

Ethics in the Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to outline Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethical thought and examine how his work has been received by theologians over the years. These are preceded by a short biographical note, which serves as contextual background for the discussion. The justification for this study is provided by the renewed interest in Bonhoeffer's writings in recent decades.

KEYWORDS: Bonhoeffer, Ethics, Life Together, Creation and Fall, Reception of Bonhoeffer

Introduction

In the early 1930s Germany, amid mounting aggressive nationalism (Moses 1999, 3-21), Dietrich Bonhoeffer arose as a prominent opposing voice to the Fuhrer and his Nazi party (Rankin 2006, 111-22), criticizing the theologians that were supportive of Hitler's regime and preaching reform for the Christian community (Moses 2006, 354-70). His resistance to the ideology of the times and its accompanying rhetoric afforded him imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, where he was tragically executed just a few days before the war ended (see Plant 2004, 11-37).

Bonhoeffer aimed to motivate Christians to live a Christian life and behavior through his writings. The main questions for Bonhoeffer were how can one live a Christian life in the actual world and where is the final authority for such a life found? Particularly to his context, he pondered

what one ought to be doing in resisting Nazism. He was convinced that the Christian thing to do was not to bow to the idols of National Socialism but to fulfill the “unconditional obligation” of siding with the victims, regardless of their religious stance (Marsh 1997, 38).

Since his death in 1945, Bonhoeffer’s writings have stirred a lot of interest among Christian thinkers. A particular place within this research history is given to his ethics, particularly as it emerged within the troubled context of a church that was supportive of war and violence. The following presents an overview of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought within its context, followed by a concise summary of writings and authors that have undertaken the task of reflecting on Bonhoeffer’s contribution to Christian ethics.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – The Man and His Context

It is undeniable that, although his life was cut short, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands out as one of the most seminal theologians of the twentieth century (Chiba 1995, 188). Information about his life is readily available in several works, which have been consulted in the conception of the short biographical summary given below (e.g. Rumscheidt 1999, 50-70). He was born in a family where ethical standards were strongly upheld and where he learned from an early age that *noblesse oblige*, that is, that his privileged birth came with important responsibilities of care for those who possessed less of a social advantage than he did (Nelson 1999, 22-49). The Bonhoeffer family was Lutheran, though not a profoundly religious one, so young Dietrich’s interest in theology from an early age must have caused something of a stir, especially in the light of the fact that his older brothers Karl and Klaus embraced socialistic ideas and were arguing against the church (Bosanquet 1968, 41, 45).

At the age of seventeen, Bonhoeffer began his study of theology at the University of Tübingen, where he met Adolf Schlatter, who taught him to appreciate the Jewish background of the New Testament, teaching on which later he built his defense against anti-Jewish pressures in German scholarship. He continued his theological studies as a graduate student at the University of Berlin. There he encountered Karl Barth’s “theology of revelation” and familiarized himself with the writings of the Swiss professor. Most importantly for his later theological development, in Barth’s work,

Bonhoeffer discovered a theological freedom and courage that suited well his own penchant for independence and intellectual freedom (Marsh 1997, 37).

In 1933 Bonhoeffer was offered a parish post in Berlin, but his inclination toward Christian internationalism, or “ecumenism” led him to choose a posting in London, where he ministered to a German-speaking community (Bosanquet 1968, 60). From that position, Bonhoeffer began to openly oppose anti-Semitism and the rising Nazi party, teaching his parishioners and his students in the various Universities where he lectured the ways of a new Confessing Church. His international trek came to an end in 1939 when, after a short stay in New York, he decided to return to Germany.

As a noted opponent of German National Socialism, and later as a member of the resistance against Nazism, Bonhoeffer was recognized as a leader of the opposition (Bethge 1977). This afforded him quite a large recognition among the denominational factions and groups that claimed him as their spokesman. Yet, his remarkable influence is due mainly to the books he produced during his short and difficult writing career. Although only 39 when executed, Bonhoeffer left a rich written legacy in the form of several books, *Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, as well as letters, papers, and notes published by his close friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge in the collections *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Ethics*, and six other volumes. In all these writings, Bonhoeffer shows his interest in personal faith development and ethics. He started working on his ethics at the end of the 1930s, but most of the manuscripts were written between 1940 and 1943 in Berlin (Bethge 1955, ix). However, due to his arrest in 1943, he did not succeed to finish his most ambitious work – his manuscript on ethics was only published posthumously.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ethics

As early as his years as a student, Bonhoeffer was encouraged by Reinhold Seeberg to concentrate on ethics, a theme that increasingly became the focus for his theological thinking. He often preached ethics as a pastor (Bosanquet 1968, 68) and as he witnessed the events of the 1930s, his passion for ethics intensified. It was during the final decade of his life that he formulated his thoughts on Christian ethics, arguing that a person does not always have

the good fortune, and freedom, to choose between a right course and a wrong one. Rather, in every decision there is an element of evil (Bonhoeffer 1959, 88). In 1938, at Zingst, he had reminded the Finkenwalde brothers, hard-pressed as they were by the temptations arising through the church struggle, that: "the Christian cannot see his life as a series of principles, but only in its relation to the living God" (Bonhoeffer 1959, 88). The truth of these insights became evident when the horrifying demands of life within Hitler's Germany arose.

Another motivation for Bonhoeffer to reflect on ethics was the lack of interest his generation had shown in any kind of theoretical or systematic ethics, and that, at a time when it should have been the most discussed theological issue (Bonhoeffer, 1955, 3). Since Christian ethics deals with Christian existence, Bonhoeffer argues that one ought to move from the general questions of "How can I be good?" and "How can I do good?" to the more specific, and utterly more relevant, "What is the will of God?" In Bonhoeffer's estimation, the dependence on organized religion has undermined genuine faith. Therefore, he would call for a religionless Christianity, free from individualism and metaphysical supernaturalism. God, argued Bonhoeffer, can be known in this world as he operates and interacts with humans in their daily lives. The abstract God of philosophical and theological speculation is useless to the average man on the street, but they represent the majority who need to hear the gospel. Bonhoeffer also believed that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we need only to ask repeatedly and humbly, to receive the answer to our ethical dilemmas (Bosanquet 1968, 109).

For Christians, therefore, ethics should never become the dry enunciation of a system of ethical principles by which they could be equipped to make correct, moral choices. As Bonhoeffer explains: "The point of departure for Christian ethics is not the reality of one's own self or the reality of the world; nor is it the reality of standards and values. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer 1955, 18; cf. Kohler 1970, 27-40). Of course, when speaking about principles, the German word *prinzipien* used by Bonhoeffer has a more negative connotation than its English equivalent. As Bosanquet (1968, 231-232) explains,

'Das Prinzip' meant for Bonhoeffer a precise and bloodless formula, and to be fettered by it is to try to apply it indiscriminately to the unpredictable chances of human life. *Prinzipien* are contrasted with God's commandments, which demand our obedience and which, alive and actual, bring us into his presence not only guiding our actions. They at the same time, also bring us face to face with the unattainability of a flawless righteousness, and so with the need for forgiveness which to sensitive Germans at that time was such an intensely immediate fact.

With the rejection of ethical principles as the measure for good and evil, Bonhoeffer also rejects both, an ethic based upon "conviction" or "success" and an ethic founded upon "duty" or the "creation order." The standard for good, Bonhoeffer argues, is the will of God revealed in the Scriptures and the person of Christ (Green 2012, 11-36; Plant 2004, 92-110; Marsh 1994, 55-80; Kohler 1970). Formalism and casuistry set out from the conflict between the good and the evil, but Christian ethics must be beyond formalism and casuistry because it is already accomplished, by and in Christ (Bonhoeffer 1955, 23; cf. Green 2012), who "became a real man and he wants man to be a real man." Therefore, "man does not take on an independent form of his own, but what gives him form and what maintains him in the new form is always solely the form of Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer 1955, 20). And since God became human in Jesus Christ and since humankind was accepted by God in the incarnation, people are related to each other because they are related to God, and there is no relation between people if there is no relation to God (Feil 1985, 85).

Based on the aforementioned points, it can be concluded that, according to Bonhoeffer, ethics rests on God's command and human responsibility. The command given is first the command and will of God. Yet it is more than that, for God was revealed in Christ, who came into His created world not as "an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or law, but ... a man" (Bonhoeffer 1955, 35). Thus, Bonhoeffer argues that in Christ, God himself overcame the secular-sacred dichotomy and consequently brought all reality under His authority. It is therefore a relational perspective on ethics.

Ethics as formation, then, means the bold endeavor to speak about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world. Ethics as formation is possible only when founded on Jesus Christ, the ultimate

form, who is present in His Church. The church is the place where Jesus Christ's form is proclaimed and accomplished. It is this proclamation, and this event, that Christian ethics is designed to serve (Bonhoeffer 1955, 25). Thus, Bonhoeffer seeks to ascertain how Christ and the church are related to the world. Christ, who is Lord and Redeemer of the world, is also the center, reason and aim of all human reality, and consequently claims all fields of human existence. Emphasizing this central point of his ethics, Bonhoeffer states:

There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifest in Christ in the reality of the world. Sharing in Christ, we stand at once in both the reality of God and the reality of the world within itself. The world has no reality of its own, independently of the revelation of God in Christ. One is denying the revelation of God in Jesus Christ if one tries to be a "Christian" without seeing and recognising the world in Christ (Bonhoeffer 1955, 63-64).

Thus, in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argues that Christians should be actively involved in the world because it is "penultimate" to the kingdom of God that cannot be ignored. This was a central question in his thinking as he pondered what role the church should have taken in Nazi Germany: one of active resistance, which could have been perceived as muddying the church with politics, or one of concentration on the spiritual, which could have been seen as an uncaring obsession with purity. This leads to another important aspect of Bonhoeffer's ethics – his discussion of distressing ethics.

Bonhoeffer identifies two ethical fallacies: ethical fanaticism, whereby one believes that "he can oppose the power of evil with the purity of his will and of his principle" (Bonhoeffer 1955, 4), and the situation whereby one fights his ethical battles from the perspective of one's absolute freedom of choice. When one values the necessary deed more highly than the spotlessness of his own conscience and reputation, then his supposed freedom may ultimately prove his undoing. This kind of man, says Bonhoeffer, "will easily consent to the bad, knowing full well that it is bad, in order to ward off what is worse. And, in doing this he will no longer be able to see that precisely the worse which he is trying to avoid may still be the better" (Bonhoeffer 1955, 6).

Bonhoeffer's theological thinking has attracted considerable interest over the years, not least because of his heroism (LeRoy 1982, 113). Moreover, although not all would subscribe to Bonhoeffer's own strain of existentialism,

his warm-hearted piety has won many on his side. His high-sounding devotion to Christ and the call to suffer for His sake are uniquely inspiring (cf. Bonhoeffer 1963).

Conclusion

In conclusion, according to Bonhoeffer, a life in Christ encompasses daily repentance and self-denial. Bonhoeffer longed and prayed for corporate repentance of his nation and the church. He believed that Christians are called to live responsibly in the world by fulfilling certain God-given inter-related mandates such as work, marriage, government, and church. Guided by these “mandates,” Christians must make ethical decisions as pertaining to being a member of a family, a citizen, a worker, and a member of the church (Rotaru 2019, 201-202). The strength of Bonhoeffer’s ethics does not lie in its systematic resolution of the challenges confronting the church but rather in acknowledging that life is complex and that all ethical systems, short of humble submission to the Word of God, are doomed to fall. As unsettling as this conclusion may be, it is a refreshing call to the contemporary church (Rotaru 2012, 5) to repent and return to a life characterized by prayer and meditation on the Word. At a time when much of the world was either enticed with, or entrapped, by fascism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer dared to live the morally responsible Christian life to its most expressive and tragic end (Lehmann 1976, 120). His legacy has inspired and will continue to inspire many, and his model of theology, done from below, from a position of weakness, according to Christ’s model, ought to be taken into consideration more often, especially in a world where Christian hegemonies continue to provide models of power that are foreign to the gospel of the Crucified One (Măcelaru 2018, 76).

Bonhoeffer’s charge to the Christian is nothing less than a reminder of the radical nature of Christ’s Gospel (Gustafson 1983, 18). In the context of contemporary church-making and the efforts to “sell” faith, the warning Bonhoeffer (1963) gives about the high cost of discipleship is needed. Christ sacrificed His blood to redeem the souls of men and women; therefore, those who follow Him must pay the cost of discipleship with nothing less than their whole lives. The message of Bonhoeffer’s ethics is that the church of the future should be a confessing church characterized by prayer and living under the Word.

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