

The Missiology, Leadership and Context of
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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for Dr. Peter Robinson
April 12, 2013

In order to evaluate the missiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it is crucial that we understand those influences that had an impact on his formation for ministry and leadership. A number of factors played a role in forming Bonhoeffer's cultural context. It will be shown that that Bonhoeffer's thought was evolving in regards to the role of the church in the world, and that the progression of his thoughts was in large part due to his difficult experiences leading up to, and including, the second world war.

It is crucial that we evaluate Bonhoeffer's education and formation for ministry. Against the wishes of his family, Bonhoeffer decided to study theology and become a pastor when he was fourteen years old. He grew up in an upper class family and had a prosperous upbringing.¹

He went to the university of Tübingen and then Berlin University. Interesting to note is that Berlin University, where Bonhoeffer completed his doctoral thesis, was a hub of liberal theology. Bonhoeffer was taught by Adolf Von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg, who both opposed Karl Barth on historical-critical grounds. Scholars such as Harnack and Seeberg approached scripture on exclusively textual and historical-critical grounds, denying the occurrence of miracles and the resurrection.² Bonhoeffer's theological stance and approach to scripture is significant in light of his schooling. Though having been trained under such liberal theologians, his theological convictions were formed to contradict the likes of Von Harnack. Whereas liberal theologians sought to pick apart the Bible and explain its particularities, Bonhoeffer saw theology as the means of guarding the holy mystery of "God revealed in the flesh," the God-man Jesus Christ."³

¹ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 8–9.

² *Ibid*, 58–60.

³ Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 27.

Bonhoeffer came to be heavily influenced by Von Harnack's outspoken opponent Karl Barth.⁴ Barth's dialectical theology stood as a bulwark against the liberal-historical school of thought that tended to abstract Jesus from the gospel and from the world.⁵ Bonhoeffer, like Barth, thought that ultimate reality is found only in God, without Whom there is no reality, and in Whom all things exist. He rejected as abstraction all ways of thinking that do not first recognize the ultimate reality of God and His self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Though he rejected the conclusions of the historical-critical school, he came to appreciate their methods. Bonhoeffer employed the methods of the historical-critical school to get to see more deeply the God whom the scriptures reveal.⁶

Central to Bonhoeffer's thought was his conviction that God could not be abstracted from the world. To abstract God is to make Him into a religious idea rather than to acknowledge His realness.⁷ To operate under such auspices is to operate in abstraction rather than reality.

Bonhoeffer's christology is extremely important as it flows naturally from his conviction that ultimate reality is found in God. He believed that "in Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world."⁸ Christ is the means of God's self-revelation to the world, without Whom God cannot truly be known or seen to be at work in the world.⁹ For him, to fail to consider the reality of Christ as the revelation of the reality of God was to operate in abstraction. Jesus was not only a historical figure who lives on in our memory or "in our hearts". Nor is He the Christ who is outside history who represents the ideal human. Christ is neither confined to

⁴ Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (New York: Oxford, 1994), 5.

⁵ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology*, 4.

⁶ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 62

⁷ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 32.

⁸ *Ibid*, 60.

⁹ *Ibid*, 70.

his historical, physical person, nor is he outside of history.¹⁰ These are, by way of summary, the theological and christological convictions to which Bonhoeffer ascribed. In order to see what bearing these convictions have on Bonhoeffer's theology of mission, we must now turn to his theology of the church.

Bonhoeffer's missiology must be derived from his ecclesiology since he didn't write missiology proper, but rather described the role of the church in the world. Thus, from his treatment of the church, we get a glimpse into his missiology. His works *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship* are also key sources that give insight into Bonhoeffer's missiology. An evaluation of his thought in these works cannot fail to take into account the context in which they were written, which was his principalship at the Seminary of the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde.

To begin, Bonhoeffer viewed the church as the presupposition, subject matter, and core of the discipline of theology.¹¹ His theological efforts were motivated by a desire to help the church resemble Christ. For Bonhoeffer, God is reality, and this Reality can only be known through Christ. The question of how Christ is made known to the world after the fact of His death, resurrection and ascension, is answered in the Church. He believe that Christ is living and present in the Church through the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.¹² This was not a mystical presence; rather, He is present in bodily form in His collective body, the Church. "The Church is one man; it is the body of Christ. But it is also many, a fellowship of members."¹³

¹⁰ Matt Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58.2 (2005): 148.

¹¹ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 61.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 225–226.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 243.

The collectivity of the church is central to Bonhoeffer's conception of the church as Christ in the world. He vehemently rejected individualism on theological grounds. He held individualism to be an abstraction that transports people into "the vacuum of the purely private and the purely ideal."¹⁴ Christ as Word, more specifically, as a word of address, can only be spoken between two persons and is thus communal. Bonhoeffer also affirmed that the sacrament of Christ is the eucharist in community.¹⁵ The reality of the church is such that we belong to Him [Jesus Christ] in eternity *with* one another," and not just as individuals.¹⁶

How did Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology manifest itself practically? The answer to this question is bound to his theology. The reality of God entered into the world through Jesus Christ, who is the only means of God's self-revelation. The Church as a collective body exists as the real body of Christ in the world. For Bonhoeffer, it follows that the mission of the Church is to increasingly realize the form of Christ, in contradistinction to the form of the world. The church lives in the world, yet it is to do so in the form of Christ, rather than in the form promoted by the world. The mission of the church is to function within the world, yet to have everything through Christ, in Him and for His sake.¹⁷

Bonhoeffer knew that the church can take on the form of Christ only if the church sees itself as a disciple of Christ. Discipleship is our affirmative response to Jesus' call to follow Him, manifesting itself in our obedience.¹⁸ As disciples, we are entirely dependent on the leadership of Christ. Obedience first entails waiting for the word of Christ to direct us. For

¹⁴ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 35. Originally quoted from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, 215.

¹⁵ Matt Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58.2 (2005): 153–155.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 24.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 267–268.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 57–58.

Bonhoeffer, the mission is Christ's, and He sends, authorizes and empowers His people for the task He has appointed for them.

In Matthew 10:7–15 Jesus has identified the mission of the church as the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of God and the confirmation of this proclamation by healing the sick, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, and casting out demons.¹⁹ Bonhoeffer affirms the urgency of this mission saying, “To tell men that the cause is urgent, and that the kingdom of God is at hand is the most charitable and merciful act we can perform, the most joyous news we can bring.”²⁰ Bonhoeffer places tremendous emphasis on effective gospel preaching.

Indeed, the chapter entitled “The Work” in *The Cost of Discipleship* makes a bold statement which reveals something of how Bonhoeffer viewed the relationship of the gospel to culture. In this section, he affirms:

“The messenger cannot wait and repeat [the gospel] to every man in his own language. God's language is clear enough. It is not for the messenger to decide who will hear and who will not, for only God knows who is “worthy”; and those who are worthy will hear the Word when the disciple proclaims it.”²¹

This statement reveals a certain naïvety in Bonhoeffer's conception of the relationship between gospel and culture. To assume that the disciple of Christ is speaking “God's language” fails to take into account the fact that the gospel cannot be abstracted from human culture and is always communicated within culture.²² Such a statement lines up with his view of scripture: “Do not try to make the Bible relevant. Its relevance is axiomatic... Do not defend God's word, but

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 207.

²⁰ Ibid, 211.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans,1986), 4.

testify to it... Trust the Word.”²³ Perhaps Bonhoeffer made such statements because he had limited exposure to ministry in other cultures. His life was limited to Germany and some time abroad in New York, Barcelona, and London. In Barcelona and London, however, he was ministering in German congregations, not cross-culturally.²⁴

Something to keep in mind with reading Bonhoeffer is that his thought was evolving. He was relatively young when he died and his own journey of discipleship was ongoing when he wrote works such as *The Cost of Discipleship*.²⁵

Let us now turn to the circumstances in Bonhoeffer’s life which show the praxis of his theology. The turbulent decades of the interwar period in Germany created specific ecclesial and political conditions which forced Christians to make a decision on where they stood vis-à-vis the rise of Nazism.²⁶ Many Christians saw the incompatibility of Christianity and National Socialism, but many sought to co-opt the church with the Nazi agenda. The outcome of this *church struggle* was a schism in the German Church. Bonhoeffer and others founded the *Confessing Church* which rejected the fusing of Christianity with Nazi ideology.

After the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers’ Party) was elected to government in 1933, the National Socialists carried out the “Nazification” of the German church.²⁷ The faction that manifested the Nazification of the church after the schism was called the *German Christians*. The German Christians came to control the church’s affairs and was the government sanctioned church of Germany. Church authorities were appointed in the Nazi government. They implemented a rigorous anti-semitic agenda. Any and all texts or hymns that had a Jewish

²³ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 261.

²⁴ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 68, 195.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 369.

²⁶ Eberhard Bethge, “Living in Opposition,” in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 26.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

flavour to them were discarded, including the Old Testament. The New Testament was skewed, viewing Jesus as an anti-semitic Aryan hero. They completely ignored the fact that Jesus was Jewish Himself and sought to glorify their own German heritage through the scriptures. The German Christians became a nationalistic cult that had Hitler as its head.²⁸ This was theological abstraction at its worst— conforming God to the image of their own ideas, removing the historical particularity of God’s self revelation in Christ and twisting the gospel into a justification for hatred.

Bonhoeffer refused to set Hitler up as an idol and opposed the German Christians who had done so. The Confessing Church had a more ambivalent stance towards Hitler until 1937. It was under the impression that Hitler could be reasoned with, but this fantasy was broken when over 800 Confessing Church pastors were arrested.

As early as 1933, Bonhoeffer spoke out against the cult of the Führer in a radio broadcast, which was cut off mid-speech. He had no illusions as to the intentions of Hitler and the National Socialists. From his broadcast we can gather that Bonhoeffer was not loath to speak out publicly against the NSDAP. We can also surmise that Bonhoeffer’s leadership style was contrary to that of Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer did not rely on his personality or his passion to win his audience. Rather, he strove to draw attention to the words and ideas he was advancing by speaking with meekness.²⁹

Bonhoeffer’s style of leadership was opposed to that which was generally accepted in German culture, which prized the notion of a strong Führer (“Leader”). This notion arose from the younger post World War I generation.³⁰ Germany had been crippled by the reparations

²⁸ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 171–175.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

imputed by the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. The sanctions were severe and a general bitterness set in among the German populace. The notion of a Führer was messianic in its nature. The people welcomed the rise of a leader who could set right the injustice of Germany's subjugation after World War I.³¹ This notion was a powerful historical force that enabled Hitler's rise to power.

Bonhoeffer saw Hitler's style of leadership as the antithesis of true leadership. Hitler had become such an idol, and had put himself forward as such.³² True leadership, Bonhoeffer asserted, refuses to become an idol, but rather points to the ultimate authority of God.³³ Indeed, true leadership for Bonhoeffer was modeled perfectly in Christ, whose "commandment never seeks to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it."³⁴

It would be unrealistic to say that the Confessing Church was flawless. Eberhard Bethge confesses that the movement was plagued by a "hidden" anti-semitism throughout most of the 1930s. Though it opposed the Nazi regime and the German Christians theologically, it remained silent with respect to the persecution of the Jews. This was a blind spot within the Confessing Church.³⁵

The political and ecclesial climate in Germany at this time thus forced Christians to decide what they thought of Christ, the gospel, and the church, and it forced them to put this belief into practice. With the rise of National Socialism before the second world war, one could not simply remain ambivalent to theological abstraction with which the German Church had

³¹ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 141.

³² *Ibid*, 168–169.

³³ *Ibid*, 142.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 38.

³⁵ Bethge, "Living in Opposition," in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer*, 26–27.

been infected. Bonhoeffer's theology, which stood in opposition to the abstractions of Nazi theology, forced him to live in opposition to National Socialism.

In 1935, Bonhoeffer was asked to head up the first Seminary of the Confessing Church. In the midst of such a turbulent time, where the Bible was being distorted by Nazi theology and used to justify evil, Bonhoeffer was given the opportunity to instruct a class of seminarians who had been expelled from other seminaries because they had refused to accept Nazi ideology. His vision was to fuse rigorous theological training with a structure of communal prayer and worship that resembled monasticism.³⁶ He wanted the students to actually learn how to live the Christian life. Here we see Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology that rejects individualism at work. His vision was to have a community of men that lives together under the Word.³⁷

Further aspects of character were also revealed in this time. He took the posture of a servant of his students. He closed the gap between pupil and teacher which was common in German institutions. He asked his students to call him "brother" rather than "*Herr Direktor*". One student described Bonhoeffer as, "a person about whom one had the feeling that he was completely whole, a man who believes what he thinks and does what he believes in."³⁸ The Seminary at Finkelwalde was shut down by the Gestapo in 1937.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer found himself in the midst of confusion with regards to his family and the Confessing Church. Having already become somewhat involved in the resistance movement, his siblings (not believers) pressured him to become more involved. He balanced this pressure with the fact that his actions affected the whole of the Confessing Church.

Bonhoeffer was trying to discern what Christ would have him do in the midst of this fray. Here

³⁶ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 266–267.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 39.

³⁸ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 279.

we see Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology in action. He looked to the word Christ for his next step of action.

A significant turning point occurred for Bonhoeffer when he chose to get more involved in the resistance movement and the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He deliberated extensively on the issue and became convinced that God was leading him into deeper involvement.

Bonhoeffer's theology took a shift as he struggled through this dilemma and as he worked on his *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer began to believe that in order to be true to God in the deepest way one's relationship with God could not be lived legalistically by "rules" or "principles". He thought that Hitler's evil was forcing Christians, such as himself, into a deeper level of obedience to God where legalistic religion was not adequate. In the midst of engaging in serious deception and being a double agent in the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer thought he was being totally obedient to God.³⁹

In the years 1939–1944, Bonhoeffer developed his notion of "Religionless" and "Worldly" Christianity. This development in his theology reflects his desire to avoid a faith that flees from the world. This seems to mark a significant shift in his thought about the world and the gospel's relation to it. In *The Cost of Discipleship* he had emphasized the separateness of Christians from the world:

"They are only passing through the country. At any moment they may receive the signal to move on. They they will strike tents, leaving behind them all their worldly friends and connections, and following the voice of their Lord who calls."⁴⁰

In his later writings he came to emphasize the necessity of not leaving this world behind for the sake of the new world.⁴¹ We see here the evolution of Bonhoeffer's thought vis-à-vis

³⁹ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 366–370.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 270.

⁴¹ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 154.

gospel and culture. He became critical of the religious piety of Cultural Protestantism and advocated a worldly Christianity in the sense of full identification with the world in its suffering. In order to do this, the Christian must “really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other.”⁴²

This change, or evolution, in Bonhoeffer’s thought is likely a product of his having been involved in the resistance movement and having been sent to prison. Through these experiences, Bonhoeffer’s eyes were opened to aspects of the world that he had never seen before. He no longer dwelt in the community of a parish or the Seminary at Finkelwalde. He was, rather, in prison where there was no such community of discipleship to which he had become accustomed. His worldview was clearly changed by his experiences in the years 1939–1944.

Bonhoeffer was also rethinking his missiology, which can be seen in his later thoughts on evangelism. In prison, he had ample opportunity to proclaim the gospel to his co-inmates, as he had claimed was the mission of church in *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this context, however, he found it more appropriate at certain times to remain silent with the gospel message. We observe in his letters more tact and wisdom with regards to evangelism. On the occasion of bombing in the environs of the Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer wrote the following: “I couldn’t bring myself to offer him any Christian encouragement or comfort; all I did was to look at my watch and say, ‘It won’t last more than ten minutes now.’”⁴³ Bonhoeffer’s experiences in prison were bringing him into a deeper identification with the world and its plight, and his missiology was being changed in the process.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 361.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 168, 199.

One of the difficulties with tracking Bonhoeffer's thought is that it was evolving right up until the day of his death. He was only 39 years old when he died, and it is difficult to say how his theology would have evolved had he been given more time. What can be surmised is that the context of the 1930s and 40s in Germany was critical in shaping his theology and its praxis. The political and ecclesial climate forced him to make very difficult decisions and to act in accordance with his beliefs. With exposure to very difficult circumstances, his missiology was given more nuance. Bonhoeffer became more sensitive to a culture of suffering and duress, and where he would have once advocated a bold proclamation of the gospel, he came to see that his identification with the world in its suffering is equally important.

This evolution of his thought was contingent upon his christology and his refusal to abstract Jesus from the world in which He was incarnated. What naturally follows is Bonhoeffer's refusal to abstract the Church from the world, since it is the real body of Christ. The church must then meet the world at its own level and not deliver the gospel with no regard for culture, context, and language.⁴⁴

By way of conclusion, Bonhoeffer's later missiology can be summarized by his words: "Action which is in accordance with Christ is in accordance with reality because it allows the world to be the world; it reckons with the world as the world; and yet it never forgets that in Jesus Christ the world is loved, condemned and reconciled by God."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ contra., Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 211.

⁴⁵ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 148. Originally quoted from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, 230.

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