bethge wanted to come to America to finish work on the Bonhoeffer biography, but had insufficient money. "Paul went to work" and raised some funds, in particular a grant of \$10,000 from the Danforth Foundation . . . EB "worked all year" and finished the biography. In the meantime (in 1951 or 1952) EB had been made executor of the DB estate ("everybody else was dead"). On the occasion of a lecture given later by EB at Union, he presented the volume(s) to Paul in return for "what Paul had done for their family and what he had meant to Dietrich."¹⁵

In addition to the 1534 facsimile, Bethge also gave Paul Lehmann a first edition of Bonhoeffer's *Ethik*, which he had edited from Bonhoeffer's notes. Both of these books, along with Bonhoeffer's personal copy of Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief* (1929), were part of the donation that Lehmann made to Princeton Theological Seminary in April 1992.

Luther's translation of the Bible changed the theological landscape of the sixteenth century. Its annotated replica, created 400 years later, represents another landscape-changing moment: the life (and death) of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The legacies of both men are tied, in different ways, to this two-volume Bible—a book 400 years in the making and 60 years of traveling from the students of Finkenwalde to the hands of their Brother Bonhoeffer to the careful curation of Bethge and Lehmann and finally to the rare book stacks of Princeton Theological Seminary.

NOTES

1. Olaf Morgan Norlie, *The Bible in a Thousand Tongues: In Commemoration of Luther's Translation of the Bible in 1534* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1935), 3.

2. Christofer Frey, email message to author, June 5, 2021.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, eds. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2013), 1015, 1021.

4. *Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, 1021–1026.

5. Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.
6. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 472.
7. Root, 140.
8. Karlfried Froehlich to William Harris, April 21, 1994. SCD #2863 Reference File, Princeton Theological Seminary Archives.
9. Froehlich, April 21, 1994.
10. William Samson, "The Finkenwalde Project," in *Monasticism Old and New*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco, TX: Baylor University Center for Christian Ethics, 2010), 22.
11. *Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 1022–1025.
12. Clifford Green, "Finkenwalde Birthday Gift to Bonhoeffer, 1937: Facsimile 1534 Luther Bible," *Newsletter*, International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, no. 76 (June 2001): 2.
13. Froehlich, April 21, 1994.
14. Eberhard Bethge to William Harris, May 11, 1994. SCD #2863 Reference File, Princeton Theological Seminary Archives.
15. Fleming Rutledge to William Harris, May 20, 1994. SCD #2863 Reference File, Princeton Theological Seminary Archives. Authors' Note: text in quotation marks refers to direct quotes from Marion Lehmann to Rev. Rutledge.