

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer:  
The Violent Pacifist**  
by J. Robert Douglass\*

I have always been fascinated by the stories of martyrs. It did not surprise me, then, when I became interested in Dietrich Bonhoeffer soon after having read his book, The Cost of Discipleship. In addition to his martyrdom, I believe that I became interested in his life because of its complexity. One aspect of this complexity is Bonhoeffer's ethics. For example, Bonhoeffer was a self-proclaimed pacifist, even going as far as making arrangements to travel to India in order to study with Gandhi, yet he was executed for his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler.<sup>1</sup> Immediately the question arises, "how does a person adhere to these seemingly mutually exclusive ideas?" In attempting to answer this question, an understanding of Bonhoeffer's ethics is required. In order to establish, at least in some sense, Bonhoeffer's ethic, the following will examine Bonhoeffer's theology by surveying his writings.

In order to correctly understand Bonhoeffer's writings, it is necessary to consider their context from which they arose. One experience that seemed to have a profound effect on Bonhoeffer occurred while he was in America studying at Union Seminary in New York. While there, Bonhoeffer was exposed to the black church in Harlem.<sup>2</sup> This experience greatly affected his understanding of oppression. In fact, after returning to Germany, Bonhoeffer was convinced that racism would become one of the most critical problems for the church.<sup>3</sup>

Another incident occurred in Bonhoeffer's life in the early 1930's. The circumstances surrounding the event are unclear, but in recalling the event to a girlfriend, Bonhoeffer wrote, "I suddenly saw as self-evident the Christian pacifism that I had recently passionately opposed."<sup>4</sup> These events are only a few of the examples of the many formative experiences that influenced Bonhoeffer's theology and subsequently, his ethics.

Bonhoeffer's first work, Sanctorum Communio, or The Communion of Saints, was his dissertation, which he completed in 1927. In it, we can observe a clear break with the typical enlightenment

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approach to morality. In addition to this break with the enlightenment, some seeds of his later works are present. This is demonstrated by the Preface, in which Bonhoeffer wrote,

The more theologians have considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts has emerged. "Person," "primal state," "sin," and "revelation" are fully understandable only in relation to sociality.<sup>5</sup>

This idea is foundation to Bonhoeffer's theology as will be discovered later. Bonhoeffer proceeded in the book to propose that a community's particular culture is a type of personal character, which results in a view of the community as a collective person. Perceiving community in these terms naturally assumes a certain degree of ethical accountability in that since the individuals comprising a collective person are to be ethical, the collective person, itself, ought to be ethical.<sup>6</sup> In discussing the primal state of humanity, Bonhoeffer describes it as a state of humanity, Bonhoeffer describes it as a state of giving and love, which has been transformed into a state of demanding and selfishness, sin is naturally destructive to a community. This selfishness also "places the individual in the utmost loneliness, in a radical separation from God and man."<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, sin is not the last word on the subject. Thanks to Christ's atoning death, the restoration of humanity is made possible. It is the recurring theme of Christ's "vicarious action" that forms the new community and holds it together.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is Bonhoeffer's opinion that through this new community, Christ exists as the congregation.<sup>9</sup>

Having laid some foundation for examining Bonhoeffer's understanding of ecclesiology, sociology, and the doctrine of sin, the next element of his theology to be noted is his anthropology. This anthropology is presented in the work, Act and Being, which he wrote in 1930. In the first section of the book, Bonhoeffer critiques the two epistemologies that were prevalent: transcendental and ontological philosophies. Both of these philosophies preclude any belief in God.<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer avoids the problems of these philosophies with the inclusion of the idea of revelation, that God, while is entirely separate from the individual, can be known. This move "frees" God from the individual.

This allows Bonhoeffer to eventually state that "God is not free of man but for man."<sup>11</sup>

He continues in the book, to examine the implications of God's freedom for humanity. Bonhoeffer argues that humanity "in Adam" is in bondage to sin, which he previously argued is being in bondage to self. On the other hand, humanity "in Christ" is set free from sin and self. Therefore, humanity, like God is free to be for others.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note at this point that after having finished Act and Being, Bonhoeffer came to America to study at Union Seminary. This is significant because it was while he was in New York that he met Jean Lasserre, a French pastor. Lasserre's pacifism greatly influenced Bonhoeffer. In addition, it was Lasserre who challenged Bonhoeffer to consider the Sermon on the Mount as guidelines for discipleship and not merely as a difficult passage of Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

The next work to be examined is Bonhoeffer's Creation and Fall, which is a development of his lectures on creation and sin, which he delivered earlier in the winter of 1932-1933.<sup>14</sup> In addition to examining the first three chapters of Genesis from a theological perspective, he restates his emphasis on the social aspect of Christianity, which he had introduced in The Communion of Saints. In true Bonhoeffer fashion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer attempted to break with the trends of interpretation of his day and pioneer new ground. Instead of offering an account of "how" the world came into existence, Bonhoeffer attempted to offer a theological interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, imago Dei means that humanity has been made into live in relation to one another, as maleness and femaleness suggests. He also argues, as he did in Act and Being, that since God is free pro nobis and since "in man God creates his image on earth," then we must live for others.<sup>16</sup> Another noteworthy point of Creation and Fall is Bonhoeffer's rejection of the ideas of "orders of creation." During this time in Germany, the concept of "orders of creation" was being employed in order to justify allegiance to Hitler. Concerning these orders, Bonhoeffer writes, "they are not orders of creation but preservation."<sup>17</sup> The immediate question that arises is "preservation for what?" Thus, by this shift, Bonhoeffer moves the argument from creation to the eschaton.

In 1933, Bonhoeffer presented several lectures on Christology. While he never wrote a book on the subject, Christ the Center, was published utilizing a student's notes from the lectures. It is important to

examine this material because of its significance for his later theology. For Bonhoeffer, the primary issue of the Incarnation is not a question of "how" but "who?" After discussing the promise of a Messiah and the eventual corruption of the idea by a fallen world, Bonhoeffer explains Christ as the concealed center of human history. Furthermore, since for Bonhoeffer, Christ exists as the congregation, it is the church that is at the center of history, not the state.<sup>18</sup> It is at this point that we can see elements of Bonhoeffer's Lutheranism as well as his tendency to think creatively.

It seems clear that his discussion of false Messiahs is a polemic against Hitler, especially in light of the fact that Hitler had only recently become chancellor in January of 1933. Bonhoeffer's approach to the subject is also interesting in that he chooses to stress the Messiahship of Christ, which is an entirely Jewish idea. It almost appears as if Bonhoeffer was attempting to remind Christians that to hate Jews is to hate Christ and that we are indebted to the Jewish race for giving us Christ.

After discussing the problem of false Messiahs and a false church, Bonhoeffer turns to develop a "positive Christology." In this discussion he deals with the humiliation of Christ. This becomes more important for his own understanding of being a Christian and for the "Christ existing as the congregation."

Next, we must briefly look at an essay that Bonhoeffer wrote in response to Hitler's imposition of laws such as the Aryan Clause, which expelled Christian pastors who had Jewish backgrounds. On May 7, 1933, Bonhoeffer wrote "The Church and the Jewish Question." This document is extremely important for our attempt to answer the original question, "what were Bonhoeffer's ethics, and how could he be involved in an assassination plot if he was truly a pacifist?"

In the essay Bonhoeffer articulates three ways that the church could relate to the state. These are cogently summarized by de Gruchy. "First of all, it must remind the state of its responsibility, that is its prophetic task; secondly, it must aid the victims of state action." He continues by quoting Bonhoeffer, "but the third possibility 'is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.'"<sup>19</sup>

In the following years, Bonhoeffer began to work more extensively with the Confessing Church to the extent of eventually running a seminary to train pastors for the Confessing Church. These

years at Finkenwalde had a significant effect on Bonhoeffer as the next work will demonstrate.

In November of 1937 The Cost of Discipleship was published under the title, Nachfolge. The work, which is an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount was the result of lectures that he gave while at Finkenwalde, although there is some evidence that he was working on the idea as of 1932.<sup>20</sup> The German version was divided into two parts. The first section explored the idea of discipleship in the gospels, while the second traced the idea through Pauline theology.<sup>21</sup> It has been suggested, and I believe rightly so, that Bonhoeffer clearly wanted to show that following Jesus, the suffering Messiah (the Synoptics) is an integral part of believing in and obeying Christ as Lord (Paul).<sup>22</sup> This is significant because of the Bonhoeffer's attempt to correct the Lutheran tendency to divorce faith from discipleship. In refuting this tendency Bonhoeffer writes, "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who obeys believes."<sup>23</sup>

In studying The Cost of Discipleship, it is essential to note the radical change it implies ecclesologically. It is clear from the book that Bonhoeffer separates the Church from the world. In fact, Bonhoeffer states that "the separation of Church and world is now complete."<sup>24</sup> This separation must not be understood as withdrawal from the world, however. The work must be studied in light of his experience at Finkenwalde. People came to the seminary to study and be encouraged only in order to return to the world to minister. This is why Bonhoeffer can write,

To stay in the world with God means simply to live in the rough and tumble of the visible church, to take part in its worship and to live the life of discipleship. In so doing, we bear testimony to the defeat of the world.<sup>25</sup>

In the following years Hitler's regime grew increasingly evil. Consequently, Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance movement also increased. Furthermore, it was during this time that Bonhoeffer began to work on his Ethics.<sup>26</sup> Prior to examining the Ethics, it is essential to realize that the work which Bonhoeffer had intended was not realized. In fact, he was working on a draft chapter when he was arrested on April 5, 1943.<sup>27</sup>

Bonhoeffer's discussion of ethics demonstrates a shift in his thinking. In the earliest works, he appealed to "orders of preservation" as the basis for ethics. This appeal placed the emphasis on ethics in eschatology. Ethics, while still concerned with eschatology, differs in approach somewhat. It is not that eschatology is no longer important, rather in Ethics, Bonhoeffer attempted to articulate ethics for the interim between the "then" and the "now."<sup>28</sup>

In this book, Bonhoeffer defines ethics as "the bold endeavor to speak about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world."<sup>29</sup> As previously mentioned, Bonhoeffer had proposed his "orders of preservation" as a replacement for his "orders of creation" as the basis for ethics. With the passing of time, the terms became interchangeable; "orders of preservation" eventually became a meaningless distinction. In order to substantiate his ethics, and deal with the tension of living "between the times," Bonhoeffer employs the idea of the ultimate and penultimate. The ultimate is the Barthian notion that the world has been reconciled to God. The penultimate ethics are for concrete situations in which the Christian finds himself/herself presently.<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the penultimate, Bonhoeffer establishes these ethics on the concepts of mandates. This move away from his earlier notion of "orders" signifies a change in emphasis for him. Unlike The Cost of Discipleship, in writing Ethics, Bonhoeffer is much less interested in the formative aspect of ethics. This is not to say that Bonhoeffer no longer views ethics as formational; on the contrary, ethics are always formational for Bonhoeffer, in the sense that by being "free for others," one is being conformed to Christ's image. The emphasis for Bonhoeffer has simply become one of the importance of concrete actions.

It is somewhat surprising that Bonhoeffer would apparently back away from his strong delineation between the world and the church as articulated in The Cost of Discipleship, particularly in light of Germany's increasing wickedness. This shift occurs, however. It is most strongly demonstrated by the balance which Bonhoeffer strives for by including both Matthew 12:30 and Mark 9:40. In Bonhoeffer's thought, the church must so tightly define itself, in order to avoid corruption by the false church, that it becomes exclusive. Here he applies Matthew 12:30 which states, "he that is not with me is against me." On the other hand, there are people outside of the church who are doing the Christian's duty, often better than the German Christians. To

them, Bonhoeffer applies the passage from Mark, "he that is not against me is for me." This second group would have included many of Bonhoeffer's family, friends and co-conspirators. The significance of these ideas is that the distinction between the two kingdoms is becoming blurred.

Perhaps the most interesting point of Bonhoeffer's Ethics is his perception of the fundamental question of ethics. According to Bonhoeffer, the fundamental question is not a matter of doing the right thing or even being the right kind of person. Instead, Bonhoeffer believed that the question ought to be, "what is the will of God?"<sup>31</sup> How, then, does the Christian live ethically? Two themes from his earlier works appear as a possible answer. First, the ethical life is a life of responsibility. Bonhoeffer defines this as "the total and realistic response of man to the claim of God and of our neighbor."<sup>32</sup> This works itself out by being free for others.

Second, the sign of responsibility is deputyship. At the center of the idea of deputyship is the concept of vicarious actions.<sup>33</sup> It is only by being free for others, even to the point of death, that we are free to live. In fact, Bonhoeffer would surely argue that to refuse to risk one's own life for another is flight from responsibility, which violates God's mandate.<sup>34</sup>

In order to understand how Bonhoeffer could have gone from his self-proclaimed pacifism to involvement in an assassination plot, it is necessary to trace his involvement in the resistance movement. It is first important to realize that Bonhoeffer's resistance against the Third Reich was not a specific decision but a process. For example, on April 1, 1933, when Hitler declared a one-day boycott of Jewish businesses, Bonhoeffer's ninety year-old grandmother defied a blockade around a Jewish owned business in Berlin in protest of the boycott.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Bonhoeffer's father, Karl, who was one of Germany's most respected psychiatrists believed that Hitler was mentally ill and was incapable of leading the nation.<sup>36</sup> These instances demonstrate that Bonhoeffer was surrounded by people opposed to Hitler throughout his life.

Bonhoeffer, himself, was vocal about his opposition to Hitler from the beginning. This resulted in the revocation of Dietrich's privileges. First he was forbidden to speak publicly. Later he was forbidden to publish. Eventually, he was not permitted to teach, and lastly, he was not allowed to go to Berlin except to visit his parents.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that it was not until the Nazis obtained enough power

to carry out their program that Bonhoeffer's involvement with the resistance movement became clandestine, because it was at that moment when what had been only the threat of tyranny became actualized.

It should not be assumed that even at this moment Bonhoeffer merely "threw his hat into the ring." In order to remain consistent with the concept of two kingdoms, many other avenues had to have been attempted before he could legitimize his involvement. First, legal nonviolent means of removing Hitler from power must have been pursued. This would have required the cooperation of men extremely close to Hitler, which was not available. Second, those in politically or militarily high places could have attempted to stop Hitler. They either could not or would not. This left the responsibility for stopping this dangerous person to others.<sup>38</sup>

Even after joining the conspirators, there were several criteria that must have been met in order to pursue tyrannicide. First, indisputable evidence must exist demonstrating abuse of power or the possibility of "irreparable harm" to the people. Second, as mentioned above, those lower or outside of the political hierarchy may only take action once those higher in the system have refused to act or have been rendered unable to take action. Third, the success of the attempted tyrannicide must be reasonably assured. This is an interesting notion, for as Rasmussen notes, "for Bonhoeffer, what is involved in creating the conditions that reasonably assure success greatly restricts when and by whom tyrannicide must be attempted with ethical justification."<sup>39</sup> Fourth, only the minimal amount of violence necessary to correct the abuses of power is allowed. The final condition is that active resistance can only be turned to as a last resort.<sup>40</sup>

One possibility for balancing Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy with his self-proclaimed pacifism is to point to the fact that Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot was completely nonviolent. Bonhoeffer simply used his position in the Abwehr, or military counter-intelligence, as a means to help Jews escape Germany and to contact the Allies in order to find support for the conspiracy.<sup>41</sup> The basic problem with this argument is that it does not take seriously the fact that Bonhoeffer clearly understood and agreed with the intentions of his co-conspirators. By Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy, he was approving of the use of violence in this situation.

The next possibility is to argue that tyrannicide is somehow different than simple murder. While this is closer to the conspirators'



position, they did not seek to "whitewash" their actions by stressing Hitler's tyranny. The conspirators understood the ethical dilemma of employing violence in an attempt to stop the Nazi machine, which was fueled by violence. It is at this point that we can see the significance of Bonhoeffer's fundamental ethical question. The issue is not whether killing Hitler would be good or not; the issue is "is it the will God?" For this reason Bonhoeffer can reflect on these events in a poem from prison and say that the Nazis had "forced us to sinning."<sup>42</sup>

The above qualifications must not diminish the significance that Hitler's tyranny had on the conspiracy. It was the tyranny that produced what Bonhoeffer would call the "necessita," for the plot. Again, the issue is not the righteousness of the action. For this reason, Bonhoeffer does not talk about the plan as a "may," in that it is permissible. Instead, he refers to it as a "must," produced by God's mandate to be for others.<sup>43</sup> It was this "emergency situation" that called for and necessitated the conspiracy.

The last option, which I am sure would appeal to many of my Anabaptist friends, is to claim that Bonhoeffer was never really a pacifist. This is why until now I have referred to him as a self-proclaimed pacifist, because this interpretation is an option. I am convinced, however, that this option does not honestly consider the great angst that Bonhoeffer clearly experienced in making his decision to be involved in the plot. Today, we have little or no concept as to life in Germany in the middle of this century. For Bonhoeffer, the actions within which he participated were the only responsible path he could have chosen, given the circumstances; there was no other option for his understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 122.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 155.

<sup>5</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio (London: Collins Publishers, 1963), 6.

<sup>6</sup>John de Gruchy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Christ (London: Collins Publishers, 1988), 5.

<sup>7</sup>Bonhoeffer, 70.

<sup>8</sup>de Gruchy, 6.

<sup>9</sup>Bonhoeffer, 104.

<sup>10</sup>de Gruchy, 8.

<sup>11</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Act and Being (London: Collins Publishers, 1962), 90.

<sup>12</sup>de Gruchy, 8.

<sup>13</sup>Bethge, 112.

<sup>14</sup>de Gruchy, 110.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959), 8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 91.

<sup>18</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ the Center (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 60.

<sup>19</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) quoted in John de Gruchy, Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ (London: Collins Publishers, 1988), 19-20.

<sup>20</sup>de Gruchy, 25.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959; Collier Books, 1963), 69.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 212.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 292.

<sup>26</sup>Clifford J. Green, "The Text of Bonhoeffer's Ethics" in New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics, ed. William J. Peck, (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>27</sup>de Gruchy, 30.

<sup>28</sup>James Woelfel, Bonhoeffer's Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 245.

<sup>29</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1965), 88.

<sup>30</sup>Woelfel, 245.

<sup>31</sup>Robin Lovin, Christian Faith and Public Choices: the Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 127.

<sup>32</sup>Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 245.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>34</sup>After his arrest and eventual imprisonment, Bonhoeffer began to write what has come to be known as Letters and Papers from Prison. The work contains Bonhoeffer's last writings and is consequently, worthwhile reading. It is also important in examining his theology. It will not be examined here, however, because it is not helpful in answering our original question of how a self-proclaimed pacifist could involve himself in an assassination plot.

<sup>35</sup>Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Life in Pictures (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>36</sup>Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 136.

<sup>37</sup>Bethge, 603.

<sup>38</sup>Rasmussen, 136.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>41</sup>Robin Lovin, "Biographical Context" in New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics, ed. William J. Peck, (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 78.

<sup>42</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Prison," Union Quarterly Review, March 1946, quoted in Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 127.

<sup>43</sup>Rasmussen, 144.

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