

The nicotine journal

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

This summer I reread Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* in Fortress Press's extraordinary new edition of his collected works. *Letters and Papers* remains almost endlessly suggestive and stimulating theologically. But in this reading I noticed how often the imprisoned Lutheran pastor mentioned tobacco. There are, in fact, no fewer than 20 entries in the index under "Smoking."

"I am very grateful for any smoking supplies," Bonhoeffer mentions in one letter. In another he adds his "special thanks for the smoking supplies and to all the kind donors of cigarettes," and elsewhere he offers gratitude for "cookies, peaches, and cigarettes."

Bonhoeffer often reinforces his gratitude with superlatives and exclamation points. "Maria's and Mother's cigarettes were magnificent," he writes. "I thank Anna very much for the cigarettes." And: "I thank you very much for everything, also for the cigars and cigarettes from your trip!" He praises a Wolf cigar for its "magical fragrance" and on another occasion declares, "I've lit the big cigar and am enjoying it immensely—thanks very much!" When his dear friend Eberhard Bethge delivers a cigar sent by Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer finds it so fine that he staggers at its "truly improbable reality."

Bonhoeffer's nicotine encomia brought to mind other theological figures who smoked. C. S. Lewis incessantly smoked cigarettes and a pipe. J. R. R. Tolkien appeared almost elfish in the author photo for *The Hobbit*, grinning and gripping a pipe. Barth, too, liked a pipe but sometimes smoked cigars. Other confirmed smokers include Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, James Gustafson and Richard John Neuhaus.

Enthusiastic smokers can also be found in the ranks of conservative evangelicals. The British Baptist C. H. Spurgeon believed cigar drafts prepared his throat for preaching. Challenged on this practice, Spurgeon replied that he would continue unashamedly to "smoke to the glory of God."

During his student days at Princeton, J. Gresham Machen remarked that cigar smoking was "my idea of delight" and wrote to his mother, "When I think what a wonderful aid tobacco is to friendship and Christian patience I have sometimes regretted that I never began to smoke."

You're never too old to start, cigar aficionados might have told Machen. And maybe he did, eventually. The mature Machen would mysteriously disappear to New York City for days at a time. Perhaps he was sneaking away to a Manhattan cigar bar.

Strenuous objections to tobacco use arise not only in fundamentalist or evangelical circles. When theologian Paul Ramsey appeared on the cover of the Methodist magazine the *Christian Advocate*, it was not his remarks on war but the photo of Ramsey with a pipe in hand that sparked a storm of controversy. One of my favorite letters to the editor in the *Christian Century* was the one years ago from a writer who summarily dismissed Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon as nothing more than "tobacco-country luminaries." Meanwhile, the paleo-Presbyterian (and wonderfully named) *Nicotine Theological Journal* insists that it is not only about the joys of tobacco but takes pride in stirring up liberals and evangelicals.

Given the health concerns related to smoking, I will attempt no theological apologia for the activity other than observing that the existence of volcanoes—not to mention liturgical incense—suggests a God who apparently has a special interest in fire and smoke.

Cigarette smoking, given its highly addictive nature and the mountain of medical evidence for its harmfulness, stands beyond even tongue-in-cheek justification.

Setting cigarettes aside, I think pipe and cigar users enjoy smoking because it provides three substantial pleasures. First, a high-quality cigar or a well-packed pipe presents occasion for patience (as Machen noticed). It takes at least 45 minutes to finish a decent cigar. That is time set aside for backyard meditation or contemplation. Few things better slow down a busy day and bring it in for a relaxed landing than a burning stogie and an iced bourbon.

Second, smoking in the company of others enhances conviviality. Conversation assumes a satisfying pace as the talkers pause periodically to draw on their pipes or cigars.

Third, smoking is an excellent aesthetic pleasure. There are the tools—cigar cutters, lighters and pipe cleaners—whose use is a soothing ritual. And smoke itself moves with visual elegance, in serene white or blue undulations, with a languorous ascent into the sky.

Take it or leave it, of course. But there can be little doubt why that brilliant and brave Lutheran pastor, jailed during the darkest days of the 20th century, enjoyed smoking.