

An Attempt on Comprehending Bonhoeffer's Actions and the Christian Centered Meaning Behind Them

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In his relatively short life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer brought up many questions and made a significant effect on the theological community. It is often thought that he made such spiritual progresses and many discoveries because of the life that he led and the personal choices that he had to make. For most people, it is quite difficult and probably impossible to fully understand his views and the damning ramifications voicing them had on his family, his friends, and his own life. An analysis of Bonhoeffer's bold claims about Christ as a community, *Stellvertretung*, Grace, and Religionless Christianity will help us try to further understand his theories and why he made the statements criticizing the third Reich and the German church that condemned him to the life of a traitor of the state.

Bonhoeffer readily states that an essential piece of being Christian is the social aspect of it; the idea of Christ as a community. You can read the Bible and live by its rules, but when interacting with a community in Christ, you truly allow Christ to be alive in a fuller way. Living a solitary life doesn't cut it; it is necessary to be in the community to find Christ. Bonhoeffer stresses that we are all members of the body of Christ. This should help us to better interpret the 'love thy neighbor' phrase, as when we cast off our neighbor, we are in turn casting off Christ. Expressed in Lori Brandt Hale's *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, Bonhoeffer states, "I and You are not interchangeable concepts, but comprise specific and distinct spheres of experience." (Hale 52). He connects our responsibility to other humans as the necessary means to become more human. The key point to be made is that the community of Christ includes the believer and the non-believer, and as this was part of Bonhoeffer's belief, one can more readily understand not his desire but his innermost voice that drove him to stand against the fastest growing political and military machine in Europe.

Bonhoeffer, through his use of the word *Stellvertretung*, revealed his rationale for openly disagreeing with the prejudice policies instated and the inhumane actions in Germany during World War II by the Nazi Regime. These actions included the unjustified closing of Jewish businesses and the imprisonment and murder of Jewish families. The direct translation of this word is 'Vicarious Representative Action'. In simpler words, Bonhoeffer wished to express the need for advocacy for those who could not advocate for themselves. This came in the long wake of the ever present question, "What is the Will of God?" Bonhoeffer believed that in this world there is no feasible way to have and follow the supposed universal set of ethics and principles, so we must therefore look to another pillar of moral conduct: Christ. This is not to say that somewhere there is a list of Christ do's and don'ts; this simply brings to light that as long as we use our judgment to be of service to others, we are acting in Christ's way. Bonhoeffer specifies, "To be conformed to the one who has become human-that is what being human really means...to be conformed to the crucified-that means to be a human being judged by God . . . to be conformed to the risen one-that means to be a new human being before God . . ." (Hale 73)

Bonhoeffer went against the law of the state and attempted to go against the Ten Commandments. In short, helping others and taking responsibility also means to take on the sin

that potentially comes with the task. Through this concept is the idea that in some cases lying is more ethical than telling the truth. Lying is less significant in comparison to saving a life. Bonhoeffer took on this sin in conspiring to assassinate Hitler and breaking the law by assisting Jews to escape. In faith, he died believing he would be forgiven for the sin he took on in his conforming to Christ and helping others.

Another crucial concept that helps clarify Bonhoeffer's stance during the War is the idea of grace. He first identifies grace as the unconditional love, mercy, and forgiveness that comes as a gift from God. He adds on to this the words either cheap or costly, as in how we interpret, see, and act in response to the grace that we're given. Costly grace is characterized by the true appreciation in receiving absolution from our sins. As in *Discipleship*:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock. It is costly because it calls us to discipleship...Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's son...and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God. (Hale 61)

In order to attain this sense of costly grace, one must continually follow this call to discipleship. In reverse, cheap grace is best defined in Bonhoeffer's own words as, "grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ." (67). Cheap grace is not appreciating what you are given, and not passing on your blessings to others. Not outright going against the Bible is still quite different from living the Bible. In relation to the Bible and more specifically the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer's close friend Jean Lassere enumerated his take on it not as an ideal yet unattainable way of life, but as a call to action in our world today. "... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Bible). Put in this way, it was impossible for Bonhoeffer to be a follower of Christ and not try to put a stop to the killing of the Jews by Hitler and the Nazi Regime. In his search for costly grace, Bonhoeffer believed in the right and responsibility of the Church to act, aid, and stop the State when it takes too little power—or in this case, too much power. The grace that God gives us does not give us the freedom from responsibility, but gives us the freedom to be responsible.

The final theory to be explored in understanding Bonhoeffer's noncompliance with Nazi Germany's policies and actions is the idea of religionless Christianity. Bonhoeffer is in awe of the way the German Church is able to endorse and support the German State, and begins to notice the way in which religion in itself becomes a distraction to Christianity. In the view that Christianity transcends race and culture, it is then necessary, in Bonhoeffer's eyes, to be able to live a secular life. As stated in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, "To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself...on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man—not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life." (83). Therefore, the idea that the Church can justify or excuse the persecution of people of different religions, backgrounds, sexualities, or races, just does not match up with the word of God and the ideal of conforming to Christ. Instead, Bonhoeffer suggests a different way of living, "The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God" (82). In

breaking down this statement, we find the self empowerment to live our lives under the responsibility of our own actions. To be Christian is to not act with the intention that God will come to save us. To be Christian is not to do good deeds for the sake of getting into heaven. To be Christian is to be called to this new way of life, and to act with love as the core of our existence. Deitrich spoke out against the discrimination and did all he could to stop it, because he believed that to live his life wholly on Earth was to act with love and compassion.

Through scraping the surface of Bonhoeffer's many theories and concepts we have only begun to identify with the correlation of his beliefs and decisions surrounding the war and his role in aiding the persecuted. His amazing insight and strong faith allowed him the conviction to act with purpose in his efforts to conform to Christ. He left us with his word and his legacy, and it is up to us whether to see it as merely a story of human strength or take it as a call to action and continue the fight.

Works Cited

Brandt Hale, Lori. Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians. Minnesota. Westminster John Knox Press.2009.