

THE TENSION OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S PRISON THEOLOGY REGARDING SOCIAL REFLECTIONS CONCERNING RACE AND POVERTY: PROVOKING ACTION TOWARD SOCIAL FREEDOM AND JUSTICE BEYOND SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS JARGON

CRAIG KYLE HEMPHILL¹

INTRODUCTION

Freedom is a loosely defined word that conjures many notions about social justice and provokes a spectrum of emotion when placed in the context of addressing racism and poverty. Freedom demands self-discipline, responsibility, and action.² The boiling of emotion and passion often follows in tandem where discussions address racism and poverty. For the Church, freedom should involve concerns for spiritual welfare and communal existence as a body identified with Jesus Christ. In terms of responsibility and freedom, the Church both historically and in the contemporary situation ought to commit to addressing racism and poverty beyond mere discussion. As a matter of Christian witness, the Church's responsibility regarding social freedom in relation to racism and poverty ought to offer a legitimate model of action consistent with the gospel of Christ versus merely a verbose paradox. The true gospel involves the confession of salvation, truth, and inclusion for all classes and races. However, while often well-intended, the Church provides mostly discussion and lament concerning issues of racism and poverty. The Church, then, has arguably united with secular institutions in a partnership of verbal pity and relational ineptness, but little action toward redressing racism and poverty.

A grave issue continues to confront the Church regarding social freedom and its attempts to redress racism and poverty -- how does the Church move beyond discussion and apathy toward action to confront racism and poverty? Particularly, how does the Church provoke action toward social justice to combat racism and poverty beyond notions of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes as the "insufficient tools of reasoning, principle, conscience, duty, absolute freedom and private duty?"³

¹Craig Hemphill is a J.D. graduate of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University, and a former *Editor-in-Chief* of the Thurgood Marshall Law Review. He has served as in-house counsel and construction contract specialist for Williams Midstream Gas and Liquids in Houston, Texas. He earned the B.S. degree in Economics from the University of Texas at Arlington and a Master of Divinity (*Cum Laude*) at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. He is a licensed and ordained minister for both the Missionary Baptist-National and Southern Baptist Conventions.

²See, e.g., Dietrich Bonhoeffer "After Ten Years," *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: The McMillan Company, 1971), 3-17.

³See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Clifford J. Green (Volume 6), trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis:

In an exact and numbing revelation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer presents through his works, prison experiences, and death a model for how the Church might confess *and* act to bring awareness and relief to the social ills caused by racism and poverty. This essay, then, presents an analysis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology concerning social freedom -- i.e., Bonhoeffer's four principles: (1) discipline, (2) action, (3) suffering, and (4) death -- through examining Bonhoeffer's prison writings and, to a limited extent, his pre-prison comments regarding civil courage. The purpose of this examination is to present Bonhoeffer's theological constructs regarding the social and/or public injustice of his time (e.g., Nazi tyranny) to offer a suggested method for dealing with contemporary injustice(s) caused by racism and poverty. Although the examination is heavy on considering Bonhoeffer's works and reflecting on his resistance to Nazi oppression, it is not intended to argue an exact fitting of Bonhoeffer's theological constructs of his particular situation. Notably, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's shortened and interrupted life limited his ability to voice his perspective on numerous contemporary matters such as racism and poverty. Rather, stated precisely, this examination seeks to speak through and for what Bonhoeffer might have voiced by applying his works to the social challenges of the present day.

This work addresses the question of how the Church can provoke action toward combating racism and poverty by acting as a model of Christ and implementing his gospel. How should the Church become a social justice catalyst to move itself and society beyond discussion and inaction to counter racism and poverty? This essay asserts that Bonhoeffer's life and works nobly demonstrate a Christocentric model of action for the Church to incorporate to answer these questions.

CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL FREEDOM VERSUS BONHOEFFER'S NOTIONS OF ACTION

For the Church to be a legitimate spiritual welfare agent, it must address important contemporary issues. Such issues involve existential matters regarding human relationships from the perspective to God.⁴ Two such relationships involve economic inclusion and racial equality. The perspective of God involves recognizing that every person as a matter of creation exists in the image of God, making humanity of immeasurable worth. Based on such worth, every person should enjoy equal dignity with his or her fellow humans.⁵ There exists a need then that humanity following the model of Christ and his gospel demonstrate equality and respect of dignity for each person no matter another's economic class or race.

Fortress Press, 2005), 12. Concerning racism and poverty, such tools often and ashamedly perpetuate the stagnant ineptness of secular and religious jargon. That is to say, the Church becomes a meeting place to discuss the good or ill fortunes of its members and/or society as a whole, but it remains merely a social outlet that empathizes with the plight of the poor and those cast aside by racial injustice.

⁴See, e.g., Bonhoeffer, note 1, 16.

⁵See, e.g., Léon Garriguet, *The Social Value of the Gospel*, ed. Henry Parkinson (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1911), 92-93, discussing the intrinsic value of human beings concerning "moral worth" as "created in the image of God."

The reminder is that Christ calls everyone who follows him to the task of service. Such service requires respecting the dignity of all people. This perspective permeates social freedom.

Problematic is the disappointment that the Church in the West and in Europe has succumbed to the will of rationalism and human intellect beyond the grit of spiritual faith that enables and promotes social freedom by fostering Christocentric service toward fellow human beings.⁶ Social freedom and service are powerful antidotes against racism and poverty. Unfortunately, Western and European churches have taken on a stance of nothing more than simple discussion, with little action to redress racism and poverty. The Church's response to racism and poverty is anemic concerning direct action. Mostly, the Church passes along its responsibility to secular vehicles to address the needs of those socially marginalized because of racism and poverty's situational results. Bonhoeffer experienced a similar situation concerning the rhetoric and passiveness of the Confessing Church during the height of Nazi oppression.

For Bonhoeffer, "confession" was more than mere words. Bonhoeffer looked toward a deliberative ethic strengthened through decisive action in which he demonstrated the courage to take on a just war to eliminate what he saw as an enemy of German society, culture, national heritage, and the Christian faith. Such action did not come free of tension or criticism, however. Yet, Bonhoeffer engaged in action that represents a model of how to counter stagnant discussion and paralyzing inaction. For sure, Bonhoeffer's actions cost him his life. For Bonhoeffer, however, social justice and freedom combines conviction, faith and righteousness, which culminates into action—even at the cost of death. One might characterize such ideology as "righteous action." Bonhoeffer's prison poem "Stations on the Road to Freedom" provides an effective witness of such sentiment.⁷

STATIONS ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

In "Stations on the Road to Freedom," Bonhoeffer formulated a Christocentric model of social justice and freedom in relation to action, which involved (i) dying to self, (ii) taking up discipline, (iii) action, and (iv) suffering. Such rationales are also present in Bonhoeffer's pre-prison theology found in "After Ten Years," where he expresses the sentiment that emulating Christ in movement and action, which Bonhoeffer notes as civil courage, results in social justice and freedom.⁸ To Bonhoeffer, then, for one to focus on righteous action he or she must model Jesus Christ. In addition, such action unquestionably involves ethics and, as always, ethics involves tension. On the one hand, one must focus on Christian appropriateness. On the other hand, one must purpose and engage in what we might best describe as a just war—righteous action—against all things that stand to decay the faith (i.e., anything inapposite to walking with Christ), including forces that assault and oppose the

⁶Bonhoeffer, note 1, 16.

⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayers From Prison: Prayers and Poems*, Johann Christoph Hampe, interpreter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 27-28 and 70-73.

⁸Bonhoeffer, note 1, 15-16.

existential state of any human being as a creature of God demanding dignity and respect. Thus, there exists a tension in ethics when one is required to assault certain principles through righteous action to accomplish a legitimate end (i.e., breaking peace to keep peace). In Bonhoeffer's case, Nazi ideology and oppression represented an object against which to carry out a just war. Bonhoeffer's righteous action in an attempt to break Nazi tyranny produced a great internal tension for him. In this discussion and analysis, racism and poverty occupy the same shoes as the enemy Bonhoeffer faced.

From this thought process, what might the Church of today learn concerning social justice and freedom in relation to righteous action against racism and poverty? First, social justice and freedom come at a great price. The Church must commit at a greater involvement of righteous action beyond mere discussion and apathy to address the concerns of the poor and those who experience racial ostracism. Second, such righteous action should follow the model of Jesus Christ. For Bonhoeffer this involved committing to righteous action to rid Germany of the Nazi regime which burdened social freedom and justice by denying the voice of the Confessing Church and committing mortal crimes against humanity. Yet, to Bonhoeffer, righteous action was not brute force. Rather, such action involved being like Jesus Christ. That is, to commit to pouring out self—a *kenosis*—and following the will of God to answer any call that alleviates a corrupting enemy concerning the Christian faith. Therefore, although social freedom and justice may come at a great price, the culminating righteous action must involve structure. For Bonhoeffer, then, such structure included the four principles found in "Stations on the Road to Freedom."⁹ Each principle demonstrates a Christocentric response regarding righteous action. To Bonhoeffer securing social freedom and justice begin with recognizing an obligation. To this end, "Stations on the Road to Freedom" represents an appropriate model toward discussing *personal responsibility* and/or sacrifice.

"Stations on the Road to Freedom" offers a pragmatic calling of how the Church might respond to existential complexities regarding racism and poverty. Consequently, based on applying Bonhoeffer's theology, one might state that righteous action beyond concepts in modern and post-modern thought processes regarding religion involve notions of more than examining personal faith confessions and contemporary status models.¹⁰ That is to say, for Bonhoeffer, Christianity exists as more than a fad or something noble. Seemingly, this is the current state of the Christian tradition in the West, and represents a similar stronghold in European religious concepts involving reason and/or humanism.¹¹ Yet, Bonhoeffer ventured that Christianity is more. Christianity in the sense of social freedom and justice involves taking righteous action to address existential concerns and responding to contemporary

⁹See Bonhoeffer, note 7.

¹⁰Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 16-17, discussing modern era of religion as characterized by "secularization, rationalization, bureaucratization, and materialism" concerning Western culture and Europe.

¹¹Ibid.

injustice(s). From this backdrop, how might the Church apply such notions toward a righteous action in relation to a contemporary response against racism and poverty?

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

As a matter of application, the principles of Stations reveal distinct insights concerning righteous action in relation to social freedom and justice.

Discipline -- For Bonhoeffer, discipline moves one beyond misguided concepts of personal desire toward righteous action.¹² Johann Christoph Hampe notes Bonhoeffer refers to discipline as “attitude, structure and servitude—almost a monastic life.”¹³ Thus, discipline is commitment to address any situation as God would address it versus how individual desires would address the situation. In righteous action, the Christian faith commits one to doing what is right—expedient—beyond notions of personal comfort and social affiliation (e.g., social affiliation such as conforming to perverted calls and mandates of nationalism and/or patriotism during Bonhoeffer’s Nazi Germany experiences).

Action -- Hampe notes that in action, Bonhoeffer relies upon God to judge the means of one’s commitment to securing freedom, which is, “relationship between action and thought.”¹⁴ Thus, righteous action is following through to address injustice (e.g., Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment and championing to rid Germany of the Nazi party).

Suffering -- Through suffering, the toil of the commitment bears fruition. Bonhoeffer notes that we place our entire trust in the power of God—“[s]tronger hands” than ours.¹⁵ To bolster this point, Lampe notes that for Bonhoeffer, suffering refers to the notion that freedom is not a possession, but “only for a moment can the sufferer touch it blissfully . . . then [he or she] must give it back to God from who it came.”¹⁶ This means that what we might consider as personal comfort in relation to social freedom and justice, may really present a hindrance thereby emasculating opportunities to further righteous action because of fear of persecution or tribulation. Yet, if we really desire to effect social freedom and justice, we must be prepared to suffer for such freedom and put away our desires for personal comfort.

Death -- Finally, we reach death (no pun intended). Bonhoeffer’s concept of death is that of an absolute giving over to faith concerning righteous action through open eyes in

¹²Bonhoeffer, note 7. For example, as God acted by committing Christ to humanity, humanity too must take on the example of Christ in relation to being the Christian faith (i.e., by state of mind and action).

¹³Ibid., 71.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 27.

¹⁶Bonhoeffer, note 7, 27 and 72.

relation to social freedom and justice. That is, death is the culmination of a spiritual commitment to discipline and suffering. At death, at times literally, one exhausts all notions of self-centered-thought and/or considerations and gives oneself over to righteous action by addressing all matters through Christ. Thus, here, the model of Christ's death takes on greater focus and meaning. Lampe notes that at death, Bonhoeffer presents the thought that "[f]reedom is granted to the one who wanted to bring freedom."¹⁷ Life, then, exist solely for the purpose of acting or living focused on Christ as model. Consequently, it is not a stretch to consider that such act or devotion, even when resulting in death, brings on a newer and greater life.

ETHICS IN ACTION

Bonhoeffer's notion of ethics regarding Christian faith and responsibility incorporates the aforementioned four principles. Concerning an ethics analysis, the key is to move beyond the inadequacies of secularism and boilerplate religion where the two rely upon each other toward promoting endless discussion and inaction concerning resisting racism and poverty. Such an inadequate course follows a pattern of what Bonhoeffer notes as the failure of "insufficient tools of reasoning, principle, conscience, duty, absolute freedom and private duty"—the counter of discipleship and/or ethical participation toward securing social freedom and justice.¹⁸ Hence, to encourage social freedom, we must ethically embrace a change in thinking and response to social ills such as racism and poverty.

One example of Bonhoeffer's examination of action and ethics comes from his 1943 prison work, "A Wedding Sermon From a Prison Cell."¹⁹ To Bonhoeffer, ethical commitment beyond thought and discussion involved "[humans taking] full responsibility upon [their] shoulders for what [they do] . . . [and in equal confidence relying upon the hands of God]."²⁰ In other words, Bonhoeffer notes to the young bride and groom in "Wedding Sermon" that their *confession* [discussion] of love is a good commitment, but there must be more than verbalized commitment. There must be action. The bride and groom must undergo a dying to self and resist their natural tendencies to gravitate toward their individual pleasures. The expectation is that the conduct or action of the couple will produce a marriage that exists in relation to the method, will and manner that God conditions for marriage. The sentiment undoubtedly calls for a moral and ethical obligation in relationship to one another, centered on God's will. In this context, the "Wedding Sermon" offers a stark reminder that human action guided by the hand of God offers the greatest path toward ethical and responsive change.

The mystery arises in how to take on the method or guidance from God in an understandable sense. Bonhoeffer likens such as "the language of God, which is universally

¹⁷Ibid., 73.

¹⁸Bonhoeffer, note 2, 12.

¹⁹Bonhoeffer, note 6, 34-39.

²⁰Ibid., 34-35.

intelligible and the only means of mutual understanding among [humanity].”²¹ This notion enlists a sense that there is a basic ability to move toward the tasks of social freedom and justice only through submitting to a God-given commitment. Yet, for Bonhoeffer such commitment is only possible through the Church where “miracles happen.”²² Concerning racism and poverty, then, such miracles only occur where the Church breaks ethically from mere discussion concerning these social ills and turns toward an ethical and moral movement. That ethical and moral movement is righteous action modeled after the example of Christ. Such a model presents a marginalized Galilean who demonstrated civil courage to tackle and overcome evil at its origin.

CIVIL COURAGE

How does the Church stand up against racism and poverty? Bonhoeffer would suggest through discipleship, which again is more than discussion and contemplation. In the face of a social evil such as Nazi oppression, discipleship involves civil courage. In “After Ten Years” Bonhoeffer outlines the task of securing social freedom and justice.²³ Bonhoeffer notes that civil courage begins by one “standing ground.”²⁴ That is to say, there can only be civil courage toward accomplishing social freedom and justice where “. . . [the] ultimate criterion is not in . . . reason, . . . principles, . . . conscience, . . . freedom [per se] or . . . [even] virtue, but [where one] . . . is ready to sacrifice all these things when . . . called to obedien[ce] and responsible [(righteous)] action in faith and [in] exclusive allegiance to God.”²⁵ For Bonhoeffer, then, civil courage begins by “. . . seek[ing] to make [one’s] whole life a response to the question and call of God.”²⁶ Again, here are demonstrations of the notion of righteous action centered on God as a Christocentric concern. This leads to the most efficient ethical response. By example, Christ stood ground against the evil of the oppressions encountered during his earthly ministry. Thus, the beginning task of civil courage involves taking a stand. For Bonhoeffer taking a stand exists as “[forsaking self desires and] . . . [serving] . . . community.”²⁷ Yet, there is more to civil courage than taking a stand—one must understand the nature of the opposition against which he or she takes a stand. Stated otherwise, one must understand the world in which he or she seeks to bring about or encourage social freedom and justice.

²¹See Bonhoeffer, note 7, 41-42, providing discussion in work “Gift of Tongues.”

²²Ibid.

²³This 1942 pre-prison letter exists as a precursor or map to the four principles discussed in “Stations on the Road to Freedom.” Where “Stations,” exists as the model for righteous action, “After Ten Years” stands as the call for such action.

²⁴Bonhoeffer, note 1, 15-16; Bonhoeffer, note 2, 13-16.

²⁵Bonhoeffer, note 2, 13-16.

²⁶Bonhoeffer, note 2, 13-16.

²⁷Ibid., 16.

In some situations, for civil courage to exist, Bonhoeffer notes, “. . . free and responsible action might have to take precedence over duty and calling.” That is to say, civil courage is more than a sense of taking action or making a stand because of a *moral duty*. It exists as more than discussion. The task of civil courage “grow[s] out of the free responsibility of free [persons];” such freedom—social freedom— “. . . depends upon a God who demands bold action [(/righteous action)] as the free response of faith”²⁸ Concerning Christ, this involved a God who required standing up for the oppressed. Therefore, concerning racism and poverty the Church can only move beyond mere discussion in an ethically and responsible manner by understanding the systemic oppressions and cultural ills that racism and poverty produce. To do so, the Church must depend upon God in taking righteous action as the free response of faith to break the destructive counter-Christian results of racism and poverty.

INJUSTICE

Racism and poverty, as situations that the Church must understand, are unjust. The two exist as co-killers to that which God created. Such killing occurs not only to those suffering from racism and poverty, but also affects those that inflict or idly stand by in the face of racism and poverty—oppressors and the morally inept.²⁹ That is to say, racism and poverty involve those who perpetuate the two by act or inaction. In understanding racism and poverty, one must realize that the two often go hand-in-hand. What then are the injustices of racism and poverty?

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹For a discussion of the affects of racism and poverty when inflicted as a matter of act, consider Andrew Sung Park’s discussion of the Asian concept of *han*, which focuses on the spiritual, moral and psyche results of victims who encounters oppressive acts (Park does examines perpetrators, but his focus is heavily on the affects of misdeeds (sin) against victims). See Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1993), 72-74. Park’s discussion in the context of racism is particularly useful in conjunction with Bonhoeffer’s notion of attempting to understand the world in which the Church exists as standing against particular evils such as racism and poverty. Park characterizes *han* as a matter of individual and group concerns regarding experiences of positive or negative reaction. Ibid., 31-44. By definition, then, one understanding of *han* is that of “frustrated hope,” which affects the inner being of victims either negatively or positively. Ibid., 15-31. The frustrated hope is anything that curtails the existence of dreams regarding the individual or a group—existential hopelessness. The consequences affect parties on both sides of the coin (perpetrators and victims). Such frustrated hope is similar to the situation where Bonhoeffer advocates service to community where one would carry out righteous action to cast away “insufficient tools of reasoning, principle, conscience, duty, absolute freedom and private duty” and commit to bringing about social freedom and justice. This is quite opposite concerning inept discussions about racism and poverty that commonly plague secular and religious institutions.

RACISM AND POVERTY HAND-IN-HAND

Racism and poverty are often hand-in-hand because of the surrounding and utter contempt that one human demonstrates for the existence of another based on his or her biological skin difference.³⁰ More often than not, such contempt leads to a total disregard of even the most basic needs of persons ostracized because of race.³¹ Therefore, a withholding of or unequal and/or limited access to economic opportunities leads to poverty because of artificial economic constraints that stymie unrealized potential of those who are disadvantaged and marginalized because of race.

In the West, there are current discussions about economic equality, healthcare inadequacies, immigration reform, and educational disparity—all these topics address the poor. Notably, the majority of impoverished individuals are people of color. A correlation appears between formidable social and economic obstacles against people of color. This is so even regarding the acquisition of the most basic economic opportunities, much less aspiring to levels of luxury offered at higher socio-economic statuses. Still, what should be the goal for the Church in the discussion of the world of racism and poverty? What type of world does the Church face regarding the two? In answering such questions, perhaps the Church may move beyond simple discussion points concerning racism and poverty, understand the tasks before it in tackling the two and hopefully toward actionable redress.

³⁰ See, e.g., Garriguet, note 5, 88-90 and 104.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 88-90 and 104.

Racism

Roger D. Hatch defines racism as having six components. One component is separation of the races geographically, socially, and institutionally.³² The second component is subordination of people of color concerning their access to (a) basic life needs, (b) high-quality public institutions, and (c) structures for political freedom and power.³³ The third component is the denial of an ordinary status—“ordinary” being defined as how the majority defines itself in society.³⁴ That is to say, Hatch appears to be suggesting that those who are dominant in society in terms of majority numbers define what it means to exist as personhood or to be a part of one race versus another. Fourth, racism means the fear and avoidance of each other; people of color avoid those of the majority race, and vice versa.³⁵ Fifth, racism means an expectation of violence and a legitimization of violence based on race relations.³⁶ Finally, racism is the rationalization of the five aforementioned components.³⁷ For sure, many other analyses characterize racism. Hatch’s components, however, serve our current discussion well. This is so because from an analogous sense, Hatch’s six components squarely fit with Bonhoeffer’s experiences in Nazi Germany. Racism is distinctly similar to the prejudices that the Nazis demonstrated against the Jews because of their heritage, as well as the discriminations that the Confessing Church experienced because of its particular religious message.

Poverty

There are two basic perceptions regarding poverty. Either one’s view regarding poverty largely stems from a positional perspective (e.g., from one’s class in life) or from a cultural perspective (e.g., a learned view of how one considers a race of people). There are several notions concerning the causes of poverty.

³² See Roger D. Hatch and Warren R. Copeland, eds., *Issues of Justice: Social Sources and Religious Meanings* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), 154-56. “Institution,” likely refers to education for Hatch, but education and employment opportunities offer a wider understanding.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 154-56.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Poverty as a Personal Choice -- When dealing with poverty, some view it as a “personal problem” or an “individual matter.”³⁸ This view represents the notion that poverty derives from taste or choice. As a matter of taste, some view poverty as freedom of choice—the poor choose to be poor because they desire lower-paying jobs for shorter work hours or less responsibility.³⁹

Poverty as a Social Ill -- Some commentators view poverty as a social ill not in the wider societal sense, but as the result of dysfunctional families and inadequate work skills.⁴⁰ This view suggests that family shortcomings and marginal work skills perpetuate poverty.⁴¹

Poverty as the Perpetuation of the Status Quo -- Some commentators assert that poverty results from the privileged few who act as a collective social class to “protect and . . . improve their position [in the face of those who are impoverished].”⁴² The point is that affluence in jobs, political power, technological prowess and/or advanced knowledge of development adduces to those who control such resources.⁴³ Consequently, those who are poor or on the periphery of societal inclusion, which often involves racial minorities, remain left out of opportunities to gain upward status because of class protecting motives.

Poverty as a Human Problem -- Some assert that poverty is a spiritual problem involving ethical considerations regarding darkness and light, good and evil. From this perspective, “poverty robs people of [their] value.”⁴⁴ Certainly, not value as a spiritual or godly concern, but rather as a matter of what motivates society—material wealth.

VARIOUS METHODS OF ADDRESSING RACISM AND POVERTY BY CHURCH AND SOCIETY

It is helpful to examine how society and the Church in tandem have addressed the notion of social freedom and justice regarding standing against racism and poverty.

Historical Survey – Historically, society as a whole and the Church in particular have promoted inadequate measures in addressing racism and poverty. The two have either remained silent or urged patience and/or restraint in taking action against the inequalities

³⁸ Ibid., 225-30.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 230-31.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

that result from racism and poverty.⁴⁵ This is tantamount to what Bonhoeffer describes as “[social] freedom . . . [becoming an] undoing.”⁴⁶ Historically, the Church and secular organizations sought to “choos[e] the lesser of two evils” and has now fallen into a worse condition regarding racism and poverty.⁴⁷ This naturally followed from a “fail[ure] to see that the greater evil [that the church and secular concern sought] . . . to avoid,” mainly civil disruption and change in life-style choices, has proved to be what was initially thought of as the “lesser evil”—maintaining silence in the face of racial and economic inequality.⁴⁸

The Contemporary Situation -- As a contemporary concern, the Church and societal organizations present continued inaction regarding racism and poverty versus Bonhoeffer’s notions of civil courage concerning achieving social freedom and justice. In the West, there is now a materialistic preaching occurring that promotes individual prosperity for those who are Christian and contribute money to the Church. In this situation, the Church increasingly relegates the cause of the poor to secular institutions for assistance versus dirtying the prosperity of those blessed to sit in mega structures.⁴⁹ Concerning racism, there has never been a concentrated effort by the Church to address the problem. Notable, is the lack of tangible action regarding racism and poverty within the Church, seminary halls, and philanthropic programs.⁵⁰

Talk (Jargon), “Programs,” and Ineffectiveness -- Part of the title of this paper is “jargon.” Two appropriate definitions of the word are: (a) “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group” and (b) “obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words.”⁵¹ The Church and secular organizations often demonstrate ineffective remedial measures for addressing racism and

⁴⁵See, e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From Birmingham City Jail,” available at http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/popular_requests/, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, Stanford University, accessed July 21, 2008. Note the open statement from white clergy cautioning the mode of wait regarding the injustice of racism, which solicited a letter in response from the late Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁴⁶Bonhoeffer, note 1, 15.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Notable is a personal experience where I spent several hours driving from church to church to donate clothes to the poor one Sunday morning before formal services in my community—a rural suburb of Houston, Texas. I was turned away at each stop only to find my final drop and ill-standing clothes drop bin. Personally, I am guilty of not going out to the poor and befriending them to provide the clothes personally.

⁵⁰See King, note 45, passim.

⁵¹See *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jargon> accessed July 21, 2008.

poverty through particular programs and unclear goals that lead to the problems remaining.⁵² Simply stated, more jargon than action.

For instance, during the U.S. Civil Rights movement, several clergy admonished Martin Luther King, Jr. that his organized demonstrations in Alabama were not “timely and wise,” noting that the solution to racial discord exists in the courts and “open negotiations [(talk)].”⁵³ For sure, this occurred in an era where some would assert that thinking was different concerning social freedom and justice. Yet, is that truly the case? Disparity in social interaction, acceptance, and economic opportunity continue as a contemporary concern for people of color. There exists in the West a continued call for discussion and court intervention to eliminate racial discrimination. Yet, according to biblical standards, Christians should not resort to the court as the final solution to human inequality and matters that require righteous action. The Church’s obligation, then, in such discussions and intervention continue to be jargon toward promoting patience, perseverance, and timeliness.

Concerning poverty, there is a shameful persistence in the Church toward passing off commitments to other institutions to assist those affected. That is to say, many churches in the West now turn down even the donation of clothes for the poor and refer such donations to outside organizations and/or convenient “clothes dump bins”.⁵⁴ This is indirect and inept action at its best. Yet, what must occur to eradicate such inaction?

BONHOEFFER’S ROLE, THEOLOGY, MODEL, AND ACTS

Although Bonhoeffer did not address racism and poverty directly during his life or particularly by his prison experience, Bonhoeffer now speaks, as mentioned at the outset of this essay, through and for what he might have voiced concerning racism and poverty by applying the rationale of his works to such challenges. Consequently, from this position, Bonhoeffer’s life and works demonstrate how the Church might move toward righteous action beyond discussion to combat racism and poverty.⁵⁵

Bonhoeffer’s notion of social freedom and justice in relation to civil courage involves taking righteous action in reliance upon faith in God.⁵⁶ To Bonhoeffer this was free and

⁵²See King, note 45, *passim*.

⁵³*Ibid*.

⁵⁴See King, note 44, *passim*.

⁵⁵Scholars note that Bonhoeffer during his time in North America (1930-31), enjoyed his interaction with the Harlem experiences of Afro-American church folk—a time antecedent to the Civil Rights struggle. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who is Christ for Us?*, ed. Craig Nesson, trans. Renate Wind (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), 7-9.

⁵⁶Bonhoeffer, note 1, 15-16.

individual responsibility.⁵⁷ The Church in its response to racism and poverty must undertake righteous action that not only offers discussion regarding the existential suffering of those facing racism and poverty, but also must usher in an awareness of such existential states by promoting change in thought, deed, and emotional sentiment concerning society's response at large. To be sure, such a defining requirement comes with great tension.

The Tension of Plot (Just War) -- The discussion noted earlier that Bonhoeffer demonstrated the courage to take on a just war toward eliminating what he saw as an enemy of German society, culture, national heritage and the Christian faith. Bonhoeffer's righteous action created tension and/or criticism from those who questioned whether Bonhoeffer's participation in the assassination attempt against Hitler was Christ-like. Yet, for Bonhoeffer, as well as it should be for anyone who seeks to confront a grave evil that impersonates social freedom and justice, his actions were soundly "bold . . . as the free response of faith, [particularly acknowledged by a God who would] . . . forgive and console [one] who becomes a sinner in the process [of confronting a social evil.]"⁵⁸ To Bonhoeffer, such tension was amounted to a just war. As an ethical concern, tension in a time of confronting a grave injustice represents what Bonhoeffer scholars attribute as insight into Bonhoeffer's participation in the Hitler assassination attempt, namely, ". . . twin concerns for Christian ethics in a time of peace and reconstruction and the ethics of tyrannicide and *coup d' état*."⁵⁹

This notion appears to suggest that certain righteous action warrants seemingly even extreme measures against moral evil.⁶⁰ From such righteous action, the goal is always to build and secure legitimate social freedom and justice—beyond that of "shut . . . eyes to . . . injustice . . . at the cost of self-deception," which perpetuates inaction.⁶¹ From this perspective, the Church must learn to embrace the same tension that Bonhoeffer faced. The Church must do so by steering away from minor discussion and charge toward a path that reaps recognizable righteous action through responsible freedom that changes the minds of individual sentiments and institutions that allow and/or promote racism and poverty. Such action is not revolutionary or radical. Rather, such action follows the righteous model of Christ. Certainly, this is what Bonhoeffer attempted to do by his model of civil courage against Nazi oppression; to him, destruction of such tyranny served as a just *coup d' état*. Today, racism and poverty are tyrants who have used the slumber of discussion by and between the Church and state for far too long to perpetuate their unwanted presence in the lives of those affected by their cruel consequences.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Bonhoeffer, note 1, 15-16.

⁵⁹See note 49 and accompanying text.

⁶⁰See King, note 45, 10-11, noting the extremeness of Christ regarding love in relation to civil disobedience.

⁶¹Bonhoeffer, note 1, 15.

Proper perspective – Act versus Talk and/or Ineptness -- Lest this essay be seen as a socialist or communist propaganda amongst those in the West and/or a call for revolution amongst those in the East, I plainly assert that there are many nonviolent measures by which Bonhoeffer's notion of a *coup d' état* against racism and poverty may occur. Bonhoeffer was not a brute bent on using force to demonstrate civil courage. His was a faith coupled with confession and righteous action toward leaning on the central power of Christ to usher in change. From a Christian perspective, then, civil disobedience to affect a wresting away of power from racism and poverty is warranted righteous action. Such righteous action in today's time must involve civil courage that presents a non-violent and/or legitimate protest to awaken the minds and hearts of those that by discussion and/or inaction perpetuate the evils of racism and poverty.

Bonhoeffer seems a pre-cursor to the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Likely, Bonhoeffer would have approved of the means that King established to affect a change during the U.S. Civil Rights movement, as well as addressing poverty worldwide from a human rights concern.⁶² In this sense, the righteous action that the Church and her precious content of men and women who belong to Christ may achieve regarding the injustices of racism and poverty is to not only speak, but also perform with all gravity legitimate protests. Such non-violent and appropriate/righteous action is the most efficient manner possible to begin a quest of moving the Church against racism and poverty. This is civil courage. Bonhoeffer demonstrated such civil courage with his life, works and sacrifice. Yet, he did so in obedience and in model to the life and gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁶²Bonhoeffer, note 55.