

Lessons from Church History (Part 2)

WEEK 14: Lessons from Modern Evangelicalism

Eric Liddell (1902-45)

- Eric was born in Tientsin, China to Scottish missionaries. He attended school in China until he was 5. At age 6, he and his brother Robert (8) started attending a boarding school in London. Their parents and their sister Jenny returned to China.
- Very early on Eric displayed his athletic abilities in cricket, rugby and track. He attended the University of Edinburgh and quickly became known as the fastest runner in Scotland. He also was an important member of their rugby team and later was inducted into the Scottish Rugby Hall of Fame.
- In 1923 he set the British record for the 100-yard race that held for 23 years. He became known as the “Flying Scotsman.” He had an unorthodox style of running in which he held his head back and kept his mouth wide open, and his arms thrashing the air.
- While at student at the university, Eric was involved with evangelizing via the Glasgow Students’ Evangelistic Union. He was their lead speaker. He also preached frequently at Morningside Congregational Church.
- In the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric says, “God made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.” There is no record of this.
- Harold Abrahams, his English rival (called the Cambridge Cannonball), said: “Eric Liddell was a man whose intense spiritual convictions contributed largely to his athletic triumphs. While his ability must have been great, but for his profound intensity of spirit he surely could not have achieved so much.”
- Liddell said he never prayed to win a race. But he did pray that God would be glorified when he proclaimed the gospel.
- Liddell participated in the 1924 Olympics held in Paris. Because the 100-meter race was held on a Sunday, he refused to race, being a strong advocate of resting on the Christian sabbath. He was highly criticized for his convictions and called a traitor. On the day he was supposed to run, he spoke at a church in Paris. Instead, Eric trained for the 400-meter race, which he was okay at, but not competitive enough on the international scene.
- On the morning of the 400-meter race, a teammate handed him a piece of paper from an anonymous source. It read, “In the old book it says: ‘He that honours me I will honour.’ (1 Sam. 2:30). This inspired him to run the best race of his life—a win for gold. He set a world record time of 47.6 seconds that beat the favored runner, Horatio Fitch. The record stood for 12 yrs.
- After winning more races in Britain in 1924 and 1925, Liddell returned to China as a missionary in 1925. He continued to race in China, beating members of the French and Japanese Olympic teams. He returned to Scotland only twice (1932 and 1939).
- Liddell taught in schools and helped his brother, Rob, a doctor, starting in 1941. At the time, WWII was in full swing and Japan had invaded China. Missionaries were often shot on the spot. Because of the danger, he sent his pregnant wife, Florence and two daughters to Canada. Eric transported wounded soldiers to field hospitals on a bike, often dodging gunfire.
- Soon Eric was arrested with other foreigners and spent two years in a squalid prison camp where he emerged as the leader. There was no running water, no bathrooms, and the prisoners were given soup and bread to eat. He taught children in the camp. They loved him, calling him, “Uncle Eric.” The impact that he had on those children is incalculable.
- In 1945, Liddell developed a brain tumor, slipped into a coma and died shortly after at age 43.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45)

- Bonhoeffer is arguably the most interesting and complex church figure in the 20th century. He was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, teacher, spy, and participant in the German resistance against the Nazis. His theology is given to diverse and contradictory interpretations, and he is often quoted by individuals on opposing ends of religious and political spectrums. His legacy is broad, but most universally recognized as courage in the face of institutional evil.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Prussia in 1906. His father was a highly regarded psychiatrist at the University of Berlin. When he, at the age of 14, told his family he wanted to be a theologian, his older brothers mocked him for considering such an unimportant profession. He replied, "Then I will reform the discipline!"
- He received his DTh in 1927 from Humboldt University in Berlin, went to America in 1930 to attend Union Theological Seminary, then returned to Berlin in 1931 where he experienced a conversion from intellectual Christianity to a genuine personal faith in Christ.
- The collapse of the Weimar Republic caused hyperinflation and the ensuing economic and political chaos set the stage for the Nazi Party to take power via Adolf Hitler in 1933. Bonhoeffer was generally insulated from the financial suffering, but he jumped headlong into the fray when he gave a famous radio speech opposing Hitler.
- In July 1933 nationwide church elections were imposed, pro-Nazi clergy took control, and then the Confession Church was formed with Bonhoeffer as one of the leaders and his mentor Karl Barth.
- Barth admonished him not to flee the persecution, but Bonhoeffer pastored two German-speaking churches in London in 1933 and left Berlin.
- From London he worked to build support for the Confessing Church through his friend Martin Niemöller.
- In 1935, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany and headed up an underground seminary at Finkenwalde to train pastors for the Confession Church. Persecution increased and in late 1937 Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo. This time of semi-monastic communal life and teaching formed the basis of his books, *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1937 and *Life Together* in 1939.
- In 1940, Bonhoeffer joined the Abwehr, the German military intelligence, with help from his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi. This provided relief from the Gestapo, allowing him to travel under the guise of spying on churches, and kept him from fighting in the war. For the next three years he smuggled Jews into Switzerland, participated in multiple plots to kill Hitler, discovered the true horrific scale of the Nazi genocide, wrote *Ethics*, and got engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer in January 1943.
- On April 9, 1943, Bonhoeffer and Dohnányi were arrested and spent 1 1/2 years at Tegel prison. Guards allowed his writings to be smuggled out via Maria to his close friend and soulmate Eberhard Bethge. These uncensored writings were later published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. He was moved to Flossenburg concentration camp. On April 5, 1945, the Gestapo discovered the diaries of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the Abwehr and mastermind of some of the failed plots to assassinate Hitler. In his rage upon reading this, Hitler ordered the participants to be killed.
- Bonhoeffer was sentenced to death and hanged on the morning of April 9, 1945, along with Canaris, and four others. Allied forces liberated Flossenburg less than two weeks later.