

Bonhoeffer: A new Luther in the face of Nazism

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, unusually for a 20th-century theologian, came not from the parsonage but from an upper-middle-class family of doctors, lawyers and scientists. His forebears, however, include a grandfather who lost his post as Emperor's chaplain when he admonished Kaiser Wilhelm for calling the proletariat a "pack of dogs."¹ Decades later, Bonhoeffer's ninety-one-year-old grandmother similarly demonstrated the cost of conscience when she marched through the phalanx of Nazi stormtroopers blockading a Jewish-owned department store.² These early examples would find later reflection in Bonhoeffer's life and writings as the 'costly grace' which "is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."³

In this essay I will consider Bonhoeffer's response to the German Liberal theology that dominated his studies and shaped his culture, his struggle with the ethical issues of his day, and his call to for the reformation of the church, echoing Luther. I will finish by considering the usefulness of Bonhoeffer's theology in present-day life and ministry.

Background

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the youngest boy among 8 children and his idyllic childhood, laced with the best of German humanist society, gave him an education rich in music and literature. The family sporadically attended church with a "genteel...dutiful Lutheran piety," but were not conspicuously religious.⁴



Figure 1 The Bonhoeffers (Dietrich 5th from right) at the family summer home in Wölfelsgrund, Silesia. ca. 1910.

¹ Often cited from Metaxas, 2010, p. 7 but possibly anecdotal

² Rubenstein, 2000, p. 34

³ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959 (1937), p. 37

⁴ Marsh, 2014, p. 10

The optimistic innocence of Europe, mirrored in the Bonhoeffer family, was rudely shattered by the Great War. When older son Walter was killed in 1918, only a month after enlisting, his father turned to stoic silence, his mother fell into depression and eldest son Karl-Friedrich became a bitter socialist, railing against God and King.⁵ Against this background of family tragedy, Dietrich announced his intention to become a theologian. His father and older brothers were dismayed, ridiculing the church as irrelevant, weak and ineffectual.⁶ Thirteen-year-old Bonhoeffer's reply was simultaneously arrogant and prophetic. "In that case, I shall reform it!"⁷

German Liberal Theology

Bonhoeffer studied theology in Tübingen and then Berlin under Adolf von Harnack, a disciple of Albrecht Ritsch: two giants of German liberal theology whose influence over thought and worship for Protestants in the early 20th century, both in Germany and beyond, was profound.

Ritsch was moulded by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Immanuel Kant, from whom came the seismic concept of a morality independent of theology. Ritsch synthesised the Reformation approach to scripture with Enlightenment epistemology, rejecting the mystical elements of Christianity and arguing for individual ethical action as the proper expression of faith. Religion was useful in helping conquer one's natural propensities, and Jesus was the perfect exemplar of right action, rather than God-in-flesh.

Ritsch's application of Kantian philosophy to Christianity was "typical of an era that had little feeling for the mystery of religion and no dread of a divine judgment."⁸ According to Ritsch, the chief end of the Christian was to work for the Kingdom of God,⁹ although such a kingdom, ruled by a God incapable of entering our world, looked uncannily like the emerging humanist ethical movement, a 'religion without ritual' established in 1876 by German rationalist Felix Adler with his motto of "deed not creed."¹⁰

⁵ Marsh, 2014, p. 15

⁶ Robertson, 1987, p. 36

⁷ Bethge, 2000, p. 36

⁸ Albrecht Ritschl

⁹ cf the Westminster Catechism (1647): Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

¹⁰ The Ethical Movement, index

Harnack furthered Ritsch's view that the essential character of Christianity was the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and its essential purpose was to reform the human into a moral character.¹¹ He searched for the core of Christianity, freed of its 'accretions' of dogma, but although Harnack's painstaking examination of history and context raised the intellectual credibility of Christianity in a scientific world, by stripping from scripture of all that was not tangible, he risked stripping away the divine also, leaving a human God, if any God at all.

Bonhoeffer's Response: Religionless Christianity

Bonhoeffer, however, took a different route from the reductionist theologians of his student days. They had cut away the attributes of God, as one might cut away the flesh of an apple, until they were left with an inedible core of ethical postulate.

Bonhoeffer stripped back the layers of religious "garb" that Western Christianity had donned – a garb that changed in different times and places – and revealed within Christ, "no longer an object of religion, but...Lord of the world."¹² He applied Paul's argument about the necessity of circumcision (Romans 2:28-29) to the question of whether religion was a condition of salvation, and concluded that it was not. This was the 'Religionless Christianity' of which he wrote to Eberhard Bethge, saying, "We are moving towards a completely religionless time...even those who honestly describe themselves as 'religious'...presumably mean something quite different by 'religious'."¹³

Bonhoeffer saw around him a worldly religion that was seeking praise from people – and finding it – whereas the 'religionless Christianity' that was the true Christianity was finding God not on the boundaries of human capability, a *deus ex machina* to be invoked when all else failed, but in the centre, "not in weakness but in strength." God was still transcendent – Bonhoeffer had not reduced him to a pet or totem – but God's 'beyond' was "in the midst of our life."¹⁴

In critiquing the *zeitgeist* of German liberalism, Bonhoeffer was following the revolutionary Luther, whose concern that the medieval church needed both

¹¹ Harnack, 1900, pp. 9, 37, 42

¹² Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 2001 (1951), p. 93

¹³ *ibid*, p. 92

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 94

theological and practical reform led him to the door of Wittenberg Church in 1517. Bonhoeffer's theses proved even more confrontational.

From Elijah to Bonhoeffer

Although 'Hitler' is a now byword for tyrannical ruler, few in the 1920s could have guessed where his policies would lead. He promised to rebuild a 'Greater Germany' with restored national pride, and similar persuasive rulers have gained followers for at least three thousand years.

At the time of the Exodus, God's plan for governing his people was theocracy, but upon their request (1 Samuel 8:7-9) God delegated his rule to kings. The first, Saul, was tall and handsome, but God warned that kingship would lead to oppression and the story of Israel's kings trails steadily downwards. By the time of Elijah, the Israelite kings had commandeered the priesthood (2 Chronicles 11:15) and appropriated religion for political expedience (1 Kings 16: 29–33). Elijah, in his conflict on Mount Carmel, famously challenged the authority of Ahab, insisting that Yahweh was the only rightful ruler and that Ahab, by abandoning the one true God, had lost his right to rule (1 Kings 18:17-18).

After the exile and return, foreign nations tried to co-opt the God of Israel for their cause, adding their idols to his temple: Antiochus Epiphanes set up an altar to Zeus in 167BCE and triggered the Maccabean revolt; Caligula in 40CE caused "a colossal statue of himself to be erected in the holy of holies", as a deity to be worshipped alongside Yahweh.¹⁵

Luther doubtless recalled these stories when he saw his government appointing church leaders for political gain. When the state (in the form of Duke George of Saxony) banned Luther's New Testament, Luther responded with vociferous defiance: "where temporal power presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government." But he noted also that the church (in the form of Pope Leo X) should not meddle in the affairs of state. "The pope and the bishops, should be bishops and preach God's Word; but this they leave undone, and have

¹⁵ Philo, 40, XXIX:188

become temporal princes...they rule castles, cities, land, and people, and torture souls with unspeakable outrages.”¹⁶

The counterparts in Bonhoeffer’s day are unmistakable: Hitler’s rise to power, assisted by political manoeuvrings and the intimidation of opponents, bore many parallels to both the excesses of Catholicism in Luther’s time and to Ahab’s dynasty, which had seized power in a period of political turmoil and slaughtered opponents with impunity, controlling both people and priests for his own end (1 Kings 16:21-27).

As Luther followed the example of Elijah in defying the state, so Bonhoeffer faced down his own prophets of Baal in the form of National Socialism, confident that his God, whom he served continually, would rescue him.¹⁷ “The sovereign power,” he later wrote while running an illegal seminary in Finkenwalde (Figure 2), “belongs to God and not to the State, which is only his minister.”¹⁸



Figure 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer with students at Finkenwalde Seminary

Two Kingdoms

If necessity is the mother of invention, conflict is that of consensus. When Christians disagree about some point of doctrine, that point becomes sharpened, hopefully to clarity but often to damaging division.

In Luther’s day, the overlap of church and state was a point of friction which produced much heat but little light. High offices in the church were commonly sold to men with scant interest in the riches of heaven, but with healthy appetites for the worldly wealth such offices promised. Albert of Brandenburg was a prime example, bribing his way to a powerful archbishopric in addition to the two bishoprics he already held. To recoup his outlay, he organised the infamous St. Peter’s

¹⁶ Luther, *Secular Authority*, 1523, 2:i, 2:iii

¹⁷ cf Daniel 6:16

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959 (1937), p. 237

Indulgences (Figure 3), with part of the revenue repaying his loan and part funding the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Luther voiced popular unrest at such egregious departure from the life and teaching of the Son of Man who had no place to lay his head. The secular world

had co-opted the church for its own purposes, he felt, and had cast God as a convenient, obedient idol. Luther thus produced his 'Two Kingdoms' doctrine, expounded in *On Secular Authority*, in which he considered the limits of secular government and the extent to which Christians owed it allegiance.

Luther's work was an expansion of Augustine's *The City of God*, written as a result of Christianity being blamed for the sack of Rome in 410. In his book, Augustine contrasted the rulers of two rival cities, one earthly and one heavenly. The earthly princes "are actuated by a thirst for ruling," while in the heavenly city, "the princes and subjects serve one another in love: the former by their care, the latter by their obedience."¹⁹ If the prince is perfectly benevolent, such obedience is wise, but "when a wicked man rules," says the proverbialist, "the people groan."²⁰

Luther applied Augustine's thought experiment to the political and ecclesiastical realities of his context, saying, "We must divide all the children of Adam into two classes; the first belong to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world."²¹ However, unlike in Augustine's imagined worlds, Luther's two kingdoms were obliged to live cheek-by-jowl and, while the pious might be governed by the gospel, Luther saw the need of secular authority "which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they must keep the peace outwardly, even against their will."²² In a pointed parable, Luther posited a shepherd who puts wolves in with the sheep and



Figure 3 Woodcut showing the sale of indulgences. Germany. ca. 1510.

¹⁹ Augustine, 426, XIV:28

²⁰ Prov 29:2, cf John 14:15

²¹ Luther, *Secular Authority*, 1523, 1:iii

²² Luther, *Secular Authority*, 1523, 1:iv

bids all live together, well-fed and peaceful.²³ The sheep would doubtless be governed thus, he commented, but they would not live long.

Luther had intended that the two kingdoms should exist in a “polemic unity in which Christians may, and at times should, oppose the secular realm in the name of a better secularity,”²⁴ but in 1930s Germany, such intentions, along with passages in which Luther commended that the Christian “treat the Jews in a brotherly manner” were conveniently laid aside.²⁵ Luther’s teachings, intended to limit the influence of the secular world upon the church, were seized upon by the growing National Socialist German Workers’ Party as a call to unthinking obedience, with its leaders standing upon the shoulders, and upon the rhetoric, of the reformer.

Taming Luther, Taming God

In Bonhoeffer’s Germany, the Lutheranism that had held sway for four hundred years was relegated to cultural niceties rather than the life-changing, soul-changing revolution it had once been. It remained in ceremony and civic duty for, according to Luther’s commentary on Romans, “even though rulers are wicked and unbelieving, yet is their governmental power (in itself) good and from God.”²⁶ But in a world that was post-Kant, post-Darwin and post-Great-War, God, formerly the firmest of all foundations, was needed only as a postulated “cause of all nature, distinct from nature itself.”²⁷ Morality was not a matter of obeying God, but merely to act ‘as if’ God exists.

Kant himself was of Lutheran stock and affirmed that his various Critiques were merely seeking the limits of knowledge “in order to make room for faith,”²⁸ but laying his Enlightenment rationalism alongside Luther’s insistence on civil obedience made the beams of a palanquin upon which the National Socialists would carry the Christian God, remade in the party’s image, tamed and put to work. Bonhoeffer would wrestle with this use of Luther in his monumental work, *Ethics*, noting that any authority devolved by God to government is conferred “only so long as they give

²³ Luther, *Secular Authority*, 1523, 1:v

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 1995, p. 550

²⁵ Luther, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, 1523, 45:200, Luther later changed his view.

²⁶ Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1976 (1483-1546), p. 179

²⁷ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788, I.II.II.V

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781, B Preface

effect to God's commandment," no single authority, be that government or church, being able to "exclusively identify itself with the commandment of God."²⁹

Both Bonhoeffer and the National Socialists looked to Luther for their inspiration; the former as call to kingdom values, the latter as a convenient hook upon which to hang their authoritarian hat. The error of National Socialism's application of Luther, says Stephenson, was not in separating the two kingdoms unduly, but "neglecting the limits imposed on the one and the rightful liberties of the other, to fuse the two into a totalitarian unity which was a parody of both."³⁰

When the intellectual classes harboured doubts about the compatibility of their faith with government policies in this 'totalitarian unity', Luther again came to the secular kingdom's aid. He instructed the good Christian to take up arms when his earthly lord commanded it, and forbade the overthrow even of a tyrant, for while the tyrant retained his reason, there remained the possibility of reason moving him from tyranny to good.³¹

In 1922, Hitler had cited Jesus as his inspiration to fight, and his speeches were peppered with appeals to "our Lord God in heaven."³² He would later form a theological institute to 'de-judaise' Christianity, claiming that Jesus, being from Galilee, was not really Jewish, and indeed, fought against the Jews. "The Institute shifted Christian attention from the humanity of God to the divinity of man: Hitler as an individual Christ, the German Volk as a collective Christ, and Christ as Judaism's deadly opponent."³³

Over the next decade, relentless repetition of this 'double think', coupled with fear of Communism among the upper classes and mass unemployment among the lower classes, would be the perfect breeding ground for the rise of Hitler, with his attractive message of 'make Germany great again'. The strategy worked. In the 1933 elections, Lutherans voted for the Nazi party in far greater numbers than did the Catholics."³⁴

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 2009 (1949), p. 297

³⁰ Stephenson, para. 12

³¹ Luther, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, 1526, pp. 21-22

³² Hitler, 2016, 12 Apr 1922, etc

³³ Susannah Heschel, quoted in Ratner, 2021

³⁴ Spenkuch & Tillmann, 2014, p. 3

Obedience or Conscience

The Bonhoeffer family had been against Hitler from the start, but the hard-wired Lutheran tradition that taught obedience to the state was hard to resist.³⁵ There was already widespread mistrust of Jewish Germans, who were blamed for Germany's humiliating defeat in 1918, and cartoons such as Figure 4 contributed to a simmering antisemitism.



Figure 4 German newspaper cartoon showing politicians, funded by rich Jews, stabbing the German Army in the back. 1924.

Text reads: Germans, remember this!

But the issue was not merely political for the Bonhoeffer family: Dietrich's twin sister was married a man who, although baptized a Protestant, was of Jewish descent.³⁶ Over the next decades, the Bonhoeffers had to make costly decisions when civil obedience conflicted with conscience; four members of the Bonhoeffer family would eventually be executed for obeying the latter.

Although religion was less important in 1930s Germany than in previous centuries, the Lutheran ideals of patriotism and citizenship were still the prevailing German ethic and so the majority of the Bonhoeffers' social class found ways to at least tolerate the demands of National Socialism, and many outright embraced the creed that promised reestablishment of Germany's self-respect after the humiliation of Versailles. Bonhoeffer, however, stood firm against what he regarded as a twisting of Luther's theology, writing in 1937 that "No State is entitled to read into St Paul's words a justification of its own existence. Should any State take to heart these words, they would be just as much a challenge to repentance for that State as they are for the Church."³⁷

Bonhoeffer's Response: The Confessing Church

Two days after the President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Führer of the National Socialist Movement and Chancellor of the German Reich, Bonhoeffer gave the first public address to openly criticise the new regime. He warned leaders of the

³⁵ Rubenstein, 2000, p. 34

³⁶ Robertson, 1987, p. 61

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959 (1937), p. 236

danger of becoming “the idol the led are looking for” and thus becoming a “mis-leader.”³⁸ Although the speech was composed before Hitler’s appointment, the target of Bonhoeffer’s speech was clear. Famously, Bonhoeffer’s broadcast was cut off mid-sentence – whether from a simple misunderstanding about timing or from deliberate censoring of a critical voice we will never know – but it was the start of Bonhoeffer’s attempt to disrupt the Nazi machine.

Hitler also made a speech that day. He vowed “before God” that the National Government would “extend its strong, protecting hand over Christianity as the basis of our entire morality” and ended with the prayer “May God Almighty take our work into his grace.”³⁹ Bonhoeffer saw through the whitewash of religiosity and the next time he stepped into a pulpit, he left no doubt about his opposition to the new Zeus being placed in the temple of God. “The church has only one altar,” he proclaimed, “the altar of the Almighty...before which all creatures must kneel.”⁴⁰ Further than this,

Bonhoeffer saw in the ‘*Deutsche Christen*’, the pro-Nazi faction of the German Protestant churches, a betrayal of the true body of Christ. It is notable that on their flag (Figure 5), a swastika has usurped the place of Jesus. Bonhoeffer’s sermon continued, “Whoever seeks something other than this must keep away; he cannot join us in the house of God ... The church has only one pulpit, and from that pulpit, faith in God will be preached, and no other faith, and no other will than the will of God.”

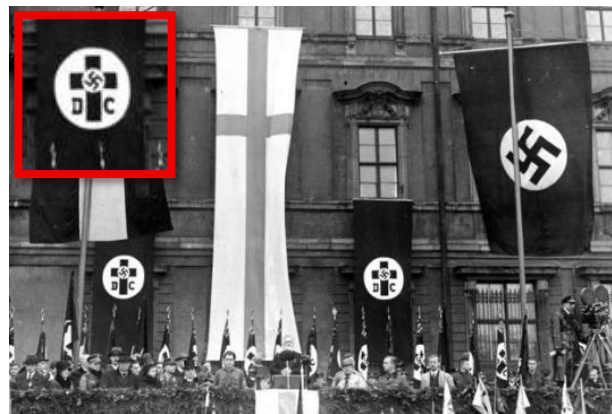


Figure 5 Luther Day celebration showing flags of the ‘*Deutsche Christen*’ (German Christians) movement. Berlin, 1933. [Inset shows detail]

Shortly afterwards, the federation of Protestant churches agreed to form a united *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*. However, their elected leader was not to Hitler’s liking and he imposed a new *Reichsbischof* with few credentials other than zealous adherence to Nazism and a hunger for power.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church had signed a *Reichskonkordat* with the Nazi state, by which the church

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *The Younger Generation’s Altered View of the Concept of Führer*, 2009 (1933), p. 268

³⁹ Hitler, 2016, pp. 106-108

⁴⁰ Bethge, 2000, p. 257

⁴¹ Robertson, 1987, p. 93

engaged to remain out of politics in return being allowed to minister unmolested. Catholic clergy effectively became state officials, and bishops vowed fealty to their new lord: "Before God and on the Holy Gospels I swear and promise, as becomes a bishop, loyalty to the German Reich and to the State."⁴²

In response to what he saw as the Church's (both Protestant and Catholic) surrender of heavenly treasure to gain earthly wealth, Bonhoeffer took up a motif from the election manifesto of the Young Reformation Movement: the 'Confessing Church'.⁴³ "Church stay a church!" he urged in a sermon later that month. "Confess, confess, confess!... The Confessing Church is the eternal Church."⁴⁴

The lines were drawn – one could have Germanism or one could have Christianity, but not both. With the threat of the infamous 'Aryan Paragraph' being extended from the civil service to the churches, Bonhoeffer, together with Hermann Sasse, drafted the Bethel Confession in August 1933. It roundly condemned the *Deutsche Christen* movement, calling it a "violation of the gospel" and showing "Christian orthodoxy's subversive potential in the face of an idolatrous regime."⁴⁵ However, many pastors were unwilling to split the church, and the initial draft was watered down to ineffectual compromise. Early the next summer, a more robust document would be published in Barmen, from the inexhaustible pen of Karl Barth.

Bonhoeffer and Barth

Bonhoeffer had come across the writings of Karl Barth as a student and had been "transformed" by *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*.⁴⁶ In the early 1930s, having completed his university studies, Bonhoeffer visited Bonn for three weeks, attending some of Barth's seminars. The two corresponded afterwards and Barth became both mentor and sparring-partner to the young theologian.

With what he saw as the corruption of the state church, Bonhoeffer was now convinced that those of true faith must be willing to speak out, and to live out, their faith even to the point of shedding blood. In his 1932 sermon 'The Things That Are

⁴² Holy See and German Reich, 1933, At.16

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, p. 208, 'Confessing' here does not mean admission of sin, but standing up for the true faith.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 217

⁴⁵ Marsh, 2014, p. 184

⁴⁶ Robertson, 1987, p. 44

Above', Bonhoeffer challenged his congregation not to set their minds so much on heaven that they forgot to be good and faithful servants here on earth. "The blood of martyrs might once again be demanded," he said, "if we really have the courage and loyalty to shed it."⁴⁷

But Barth took a more theoretical approach. Despite his famous call to theologians to "take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both,"⁴⁸ Barth was more reticent than Bonhoeffer to make a public stand against the rising Nazi movement. When Bonhoeffer challenged Barth on the social and ethical repercussions of faith, Barth replied bluntly that theology bore no responsibility to change society. It could make nothing happen, and that was as it should be.⁴⁹ However, he later regretted this position and noted in a letter to Eberhard Bethge, "I have felt for a long time that it was a guilt of mine that I did not also...urge [the Jewish question] as being crucial."⁵⁰

But in the autumn of 1933, in the aftermath of the 'Brown Synod', in which the *Deutsche Christen* sought to enforce the Aryan Paragraph in Protestant churches, Bonhoeffer wrote to Barth about the possibility of an independent church, saying, "The *status confessionis* has arrived," the time to hold to the traditions that they had been taught. Barth replied immediately, agreeing that excluding non-Aryans from the pastorate was "intolerable" and that "the church authorities...must be told directly, and at the same time publicly, 'Here you are no longer the church of Christ!'"⁵¹

Just as Luther had no plan to start a new branch of the Christian church but intended "to recover the authenticity of a lost Christianity,"⁵² so also Bonhoeffer viewed what would become the Confessing Church not as a breakaway group, but as the true church emerging from the thickets of apostasy. "The difference between our present situation and that of Luther," he wrote to Barth, "lies in the fact that the Catholic Church expelled Luther under its laws against heretics, while our church authorities...completely lack any concept of heresy."⁵³

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Collected Sermons*, 2012, p. 75

⁴⁸ Recalled by Barth from 40 years previously in *Barth in Retirement*, 1963

⁴⁹ Marsh, 2014, p. 139

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *Gesamtausgabe V Briefe 1961-1968*, cited in Todt, 2007 (1993), pp. 2, 73

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, pp. 231-232

⁵² Hendrix, 2010, ch 5, intro

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, p. 230

The Jewish Question

The chief issue for Bonhoeffer in the early 1930s was the church's position on what became known as 'The Jewish Question'. The *Deutsche Christen* movement popularised the erroneous belief that by killing Christ (Figure 6), the Jews had surrendered their place as God's chosen people and that the 'new Israel' was the Christian church, and specifically the Aryan church. They backed their views with biblical quotes:

racial purity was based on Ezra's prohibition of intermarriage (Ezra 9-10); the collective guilt of all Jewish people, on Matt 27:25.

The Council of Trent (1566), repudiated the notion, teaching that "our guilt takes a deeper die of enormity when contrasted with that of the Jews: according to the testimony of the apostle, 'if they had known it, they never would have crucified the Lord of Glory:' whilst we, on the contrary, professing to know him, yet denying him by our actions...lay violent hands on him."⁵⁴

However, by the 1930s, there was no corresponding definitive proclamation from the Protestant churches, and when it came to the persecution of non-Aryan Germans, sadly, Luther's appalling tirade *On the Jews and Their Lies* was a perfect excuse for promoting antisemitism as the appropriate attitude for good German Protestants. Posters such as Figure 7 created a direct descent from Luther's 16th-century assault to Hitler's 20th-century genocide.

So it was contrary to mainstream opinion that Bonhoeffer and Barth raised their voices. Barth said that the "so-called church of the Reich" was complicit in a deceitful regime and asked if "the Church had listened...not to the voice of the word of God, but to the voice of human judgement, merely political?"⁵⁵



Figure 6 Wall painting showing a Jew crucifying Jesus. Katharinenkapelle, Germany, 14th century

⁵⁴ The Holy See, 1829 (1566), I:IV:47, 1 Cor 2:8

⁵⁵ Barth, 1962 (1933), pp. 19-20, 25, 27-28

Bonhoeffer's contribution to the debate was more vehement than Barth's cool, theological response. He wrote a discussion paper entitled 'The Church and the Jewish Question' in which he defended the right of Jewish Christians to be part of the church. Membership depended upon baptism, he argued, not race. In seeking to limit church membership to Aryans, the *Deutsche Christen* were returning to a kind of inverted Judaism and condoning the interference of state in the governance of the church.



Figure 7 Propaganda poster, Germany, 1933.
Text reads 'Hitler's struggle and Luther's teaching: The German people's good defence'

When the Nazi regime imposed embargoes upon Jewish businesses in April 1933 and then fired Jewish teachers and doctors, Bonhoeffer added an extra section to his paper, extending his defence to all those of Jewish heritage, not only those who had converted to Christianity. It was a three-pronged attack on the prevailing theology of the *Deutsche Christen* and proved too challenging for some pastors, who walked out when the essay was presented.⁵⁶

The first prong was to "ask the state whether its actions are legitimate," with a clear undertone that they were not; the second, to "aid the victims of state action," asserting that the Christian church has an "unconditional obligation" to help all victims, regardless of church membership. If such actions proved contrary to (unrighteous) state laws, Bonhoeffer maintained, "the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks." The third prong, a much-quoted call to direct action, was "not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself."⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer would act upon his beliefs and become such a spoke. I do not believe he had any illusions about what it would cost.

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 1995, p. 130

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p. 13

Bonhoeffer's Response: Rethinking Ethics

In his second doctoral thesis, later published as *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer argued that modern German liberal theology had become stuck, repeating tired formulae that had well served previous generations, wrapped as they were in their insulating Lutheranism, but which were now irrelevant and impotent, 'rusty swords' against contemporary ethical problems. Kant, the Copernican revolutionary, had relocated God "from the starry heavens above to the moral law within."⁵⁸ Theology had to follow, Bonhoeffer argued, with the practical outworking of faith being found in the street rather than in the theologian's ivory tower. This was not to be done by formulating yet more theological principles, but by "examining and entering into the characteristic trend of contemporary ethical problems in the light of fundamental Christian ideas."⁵⁹

While a curate in Barcelona, a few years before the struggle over the Jewish Question, Bonhoeffer had considered the nature and origin of Christian ethics, if such a thing existed. Some argued that since Christians are humans facing the same dilemmas as others, positing a specifically 'Christian' ethic "amounts to no more than an ugly assertion of moral superiority."⁶⁰ Others reasoned that Christians typically hold moral views that are out of step with – even opposed to – those of non-Christians in their culture, and even when both Christians and non-Christians arrive at the same point, they may reach that destination from very different paths. While secular ethics starts from 'What is the right action?', Christians begin by asking 'What does God want of me?'

Bonhoeffer certainly did not hold that the Christian ethic was superior to the German, French or American ethic, but was clear about the basis upon which moral decisions were to be made. "The significance of all Jesus' ethical commandments is rather to say to men [sic]: 'You stand before the face of God... You are at the disposal of someone else in the world and for him you must act and work.'"⁶¹

Bonhoeffer spent years wrestling with this matter. The concepts of 'good' and evil', he reasoned, existed "only on the completion of an action," and any attempt to

⁵⁸ Marsh, 2014, p. 93

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, pp. 39-40

⁶⁰ Plant, 2004, p. 7

⁶¹ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, pp. 42-43

crystallise a Christian ethic was as vain as “trying to draw a bird in flight.”⁶² Far from being a matter of theoretical cogitation – a point over which Bonhoeffer locked horns with Barth – Christian faith was to be lived in the real world, according to values grown from the muddy soil of lived life. “There cannot be ethics in a vacuum,” he said, nor good and bad as untethered principles, “but only as qualities of will making a decision.” Prophetically he added, “There are no actions which are bad in themselves – even murder can be justified – there is only faithfulness to God’s will or deviation from it.”⁶³

However, faithfulness to God’s will in the face of Nazism, as Bonhoeffer saw it, brought him conflict with his conscience. According to Kant, to lie, even when to do so would save a life, is wrong.⁶⁴ How much more so a planned murder?

Bonhoeffer had taken the dangerous step of joining an assassination plot. In a Christmas letter to his family and co-conspirators, Bonhoeffer poignantly reflected on the likely outcome of his actions, ethically at once good and bad. “We still love life, but I do not think that death can take us by surprise now. ...we should like death to come to us, not accidentally and suddenly through some trivial cause, but in the fullness of life and with everything at stake.”⁶⁵

Bonhoeffer would be arrested only months later, then tried for his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler and executed. In this battle on Mount Carmel, the prophets of Baal had won, but Bonhoeffer’s legacy, the Confessing Church, stands as a beacon of reform and resistance to ‘cheap grace’, that false gospel of “the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner,” which says, “let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world’s standards in every sphere of life.”⁶⁶ In its place stands the costly grace that called Peter to leave all and follow, the grace that drove Luther from the cloister to the world, the grace that bade Bonhoeffer take up the cross “destined and appointed by God” and to carry it wherever God led, for “when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁶⁷

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, pp. 39-40

⁶³ *ibid*, pp. 44-46

⁶⁴ Kant, *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy*

⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 1995, p. 485

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959 (1937), p. 35

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p. 79

Significance for Christian Ministry

The specific issues with which Bonhoeffer grappled almost a hundred years ago differ from those which concern the modern Christian, but the need for a rock upon which to build our houses is the same. A culture that is not only post-Kant, post-Darwin and post-Great-War but also post-truth⁶⁸ needs Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity to make sense of its religionless world.

The Refugee Question: Britain's attitude to asylum-seekers has long been complicated. From a 21st-century viewpoint we consider refugees from Nazism, including Bonhoeffer's own brother-in-law, as 'genuine', but in the 1930s, Jewish arrivals were greeted as often with racism as with sympathy. They were accused simultaneously of stealing our jobs and sponging off the state. Genuine asylum seekers, it seems, are "always in the past, never today."⁶⁹

Sadly, the church is no different from the world in this aspect – arguably worse because when God said, "Love your neighbour," he did not add, "provided their skin colour/language/religion is the same as yours." A 2024 report found institutional racism still deeply embedded in Church of England structures: 15% of applications to clergy posts were from black people and 75% from white, yet of rejected/withdrawn applications, 29% were from black clergy and only 63% from white.⁷⁰ In all levels of professional careers – education, technology, business – GMH people are under-represented, but the church should be the leader in this area, not the follower.

Civil (Dis-)obedience: The Bible gives many examples of both civil obedience and civil disobedience. Daniel submitted to Babylonian education and customs, but maintained his integrity when it came to eating sacrificed food and worshipping the king. Nathan faithfully served King David, but famously admonished him over Bathsheba with, "You are that man!" Peter, when forbidden to preach, replied, "We must obey God rather than human beings."

⁶⁸ 'Post-truth' was named Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year in 2016 in the wake of the election of Donald Trump as US president.

⁶⁹ Kushner Knox, quoted in Karpf, 2002

⁷⁰ Mohdin, 2024

Luther had sought to revitalise his church, but when brought to trial for heresy (Figure 8) he echoed the words of Peter. Four hundred and fifty years later, his namesake, Martin Luther King, was labelled an ‘extremist’ for organising nonviolent action. “Was not Jesus an extremist for love?” wrote MLK from a Birmingham jail. “Was not Martin Luther an extremist: ‘Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.’”⁷¹



Figure 8 Woodcut, Luther at Worms. 1576. Text reads: *Hie stehe ich. Ich kan nicht anders. Got helffe mir. Amen*
Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

Viewed with the infallible wisdom of hindsight, the modern reader may wonder how a rational nation could choose a leader such as Adolf Hitler, but such leaders are far from rare. More than half of our world’s 8.3 billion people live in authoritarian regimes, many initially brought to power by popular will, and there has been a noted rise in right-wing, nationalist politics in Europe in recent years.⁷² Across the Atlantic, the ‘world’s biggest democracy’ has backslidened to ‘flawed democracy’⁷³ and “lies at the cusp of autocracy.”⁷⁴

While Paul commends dutiful citizenship in Romans 13:1-5, there are clearly limits to this, with God himself being implicated in no fewer than three jailbreaks! (Acts 5, 12 & 16) The obligation to ‘render unto Caesar’ should not descend into an “unbalanced, ‘enthusiastic’ and ultimately idolatrous estimate of the function and competence of secular rule,”⁷⁵ nor blind us to the superior obligation to render unto God what is God’s.

Ethics in a World Come of Age: Many moral issues seem clear-cut: most people would repudiate the idea of killing a politician with whom one disagreed.⁷⁶ But if that politician were bent on murdering six million Jewish people, would that answer change? Should that answer change? The Church cannot tell its parishioners how to

⁷¹ King, 1963

⁷² Democracy Index 2024, 2025

⁷³ Democracy Countries 2026

⁷⁴ Center for Systemic Peace

⁷⁵ Stephenson, para. 3

⁷⁶ Plant, 2004, p. 5

vote, but it has a sacred duty to hold power to account, to be a Nathan to our world's Davids.

Word or World: The Church needs also consider the extent to which it should reflect its culture, proclaiming the gospel afresh in each generation, and how much it must transform, rather than be conformed by, the world. This is exemplified by the LLF process and the still-ongoing struggles for female clergy:

In the Church of England, women comprise two-thirds of congregations, but one-third of priests, despite it being over half a century since General Synod ruled that there was no theological barrier women's ordination to the priesthood. Female clergy are still pushed into lower-paid or non-stipendiary roles, and church structures allow 'traditionalists' to claim that they are not really priests. "A couple of people...don't come to the altar when I'm presiding. They won't receive communion from me. I notice it."⁷⁷ Notably, the current Archbishop of Canterbury cannot preside at eucharist in 5% of her churches.

The appallingly hurtful LLF process, which recently closed with no progress, is a prime example of both sides believing they hold the biblical view. Just as in Bonhoeffer's day and Luther's day, one person's biblical imperative is another person's cherry-picked pretext. Let us treat both sides with humility and grace, remembering that it is easier to solve a maze from the air than from the ground.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer reacted against the German liberal theology of his student days and a Christianity reduced to bourgeois respectability – a cheap grace which had allowed the church to become subservient to the state. Instead, Bonhoeffer both advocated and demonstrated the costly grace which leaves all to follow Christ. In the last letter to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, dated December 1944, he wrote:

*Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving
even to the dregs of pain, at thy command,
we will not falter, thankfully receiving
all that is given by thy loving hand.⁷⁸*

⁷⁷ Jagger, 2021, sec. 9

⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959 (1937), p. 16

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- 1: Karl_und_Paula_Bonhoeffer_mit_ihren_Kindern_in_Wölfelsgrund.jpg
- 2: Bonhoeffer Initiative
dietrich-bonhoeffer_mit-berliner-studenten.jpg
- 3: Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales,
Ablasshandel-Holzschnitt-1510.jpg
- 4: www.annefrank.org/en/timeline/193/the-stab-in-the-back-legend/
Stab-in-the-back cartoon 1924.jpg
- 5: Bundesarchiv Bild 102-15234, Berlin, Luthertag.jpg
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Landau 066.jpg
- 7: Westfälischer Anzeiger
<https://www.wa.de/kultur/landesmuseum-klosterkultur-zeigt-luther-1917-heute-6917815.html>
- 8: Luther-in-Worms-auf-Rt.jpg