

Reflections on Bonhoeffer

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I found Bonhoeffer's theology incredibly insightful. He is clear in his thoughts, and as the text states, his theology is very interconnected. The following are journal-type reflections on how I have seen applications and/or examples of Bonhoeffer's key points in my own life.

Reflection: Christ Existing as Community

Christ exists as community. He is not limited to working through only a specific group of people. While Christian denominations may vary far and wide on several theological points, at the center of them all we find a commitment to following Jesus Christ. We are (hopefully) able to come together and agree that it is Christ we are made to worship and give glory to, not to one another or to theological views.

I was blessed with an opportunity to see Christians from different backgrounds coming together to allow Christ to be present through them as one united community. On Good Friday of this year, an ecumenical service was held at my church. The congregation held people from the following denominations: Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Covenant, Pentecostal, Catholic, Methodist, and Assemblies of God. Pastors from four of those churches helped to lead the service. We all communed together. It was a beautiful, touching experience. People came together across lines of difference to share in Christ's love. After the service, people sat down to converse with one another and eat together. They shared in Christian fellowship.

Just because you are with a group of Christians does not mean there is community or fellowship. Christ must be present in the people, and for this to happen, people must engage with one another in conversation, activities, worship, or other things. At that ecumenical service, people made the direct decision to engage.

Bonhoeffer also discusses "intersubjectivity" in Christian community. "Bonhoeffer resists objectifying the Other...Bonhoeffer conceives the Other as a boundary to the self and underscores the ethical encounter rather than intimacy between self and Other" (Haynes and Hale 55). People are not objects to be converted or herded into categories. Even though differences exist, we are called to see Christ in one another and work through those differences.

I have been a part of a youth group of another denomination in addition to the one at my own church (ELCA). This other church holds views with which I do not agree. In encountering other people there, I am thankful that the majority of my experience has been welcoming. When we come to differences of opinion, we do not 'objectify' one another; that is, we do not make each other targets of conversion or make the goal of the conversation to win and impose thoughts. Instead, we engage in healthy dialogue, seeing Christ in one another. In this way, our relationships are "mediated by God" (56).

A final experience of Christ as community has been the realization that "...each encounter between I and Other comes with it the possibility of presenting Christ to the other or glimpsing Christ in the Other" (57). Christ dwells within people of all ages, races, and backgrounds. A

meaningful example of this for me was through a young girl named Amelia. I was helping at a place for underprivileged children as a part of a youth retreat weekend, and everyone was paired up with a kid. Amelia was five or six years old, dark-haired, and had big, curious brown eyes. She was the most optimistic child I've ever met, and she knew so much about Jesus. It was incredibly uplifting. I saw Christ in her eyes. It showed forth that "God can speak through even the smallest of voices," as a friend of mine pointed out.

Reflection: Costly Grace and Stellvertretung

[Costly grace] is costly because it calls us to discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it thereby makes them live... 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. (61)

So many people have taken up the 'God only on Sundays' lifestyle. We are not called to put God in a box—period, let alone in a building. Grace should evoke transformation in one's life; if it does not, then it is cheap grace, not costly. It is not our place to judge those people. It is not our place to judge the 'Easter and Christmas' crowd, either.

On a more personal note, I recently had a conversation with a friend about the Bible. This friend stated that, "You know your favorite stories and that's enough", and "The Bible is a last resort for me." This friend did not understand why I insisted that the Bible is necessary to the Christian faith or why scripture passages need to be read multiple times and with multiple people. I have come to understand these things because of trying to live in costly grace; the call to discipleship includes regular engagement with the Word of God in Scripture and in Jesus.

However, this call to discipleship also includes "Stellvertretung", meaning "vicarious representative action." "Stellvertretung, most simply, is Bonhoeffer's description of how we are to be in the world. As Christ lived and died vicariously, his disciples are called to vicarious action and responsible love on behalf of the other" (69). This statement ties Christ as community, costly grace, and stellvertretung together. While I am not called to judge this friend, I am called to try to understand where this friend is coming from and to live in "vicarious action and responsible" love on this friend's behalf; in other words, I am to be an example and hopefully this friend will see Christ rather than me and begin to understand scripture's importance to this costly grace.

I am also called to see Christ in her, and to learn about Him from her as well. All of the above relates to Bonhoeffer's "ethics as formation." "Who stands fast? Only the man... the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life answer to the question and call of God" (72). We are called to live for God so that others might see Him more clearly, too.

Reflection Three: Religionless Christianity

Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity is about getting back to the core of Christianity. "If religion is only a garment of Christianity... then what is religionless Christianity?' Bonhoeffer

wants to strip Christianity of all but its barest essentials in order to discover its heart, or core" (78). Religion can simply be a garment, and it should not equal Christianity. There are components of religion, and these things can either be a part of religion or of Christianity. They are a part of Christianity if they help you to see Christ more deeply; they are a part of religion's garment if you do them out of routine or for show.

I have noticed many things that could fall to either side in our Lutheran traditions. We have liturgy and the lectionary for example; these give us a familiar pattern to our services. They can be used to engage with God, or they can be misused to simply cruise along in an 'auto-pilot' mode due to their familiarity. The reciting of the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer is another example. Do we just toss out the words or do we really think about their meaning and about Christ's sacrifice? I believe they can be much like Scripture (especially since the Lord's Prayer does come from Scripture); if you take a look at them deeply again and again, you will find new insights or re-discover messages you haven't thought about for some time. You will engage with the will of God. This is a part of getting back to the core.

"For Bonhoeffer, the difference between the deus ex machina [god from the machine] and the suffering Christ marks the difference between religion and Christianity," (82) Christ suffered for us; we don't deserve that love, but we have it by God's grace. I can see that we need to start from the basis, the center of Christian faith, and then work our way outward so that we may use components like liturgy, lectionary, and reciting prayers and creeds to engage with Christ rather than with religion.

Source:

Haynes, Stephen R., and Lori Brandt Hale. Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.