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The Political Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Ethical Problem of Tyrannicide

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THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND THE ETHICAL
PROBLEM OF TYRANNICIDE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Political Science

by
Brian K. Watson
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PREFACE

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and pretty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the relationship between political theology and the ethical problem of tyrannicide in the life and works of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Beginning with an examination of his theological views, I argue that Bonhoeffer's Christo-centric worldview forms the basis of his subsequent ethical and political beliefs, as well as his motivation for participating in an assassination plot against Adolph Hitler. Bonhoeffer's desire to connect his understanding of Jesus Christ to the entirety of human life leads him to develop an unsystematic theological approach to ethics and the relationship between church and government. Concluding with an exposition on the implications of Bonhoeffer's resistance against the Nazi state with respect to Christian sinfulness, I argue that Bonhoeffer's political theology is ultimately characterized by faith. Rather than claiming his actions are justified according to ethical principles or just war arguments, Bonhoeffer acts against what he considered to be an evil force with the hope that his God offers forgiveness for those acting boldly yet sinfully.

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will argue that mid-twentieth century pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's participation in an assassination plot against Adolph Hitler represents an ethical problem for responsible Christian action in politics. This question of tyrannicide will be addressed in four chapters devoted to understanding Bonhoeffer's beliefs and self-understanding on the on the theological, ethical, and political implications of his actions. I begin by discussing Bonhoeffer's Christology, or his efforts to ground the meaning of human life in a Christo-centric worldview. The implications of this Christological worldview inform Bonhoeffer's approach to basic questions of ethics, particularly in contrast to other philosophical traditions. Finally, there are two chapters exploring how the relationship between his theological and ethical teachings influence his understanding of church and government. I will conclude by exploring the question of sinfulness with respect to Bonhoeffer's actions. Does he present a defense of his actions on theological or ethical grounds, or does believe his actions ultimately violate his Christian commitments? I will conclude by observing that while Bonhoeffer never directly admits that his participation in the plot was sinful, his writings at the end of his life vaguely point to an acceptance of the possibility that he has sinned in aiding violent resistance against Hitler and a desire for forgiveness from the God he attempts to serve. Nonetheless, although there are reasons to suspect Bonhoeffer may have been unwilling to give his actions full ethical endorsement, he also never expresses regret for assisting in a murderous plot. Bonhoeffer's ultimate conclusion is that responsible Christians must act in a "bold venture of faith" against injustice without certainty that their actions will be justified. Instead, they must place their faith in the mercy of God and in the example of Jesus Christ.

This argument will be presented in four chapters in which I attempt to present Bonhoeffer's thinking from the ground upward, beginning with his emphasis on Jesus Christ as the central figure around whom reality is focused and attaching that belief to his political actions. The four chapters are: Bonhoeffer's Christology, Bonhoeffer's Ethics, Church and Government One, and Church and Government Two.

Beginning with the Christology chapter, I will argue that Bonhoeffer's thought begins and ends with a focus on the importance of Jesus Christ to the historical situation of individuals in *this* life. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer challenges philosophical views from the Western tradition which he believes have contributed to the challenges facing Germany at the time of his writing. Bonhoeffer wishes to ground the meaning of human lives, ethics, and political life directly in the person of Jesus Christ, or the God who became human. Any worldview that appeals to deities, ethical programs, or natural forces for a justification of Christian life is unsatisfactory. His primary theological goal is to understand all of human life given the immediate importance of Jesus Christ to reality, both at the level of everyday human experience as well as creation broadly speaking. Therefore, although Bonhoeffer presumably hopes his work is applicable to all persons, his Christian presuppositions are inescapable when examining his beliefs. For the purposes of understanding his political theology and actions, I will assume the primary audience of his works were, indeed, Christians. It would be difficult to expect his contemporaries to be persuaded by appeals to the importance of Jesus Christ if they did not recognize the authority of Christian beliefs. Therefore, the conclusions of this thesis are similarly most applicable those who would share Bonhoeffer's presuppositions, especially Protestants. His Christological views form the center of all of his subsequent thinking, including his ethics and politics.

In the chapter entitled “Bonhoeffer’s Ethics,” I explore the implications of Bonhoeffer’s Christology for his understanding of Christian ethics, especially in contrast to conflicting ethical programs from classical and modern political thought. In order to explore the relationship between Bonhoeffer’s beliefs and actions, particularly in light of his complicity in a conspiracy to commit an act of violence, it is helpful to distinguish Bonhoeffer’s ethical views from much of the Western intellectual tradition preceding him. Although this contrast is not exhaustive, emphasizing the theological grounding of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought is beneficial to understanding his political theology. Against the analysis of many commentators of Bonhoeffer, I argue that his ethical views are inseparable from the Christo-centric theology that underlies his pastoral work, as well as his involvement in the German churches. In order to proceed from Bonhoeffer’s theology to his political actions, the intermediary role of ethics must be explored. In particular, Bonhoeffer’s rejection of paradigmatic schools of ethics thought (e.g. deontological, virtue, or consequentialist) in exchange for discipleship toward the will of God is key. As a Christian attempting to apply his beliefs to the historical crisis surrounding him, Bonhoeffer’s actions cannot be interpreted apart from the extent to which his Christian beliefs inform his understanding of ethical behavior. I conclude that Bonhoeffer’s view of ethics is grounded solely in the pursuit of God’s will in the context of his historical situation. He argues that since ethics receive their authorization from ‘above,’ or from God alone, then the most primordial concern of Christian ethical life must be to follow the will of God in the time and place circumstances of human life.

After discussing Bonhoeffer’s view of ethics, I then move to two chapters dealing with Bonhoeffer’s views on the relationship between church and government. The first section concerning the relationship between church and government will address Bonhoeffer’s early

political thought as it is recorded in his 1933 essay “The Church and the Jewish Question.” This somewhat infamous work is the first known record of Bonhoeffer’s public reactions to Nazi efforts to oppress the Jewish population within Germany. More specifically, Bonhoeffer’s early political thought comes in response to Nazi incursions into the internal workings of German Protestant churches which included efforts to persecute and deny ethnically Jewish Christians from participating in such churches. It is here that Bonhoeffer articulates an early rendition of his understanding of the divide between church and government, including responses the church may take against these unacceptable invasions from state authorities.

The second church and government chapter explores two final concerns of this thesis: Bonhoeffer’s political theology during the final years of his life, including the years of his participation in the German military intelligence wing’s (known as Abwehr) conspiracy, and the ethical implications of attempted tyrannicide given the Christological and ethical views expressed beforehand. I attempt to describe how Bonhoeffer’s understanding of church and government evolved toward a more sophisticated appreciation for the complexity of church-government relations during his later years, although his argument remains characteristically unsystematic. He concludes that Nazi Germany had violated its mandated role as a governing authority through its efforts to infiltrate the German churches. Worse, the Nazis had undone the fundamental role of government, to preserve the possibility of human beings having an openness toward the revelation of Christ, by persecuting its opponents and engaging in genocidal practices. From Bonhoeffer’s perspective, there could be no reconciliation between the abhorrent practices of the Nazi state and the preservation of genuine Christian ethics in Germany. His participation in the Abwehr assassination plot came as a result of his desire to end the war and participate in the restoration of his country when the crisis had subsided.

Ultimately, the ethical problem posed by Bonhoeffer's beliefs and actions is approachable if we understand his political theology to be grounded in faith. From the conclusions drawn from his Christology and ethics, and given how these conclusions inform his political theory, I argue that Bonhoeffer's self-analysis with respect to his actions depends on his understanding of the Christian need for forgiveness. Commentators on Bonhoeffer have improperly categorized him as a pseudo-just war thinker during World War II, or have sometimes dismissed the possibility that Bonhoeffer is occasionally a contradictory figure.¹ However, my conclusion is that Bonhoeffer's explicit appeal to Christian reliance on the forgiveness of God as a result of sin prevents him from offering clear ethical endorsement of his actions. While Bonhoeffer expresses neither a desire to recant himself, nor a justification for his decisions, his final writings provide us with some insight into his dependence on the mercy of God in the midst of political action. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's belief in Jesus Christ as the center of all reality is the key to understanding how he viewed his involvement with the Abwehr conspiracy. If reality exists for and through Christ, then Bonhoeffer's ethical objections to Nazism and Adolph Hitler must also proceed from the Christo-centric nature of the Christian life. While Bonhoeffer makes no appeals to moral or political laws, nature, or conscience, he acts against a tyrannical regime as a venture of faith. This act of faith is not dependent on justification, but upon the forgiveness of God.

¹ This view will be examined later in my thesis, particularly in regards to David M. Gides' *Pacifism, Just War, and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Church-World Theology and His Changing Forms of Political Thinking and Involvement* (2011) and Kenneth Barnes' essay entitled "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler's Persecution of the Jews" (1999).

Source Material

I will be relying on several of Bonhoeffer's works throughout this thesis, and primarily these are found in a recent seventeen volume series of translations known as the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Collected Works* (1996-2014) from Augsburg Fortress Press. Internal citations of these manuscripts will abbreviate the title of each volume along with the pagination containing the quote (e.g. DBWE 16: 25). Additionally, Bonhoeffer's unfinished magnum opus, *Ethics* (2004), will serve as the primary text of this thesis. The translation of *Ethics* I use is the same translation found in the collected works as volume six, translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas W. Stott. Unlike the other volumes, however, internal citations of this work will simply record the title and page number (e.g. *Ethics*, 10) so as to clearly note for the reader when Bonhoeffer's views come from this later work, as opposed to earlier or less important texts. Similarly, Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1997) as collected by his friend and student, Eberhard Bethge, will be abbreviated (LPFP) rather than cited as part of the collected works. Like *Ethics*, I will draw heavily from LPFP in the later chapters and wish to differentiate citations from it in order to be clear about the time and importance of the quotations selected. Finally, some commentary will be included from *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (2013), edited by Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge and also published by Fortress Press. This book contains selections from the collected works translations which are presented in compacted form. As with the collected works and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, I will abbreviate the title of the reader (DBR).

BONHOEFFER'S CHRISTOLOGY

*“Ever since Jesus Christ said of himself ‘I am the Life’ (John 14:5; 11:25), no Christian thinking or indeed philosophical reflection can any longer ignore this claim and the reality it contains.”*¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is frequently lauded by Christians from an array of traditions for his alleged civil and religious courage in the face of Nazism and the violence of the National Socialist regime. Despite being claimed as a martyr for the sake of his Christian beliefs and concerns for his Jewish fellows, it is often forgotten that Bonhoeffer had also proved himself to be one of the most formidable Christian theologians of the early twentieth-century at the time of his death. To understand the gravity of Bonhoeffer's choices toward the end of his life, we must appreciate the depth of his intellectual involvement with the Christian faith. I will argue in this thesis that Bonhoeffer's actions flow from his theological beliefs. His justifications and self-awareness, while sometimes obscure and difficult to tease out, are always rooted in the core teaching of his theological beliefs: that the central focus of all existence is the person of Jesus Christ.

In order to discuss how Bonhoeffer viewed his participation in attempted tyrannicide, it is valuable for us to know that Bonhoeffer understood the existence of both church and state as domains tasked with representing the will of God on Earth. Furthermore, reality itself is oriented around the expression of God's will through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The foundation of Bonhoeffer's theology and social thought is his Christology. Therefore, all of Bonhoeffer's writings and actions relevant to this thesis must be appreciated as consequences proceeding directly from his view of Christ as the center.

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Fortress Press DBWE vol. 6 (2004); pp. 249

To summarize the essential components of this chapter, I will argue that Bonhoeffer's Christology refers to the following claims: that Christ should be seen as a concrete and historical redeemer about whom the whole of reality is oriented. Christ, or the God who became human, has lived an earthly life in order to reconcile the gulf between God and human beings which has been created by godlessness, or what Christians have called sinfulness, the consequence of which is death. Upon achieving this reconciliation (found in the Christian teachings of the cross and resurrection), God has authored "mandates" to preserve order and make the knowledge and experience of Christ continually open to human beings. Nature, therefore, is defined by the affirmation of a reality centered around Christ, while what is unnatural rejects this reality.

While it may seem digressive to place such importance on Bonhoeffer's theological beliefs in a study of his political life, the foundational worldview which informs ethical or political decision-making should be fair game for a study of political theory. I will argue in this thesis that Bonhoeffer is a Christian man making decisions which have politically relevant consequences. Bonhoeffer's Christian presuppositions have a direct influence on his teaching and self-awareness. It is necessary to point out that Bonhoeffer does not begin with a politically motivated frame of mind, but from the perspective of a devout Pastor concerned with the suffering of others at the hands of his countrymen. The central motivating force behind his real life actions, or at least as he is able to articulate such a force, is worth including in a serious exploration of his life. Not to include Bonhoeffer's Christology as the center-piece of his ethical and political thinking would be to betray the integrity of his actions and ignore his own words.

Christ as the Center

Bonhoeffer begins his *Ethics* with a chapter entitled "Christ, Reality and Good," in which he dismisses the notion that Christian ethics can be addressed from the standpoint of the

individuated self, where the human mind asks “what is good?” or “how can I become good?” Instead, Christians must ask a radically different question: “what is the will of God?” Of course, the presupposition behind this question is a reversal from the thought of many Moderns, for whom the focus of ethical concerns originates within the self. Bonhoeffer is partially reviving an ancient claim that the truth of ethical concerns has its source independent of human capacities or artifice, though his views depart from the Classical Hellenists as well. In order to discuss Christian “ethics,” Bonhoeffer believes we must dispense with the mistaken belief that the boundaries of ethics begin and end with the human being. We must also abandon the mistaken equivocation between what is apparent to us from nature and what is revealed to us as the will of God. To do so would be to think from the outset that the self and the world in which it lives are the focus of real life and everyday concerns. He writes that “[t]he source of a Christian ethic is not the reality of one’s own self, not the reality of the world, nor is it the reality of norms and values. It is the reality of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ.”²

What distinguishes this Christological view of reality from modern ethical theories is the placement of Christ directly at the center of life, from which all other concerns proceed. All ethical concerns start from this fact and expand outward toward specific circumstances in human lives. Bonhoeffer believes that we must not place the influence of God in our daily lives at the margins of existence, but at the center of all phenomena. His view is that “Christ is [not only] the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of theology, but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture.”³

² Ibid 99

³ Ibid 341

According to this view, the Western world has lost track of how to understand the ‘presence of God with us’ by conceptualizing humanity and the world in the terms of Hugo Grotius: *etsi deus non daretur* (‘even if there were no God’).⁴ Bonhoeffer traces the development of this modern naturalism in a letter from Tegel prison to his student, friend, and eventual biographer Eberhard Bethge in July of 1944 where he identifies the “one great development that leads to the world’s autonomy” from a reality connected inseparably from God’s reality. Here it is useful to let Bonhoeffer trace the key figures in this development in his own words. He writes that:

In theology one sees it first in Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who maintains that reason is sufficient for religious knowledge. In ethics it appears in [Michel de] Montaigne and [Jean] Bodin with their substitution of rules of life for the commandments. In politics [Niccolo] Machiavelli detaches politics from morality in general and founds the doctrine of ‘reasons of state.’ Later, and very differently from Machiavelli, but tending like him towards the autonomy of human society, comes Grotius, setting up his natural law and international law [...]. The philosophers provide the finishing touches: on the one hand we have the deism of Descartes, who holds that the world is a mechanism, running by itself with no interference from God; and on the other hand the pantheism of Spinoza, who says that God is nature. In the last resort, Kant is a deist, and Fichte and Hegel are pantheists. Everywhere the thinking is directed toward the autonomy of man and the world.⁵

Bonhoeffer sees a Western intellectual culture which has placed God and ethics outside of daily human life, at the margins of existence. God is no longer conceived as the Hebraic Yahweh, a deity involved directly in the world’s affairs and concerned with the circumstances of real people, yet still above his creation. Instead, Bonhoeffer worries that God has been viewed

⁴ This is Bonhoeffer’s shortened paraphrasing of Grotius’ language. (See. LPFP, 359). Wüstenberg notes in an essay compiled in “Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought” (ed. Frick, Peter 2008) that Grotius’ actual statement from his *Prolegomena* reads as: *etiamsi daremus, quod sine summon scelere dari nequid, non esse deum* (“Even if we were to give – which cannot be done without great sacrilege – that there is no God”).

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 359

as either a distant organizing force or something indistinguishable from the natural order itself. The modern West has demoted human life, including ethical concerns, to a world constructed purely by natural ends; self-contained and mechanistic. As Gides notes, “[Bonhoeffer] creatively sought to formulate a Christian understanding of transcendence somewhere between the extremes of God’s total otherness and any equation of God and the world. Bonhoeffer’s solution is a ‘this-worldly,’ ‘ethical,’ or ‘social’ transcendence rather than notions of transcendence that rely on traditional or continental philosophy or metaphysics.”⁶ Bonhoeffer wishes for us to visualize Christ as the centerpiece of all life concerns so that ethical and political choices must be related back toward Jesus in order to have significance.

We can recall, as an example, in contrast to Bonhoeffer, the view of nature given to us by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* as a clear example of this orientation toward an autonomous life and world. The philosophical addition to modernity which Hobbes adds to the politics of human life are stated thusly: “For there is no such *Finus ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *Summum Bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old philosophers.”⁷ Rather than entertaining notions of the soul or a directedness toward ‘higher’ things as the ancients did, Hobbes writes that “when the words *free* and *liberty* are applied to anything but *bodies*, they are absurd.”⁸

One cannot help but notice that Hobbes equates necessity in the world with the ‘will of God’ in these passages—there is no appeal to the Christian scriptures on ethical choices or a proper way to live; more importantly for Bonhoeffer, there is no Christ at the center. The potential range of choices presented to us by Hobbes are contained exclusively within nature

⁶ Gides, 94

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 57

⁸ *Ibid* 136

itself, as well as the ‘necessary’ consequences once those choices have been made. They are never connected to any ‘higher’ form of moral thinking, nor are they teleologically directed toward any virtuous outcome. They are within the world itself. ‘Good’ political behavior in the *Leviathan* is constituted by explicitly and exclusively natural ends. Bonhoeffer believes this kind of autonomous view of life and nature has obscured the reality of God’s revelation from the world. Nature is self-sustaining and blind to any influence from the divine. The only ‘good’ is what reason has illuminated for us from what is apparent in nature.

For Bonhoeffer, when we imagine God as a working hypothesis placed at the boundaries of nature that fills in the void of mystery through the omnipotence of a secret hand, or some kind of cosmic interrupter who reaches down to mingle with the machinery of the world in occasional moments of punishment or reward, we push Christ to the margins and re-write the presentation of the Messiah found in the Gospels. Bonhoeffer writes to Bethge that Christ “helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.”⁹ Thus, it is essential to Bonhoeffer’s Christology that we understand Jesus as the god become human—the concrete and historical life of Christ who gave up the power and majesty of a deity and became a human being in the flesh. Furthermore, he did not come as a king over an earthly principality or as a conqueror of land and titles, but appeared instead as a Jewish teacher raised in Israel, and finally murdered at the hands of religious and political authorities. According to Bonhoeffer scholar Clifford Green, “[t]his centrality of Christ is the core of Bonhoeffer’s ethic of *one reality* constituted by the reconciliation of the God who became human in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

⁹ LPFP, 360-361

¹⁰ *Ethics*, Green, 5

Bonhoeffer's God is not nature itself or some kind of cosmic and distant watch-maker; he is the good shepherd to a lost and rebellious flock.

The Humanity of Christ in the World

According to Gides, "Bonhoeffer presents what is essentially the same theological position in different ways to meet differing conditions, with respect to varying life contexts, or in terms of the genre in which he is writing."¹¹ Despite shifting ethical and theological views found in Bonhoeffer's canon, all of these views proceed directly from an effort to comprehend the profound impact of Christ on human lives. Bonhoeffer roots his religious, philosophical, ethical, and personal work in the essential Christian teaching of Emmanuel, the God who became human. But in order to follow the vocabulary adopted by Bonhoeffer in his Christological work, we must understand what Bonhoeffer means when he refers to the humanity of Christ and why it matters to the real daily life concerns of human beings.

To begin, Bonhoeffer writes that "[t]he most fundamental reality is the reality of the God who became human. This reality provides the ultimate foundation and the ultimate negation of everything that actually exists, its ultimate justification and ultimate contradiction."¹² Since God has taken it upon himself to become human, Bonhoeffer believes that human life is affirmed by the doctrine of Christ's incarnation, and there is no need for humans to strive toward becoming divine themselves. Instead, the very definition of humanity, or what being human is intended to mean, has now been defined for us by the incarnation of Christ as the God who lived a human life. Bonhoeffer describes the importance of this incarnation as the moment in which the gulf between a godless world and its creator was bridged by the actions of that creator.

¹¹ Gides, 11

¹² *Ethics*, 223

But Bonhoeffer's view of the incarnation of Christ focuses on a narrative of Jesus which describes the Messiah as a king robed in the weakness of human flesh, as opposed to a gnostic event that raised humanity up to the divine level. In relation to Jesus, Clifford Green notes that Bonhoeffer is consistently using the term *Menchwerdung*, "becoming human."¹³ He writes that "God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid belief, or a law; God became human."¹⁴ Through the incarnation of Christ as a human being, Bonhoeffer is making a statement about how a humanity that had rejected God is now reformed and given reconciliation to God in Christ's having affirmed and embodied the intended human life. Now that Christ has redeemed the world, a new humanity restored by the grace of God and exemplified by Jesus is bursting forth in *this* world and *this* life. Furthermore, and as Green goes on to explain, Bonhoeffer "reverses an ancient theological dictum [...] that God became human in order that humans might become divine," and replaces it with the view that Christ's humanity makes true humanity possible – now human beings as they were intended are exemplified by Jesus himself.¹⁵ Therefore, because of Christ, a true and restored humanity is an emerging social and historical fact. The incarnation of God having lived a human life has instated an ontological reality where the sinfulness articulated by the Christian doctrine of the Fall has been overcome and human beings are restored.

Nature and the Four Divine Mandates

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the humanity of Christ is not a metaphysical claim about the *substance* of reality. Bonhoeffer is not using this Christological view to refute materialism or take a stand on the arrangement of the human soul. This is a teleological worldview which

¹³ Green notes that the root *Mench* means "human being," as opposed to *Mann* or "man."

¹⁴ *Ethics*, 99

¹⁵ *Ethics*, Green, 6

places Christ at the center of a universal narrative in which human beings are the recipients of God's love. Bonhoeffer writes that "[t]he world has no reality of its own independent from God's revelation in Christ. It is a denial of God's revelation in Jesus Christ to wish to be 'Christian' without being 'worldly.'"¹⁶ Thus, it is difficult to justify a distinction between the natural and super-natural realms in Bonhoeffer's thought. Instead, God's revelation of love through the concrete and historical life of Christ represents the embracing of human life. What remains to be seen is the response of this world to that revelation. How are we to view the natural in light of Bonhoeffer's opposition to the mechanistic and self-sustaining view of nature expressed by his characterization of modernity?

Everything in reality proceeds from the reality of Christ, or is rejected by it

Bonhoeffer wishes to avoid eliminating a conception of 'nature' from his thought as he fears other Protestants have done,¹⁷ but he does not wish to re-hash Catholic notions of Natural Law or Natural Theology. Instead, nature, or "the natural" in the DBWE translation, becomes about an experience of living for or against the reality of Christ.

The connection between Bonhoeffer's Christology and his conception of nature is found in his teaching on what he calls the four divine mandates. The key point in Bonhoeffer's Christology is God becoming human, and thus placing the focus of Christian living on *this* life, and the revelation of Jesus Christ in the concrete world. The core elements of human life which Bonhoeffer believes have been situated by God to direct human life toward him, called "mandates" by Bonhoeffer, pivot directly on the centrality of Jesus to all things. He writes that "[t]his relation of the world to Christ becomes concrete in certain *mandates of God* in the world.

¹⁶ Ibid 58

¹⁷ Ibid 172

The scripture names four such mandates: *work, marriage, government, and church.*^{18 19} By living within the context of these four demarcations of human life, humans are given the opportunity to have lives which affirm or deny the work of God through Jesus Christ. The natural is described by Bonhoeffer as “that which, after the fall, is directed toward the coming of Jesus Christ. The unnatural is that which, after the fall, closes itself from the coming of Christ.”²⁰

Human freedom thus emerges as a result of this rejection of God. The fall from creation into nature introduces the possibility of freedom: the freedom to direct oneself toward the reality of God or not. Bonhoeffer’s ‘mandates’ are formulated from his interpretation of the New Testament’s means of keeping the possibility of following God open to human beings, despite their preference for godlessness. According to Bonhoeffer’s description, “we speak of the natural as distinct from the created in order to include the fact of the fall into sin.”²¹ The introduction of godlessness into creation that is presented in Genesis 2 represents, for Bonhoeffer, the transformation from the world as ‘creation’ to something which accounts for a reality now plagued by the possibility of human rejections of God, i.e. of sin.

Again, it is important for us to distinguish Bonhoeffer’s terminology (i.e. nature) from what might be confused as statements about the material world, or the physics of material things. “The natural is that form of life preserved by God for the fallen world that is directed toward

¹⁸ So as not to veer off topic here, I will return to the references to biblical scripture in more detail in the sections devoted to Bonhoeffer’s church and government relations. His exposition on passages concerning marriage and work are beyond the scope of this project. It is also pertinent to note that the mandates translated as “marriage” and “work” in vol. 16 of DBWE are frequently translated as “family” and “culture” respectively.

¹⁹ *Ethics*, 68

²⁰ *Ibid.* 173

²¹ *Ibid.*

justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ”²² Nature in Bonhoeffer’s thinking is broader, encompassing all real dynamics of what exists within the human experience with the possibility of being ‘natural’ or ‘open’ to the revelation of Christ, as opposed to ‘unnatural’ and ‘closed’ toward Christ.

It is also important to remember that the mandates (marriage, work, government, and church) are connected to the natural in the sense that they are God’s means of *preserving* the possibility of being oriented toward or open to the reality of Christ. Green and DeJonge note that this conception of the mandates is a departure from the Lutheran conception of creation ‘orders,’ and a direct challenge to Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran contemporaries who had adopted the *Volk* (people, nation, or race) as an additional ‘order’ of creation. Bonhoeffer is hesitant to use the term “order” for fear of suggesting that the mandates are solely focused on a static element of human life. “This,” he says, “then leads all too easily to a divine sanctioning of all existing orders per se, and thus to a romantic conservatism that no longer has anything to do with the Christian doctrine of the four mandates.”²³ To focus too strongly on the *permanence* of the authorization of the mandates by God, rather than the actual *sanctioning* granted by God, risks confusing a present state of affairs with the role of the mandates to preserve Christ’s presence within human experience. The presence of these mandates in human life should not lead us to believe that they are sources of truth in and of themselves simply because they hold a permanent place in human life. Indeed, as some commentators have written of Bonhoeffer, “there [in the mandates] he rejects the idea that God’s will could be read directly from nature or history; fallen creation can be rightly understood only in the relationship to Christ”²⁴

²² Ibid. 174

²³ *Ethics*, 390

²⁴ DBR, Green and DeJonge, 685

In order to clarify the role of the mandates in human life and tie them to the Christological view of living a ‘natural’ life, Bonhoeffer defines the mandates thusly: “by ‘mandate’ we understand the concrete divine commission grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of scripture; it is the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution.”²⁵ The authority of these divine commandments, mandates, depends on the importance, sanctioning, authorship, of them as the commandment of God made real through Jesus Christ. They preserve the human experience of God’s expression of the love for the world through Christ. So, to be natural is to affirm the reality of God’s love for human beings. This expression of God’s love, called a revelation, becomes historically real as Christ and is preserved in human experience through the four mandates. To live a ‘natural life’ is to experience the reality of God’s love for human beings as God chose to express that love in the reality Christ, and we see the preserved representatives of that love in *this* life through the mandates which have been issued by God for that purpose. “The divine mandates depend solely on God’s *one* commandment as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.”²⁶ In other words, the mandates embrace the whole of human experience just as Christ himself does by becoming human.

So, when Bonhoeffer refers to natural life, he is talking about being open to Christ in the context of human experience. On why the mandates of creation are related to human experience he writes: “God’s commandment therefore always seeks to encounter human beings within earthly relationship of authority.”²⁷ In Bonhoeffer’s view, God has authorized four earthly mandates of human life to be institutions which the truth of Christ is preserved for the world.

²⁵ *Ethics*, 389

²⁶ *Ibid* 390

²⁷ *Ibid* 391

These mandates, derived from the text of biblical scripture, are tasked with orienting human lives toward the revelation of Christ. To affirm this reality by living a life devoted to Christ as described by scripture is to live a 'natural' life; that is, a life which reflects the fact that all of reality is created by God for and through Christ.

Given that human beings are granted the possibility of experiencing God through the revelation of Christ within the context of the four mandates, it remains to be seen how Christians are to apply this view of natural life to the world around them. Or, to place the implications of this Christological center directly into the concerns of Bonhoeffer's political actions, it remains to be seen how the topic of ethics arises from his theological views. The general background of Bonhoeffer's thinking on theology are essential to understanding his ethics and the intellectual framework of his involvement with the Abwehr conspiracy.

BONHOEFFER'S ETHICS

“Instead they must ask a wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God? This demand is radical precisely because it presupposes a decision about ultimate reality, that is, a decision of faith.”¹

The topic of Christian ethics, given the centrality of Jesus Christ to all things, must be appreciated from that vantage point. In this section, I will explore Bonhoeffer's commentary on ethics in which he grounds all moral thought in the Christological center of reality. For Bonhoeffer, if there is to be any discussion among Christians on ethics at all, the starting place must be the implications of Jesus Christ for daily life. Universally valid systems of ethical principles which have been manufactured by Western thinkers of all stripes are ultimately hollow because “systematic construction of metaphysical deduction paralyzes real life.”² Ethics have to be “authorized,” and this authorization occurs only under the expression of God's will. Identifying and following the will of God in one's historical situation is the ethical position Bonhoeffer prefers, not classical or modern ethical thinking. This section will examine these ethical claims in more detail, as well as lay the groundwork for the forthcoming sections on church and government.

Among all of Bonhoeffer's works, none contains more substance on the subject of the ethical than his appropriately entitled, though unfinished work, *Ethics*. I have relied on this work frequently in the previous pages and will continue to use it as the central source for Bonhoeffer's thought in this chapter. Within *Ethics*, I will rely primarily on three sections entitled, “Christ, Reality, and Good,” “Ethics as Formation,” and “The ‘Ethical’ and the ‘Christian’ as a Topic.” The use of these selections for the purpose of my thesis will be to demonstrate that Bonhoeffer

¹ Ibid 47

² Ibid 377

integrates his Christological views into the question of ethical life to the point that he, in many ways, alienates himself from many traditionally Western visions of ethics.

The difficulty Bonhoeffer finds in even approaching the question of a Christian ethic is that he believes we must abandon the questions which have prompted many to examine the topic at all. Those of us who are interested in Christian ethics must give up “the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: ‘How can I be good?’ and ‘How do I do something good?’”³ To include these questions as the starting places for taking up Christian ethics would be to violate the Christological center described in the previous section because doing so would be to place the root of the ethical at the level of human beings, grammatically focusing ethical inquiry on the subjective “I,” not through and for Christ. If Christians are able to take up the topic of ethics at all, they must begin by affirming the centrality of Christ. For this reason, we might say that Bonhoeffer throws out the possibility of virtue, normative, and consequentialist variations of ethical thought from the start, but this will be explored more thoroughly later.

This portion of Bonhoeffer’s thinking from the *Ethics* begins with the claim that human experience suggests to us that community is always in a state of disintegration. The question of the *ought* enters our experience when humans become aware of the self-restraint placed upon us by entering into communities and resigning ourselves to the constraints of human interactions. As Bonhoeffer explains, “[o]nly where the community disintegrates or where the order is endangered does the ought raise its voice, only to recede and fall silent again, once the order has been restored.”⁴ However, concrete communities are always, in some sense, decaying for one

³ *Ethics*, 47

⁴ *Ibid* 367

reason or another. Bonhoeffer calls this entropy a secular analogy to the doctrine of original sin. The consequences of godlessness in the world have a negative effect on the sustainability of human community. Bonhoeffer does not believe that human communities can be perfected by more Christian “righteousness” because God himself has endured rejection as a result of the human sinfulness in which both Christians and non-believers engage. Bonhoeffer takes the standard Reformation view of the doctrine of the Fall here. Bonhoeffer believes that whenever the ethical is taken up as a ‘topic,’ it becomes something discussed and deliberated until someone arrives at a ‘method’ or ‘rubric’ of behavior. When these discussions go too long, beyond the “emergencies” that prompt them, the ultimate question of the *ought* is “replaced by a flat-footed moralizing and a homespun pedagogical approach to all of life.”⁵ To allow our ethical theorizing to go on and on is to retreat from daily life, risking disastrous results. For the Christian to treat the ethical as a topic is to risk, ironically, undermining the benefit to daily life which was sought in the first place.

But so far Bonhoeffer’s views are unclear. After all, what does Bonhoeffer say ethics actually are, and what does an ethicist do to comprehend them? It is clear that he is adamant about the importance of daily life -- time and place – when he rejects ethics conceived as “a reference manual that guarantees flawless moral behavior.”⁶ This daily living – the tasks and processes of life—are not universals, he says, but are characterized by and made apparent by the concrete circumstances of one’s life. Bonhoeffer sets up his point about the time-place character of the ethical this way:

[...] it is the folly of ethicists to overlook this fact willfully and to start from the fictional assumption that human *beings* at every moment of their lives have to make an ultimate, infinite choice; as if every moment of life would require a conscious decision between

⁵ Ibid 368

⁶ Ibid 370

good and evil; as if every human action were to be labeled with a sign, written by divine police in bold letters, saying ‘Permitted’ or ‘Prohibited;’ as if human beings incessantly had to do something decisive, fulfill a higher purpose, meet an ultimate duty. This attitude is a misjudgment of historical human existence which everything has its time (Ecc. 3).^{7 8}

In order to approach this question about the ethical in time and place, as opposed to a principle or rule which is appealed to at all times and all places, we must tackle what Bonhoeffer calls the requirement for “concrete authorization.”

Authorization

The ethics of time and place are ‘concrete’ by being limited (or constrained) by the bonds and circumstances we are exposed to by participating in mutual relationships. In Bonhoeffer’s words, these relationships “inherently [involve] a certain order of human community and entails certain sociological relationships of authority.”⁹ The reverse approach, which is to treat the ethical merely as a topic to contemplate in the pursuit of universal principles, has the effect of atomizing individuals away from one another and erodes the health of communities since the ethical relation is no longer tied to the specific relationships and circumstances of one’s life, but to abstractions which are ‘out there’ -- not directly experienced by interacting with other people. As Bonhoeffer explains, “It is at least highly questionable whether isolated individuals, divorced from their historical situation and their historical bonds can be considered as a relevant ethical

⁷ See Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 “For there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time for peace.” NRSV

⁸ *Ethics*, 365

⁹ *Ibid* 373

agent at all.”¹⁰ These concrete relationships are no longer authoritative in informing ethical decision-making, but merely provide us with reference points from which we measure our status according to universal principles. Bonhoeffer fears this is making ethical choices on the basis of abstractions, not for the sake of others.

How then would Bonhoeffer have us think of the ethical? He realizes that these claims lead him to confront an unavoidable question: “*what is the basis of the concrete authorization for ethical discourse?*”¹¹ To begin his answer, he presents two alternative approaches, both of which he claims are problematic:

Two answers come to mind: either the authorization for ethical discourse is found positivistically in existing reality without any further attempt to interpret it, or one creates a system of orders and values within which authorization is ascribed to the parent, the master, the government.¹²

Bonhoeffer argues that grounding the authorization for ethical discourse in positivism, or from what is “given” in reality as we understand it, is limited by the fact that because we can only speculate based upon what is apparent to our knowledge and understanding at the present historical moment, the authorization would therefore be bound to change as our knowledge and understanding changes. If the authority of the ethical is derived from our apprehension of facts and speculations about reality, Bonhoeffer believes that changes in our knowledge and capacities will necessarily change our apprehension of what is “given.” To universalize what appears to be given in reality risks creating a permanence of antiquated or false information. These vulnerabilities make the positivist option nearly impotent in defining the boundaries between the mandates of government, church, family, and work. The authorization of these elements of

¹⁰ Ibid 247

¹¹ Ibid 376

¹² Ibid 376

human experience cannot depend on something as capricious as human understandings of what is 'given' in reality. They must be authorized by something else.

What is more, we can observe Bonhoeffer's tendency to reject rationalism or a strict adherence to the Western logical tradition as early as 1934 when, in giving a lecture on the theology of Karl Barth and the situation for German churches, he suggests that the incarnation of Christ defies the Aristotelian principle of identity (i.e. $A=A$) and its tandem principle of non-contradiction.¹³ Continuing his disapproval of rationalism later in *Ethics*, he writes that "[w]henever, in the face of the deification of the irrational powers of blood, of instinct, of the predator within human beings, there was an appeal to reason."¹⁴ Humans, Christian or otherwise, routinely and historically commit an error when we place reason on a high pedestal of epistemological justification. Bonhoeffer seems to believe, as a matter of historical observation, that the horrors of human ethical behavior have nearly always been sanctioned by appeals to human reason. Principles which are generally valid through either the access of unified human reason or historical experience will always raise the challenge of making the timeless into something temporal. Turning the abstract generally valid authority into the concrete and contextualized. Bonhoeffer says this would no longer be God's commandment, but accessed by and subject to human understanding, interpretations, and applications.

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer's second answer to the question posed above ("*what is the basis of the concrete authorization for ethical discourse?*"), a system of values and orders, is also limited. This second option is a system of values and orders within human life which, in the course of experiencing daily concerns, receives its authorization directly from governments,

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1005b "It is impossible for the same thing both to belong and not to belong to the same thing at the same time and in the same respect."

¹⁴ *Ethics*, 340

parents, employers, or clergy members. In this system, the values and orders established by the figure-heads within the mandates are taken as “direct manifestations of divine will, which [demand] submission.”¹⁵ The difficulty here, Bonhoeffer claims, is the seemingly arbitrary selection or delineation of the boundaries of authorization and authorities. In fact, Bonhoeffer believes that “the empirical positivism is replaced here by a metaphysical-religious positivism” where the authorization of ethical discourse is simply extended past empirical knowledge to the speculative and arbitrary choice of one particular mandate as the source of authority, as opposed to the others.¹⁶ This approach offers us no valid means of understanding the boundaries between which elements of daily life are contained within the authority of government as opposed to church, family, or work. The selection of one mandate as authoritative over the others is ultimately an arbitrary choice.

So, the question posed by Bonhoeffer still stands: what is the basis of the concrete authorization for ethical discourse if we cannot derive it from the knowledge given in empirical investigation or from the sociological orders and values chosen by a mandated figure-head? What gives the questions of the *ought* any meaning if rational contemplation, the state, and even the church are insufficient to authorize the ethical? He begins by arguing that “[w]e are thus led beyond the ‘ethical’ to the only possible subject matter of a ‘Christian ethic,’ namely, the ‘*commandment of God.*’”¹⁷ Here we receive the pastor’s decisive claim that “the commandment is the sole authorization for ethical discourse.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid 377

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid 378

¹⁸ Ibid

Bonhoeffer defines the commandment as “the total and concrete claim of human beings by the merciful and holy God in Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ This pivotal clarification of the grounding of authority is where Bonhoeffer combines the importance of the mandates with the time and place restrictions of concrete ethical life. As mentioned before in the previous chapter, the divine mandates are tasked with preserving the truth of God as it was expressed through Christ. Bonhoeffer cannot accept that Christians can come to know the will of God through principles or worldly orders since, he argues, “the concreteness of the divine commandment consists in its historicity; it encounters us in historical form.”²⁰ The will of God is offered to human beings through “the commandment of God revealed in Jesus Christ [and] is addressed to us in church, in the family, in work, and in government.”²¹ Through these mandates, God has made it possible for generations of Christians to realize that God has laid claim to what it means to be human through the life of Christ. By becoming human, God has taken ownership of everything that is the human experience. He taught and affirmed the good, the ‘natural’ life, while overcoming the bad via the Passion: Christ’s death and resurrection.²²

The role of the mandates is to offer the possibility of encountering the reality and character of God through Christ. In the church, knowledge of God and his revelation is taught and expressed through the church-community devoted to teaching the scriptures. Every time a spouse or parent shows love to a family member by putting the other’s needs above their own,

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid 379

²¹ Ibid 380

²² “God’s commandment allows human beings to be human before God. It lets the flow of life take its course, lets human beings eat, drink, sleep, work, celebrate, and play without interrupting those activities, without ceaselessly confronting them with the question whether that were actually permitted to sleep, eat, work, and play, or whether they did not have more urgent duties.” *Ethics*, 384-385

they mirror God’s love for human beings by acting according to his image. Human work, or vocation—our engagement with the broader culture surrounding us—offers the chance to exercise creativity and recognize contributions to one’s neighbors and enemies alike. And, in service to the authority of government, Christians imitate the humble servitude of Jesus himself by respecting the power established above them. As Bonhoeffer explains, “I honor my parents, keep my marriage vows, and respect the life and property of others not because of menacing ‘You Shall Not’ at the boundaries of my life, but because I myself affirm the given realities of parents, marriage, life, and property that I find in the center and fullness of life as God’s holy institution.”²³ The question of ethics in Bonhoeffer’s corpus begins and ends with the will of God as filtered through experiencing the importance of Jesus Christ to the world.

Consistent again with his Christology, this means that the basis of our ethical discourse, or how the presence of the *ought* becomes apparent to us, originates from beyond the appearance of the ethical in the material world as we apprehend it. As Bonhoeffer clarifies, “[t]he commandment of God is not, in distinction from the ethical, the most general summation of all ethical rules. It is not timeless and generally valid as opposed to being historical and temporal.”²⁴ The question of God’s will is established by God himself and is given to us through the mandates which are tasked with preserving the reality and consequences of Christ in our world. The commandment “is always a concrete speaking *to* someone, and never an abstract speaking *about* something or someone.”²⁵ We encounter the commandment of God through the real world: we are spoken to through creation, others, nature, events, etc.²⁶

²³ Ibid 382

²⁴ Ibid 378

²⁵ Ibid 381

²⁶ Psalm 19:1-4 “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no

This does not mean, however, that the will of God is going to be readily apparent to human beings simply because the mandates are tasked with this exposure. Bonhoeffer's claim is that the commandment and reality of God is steadily made known to human beings through innumerable situations and events contained within the context of the divine mandates and their presence in our daily lives. The commandment will never be universally available to the Christian at once or in a single moment since people are exposed to it according to the historical time and place circumstances of individual human lives. No single moment of experience can reveal the totality of the *ought* for every ethical question of human life. Our awareness of the commandment of God can only encounter human beings in the lives they actually live.

The central argument found here is that through God's graciousness toward human beings, the reality and accomplishments of God's love, made concrete through the life of Christ, are now bestowed on human life through daily historical experiences within the umbrella context of the divine mandates. God's 'will' for the Christian life can be delivered through the mundane encounters we experience every day without being conditioned upon their universality. Bonhoeffer goes on to clarify that "[t]he guilt we must acknowledge is not the occasional mistake or going astray, not the breaking of an abstract law, but falling away from Christ, from the form of the One who would take form in us and lead us to our own true form."²⁷ Thus, humanity writ large has been redeemed by Jesus having taken on human form and, through God's institution of the mandates, now has the possibility of conforming to the true form of human life exemplified by Christ.

speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and the words to the end of the world." NRSV

²⁷ *Ethics*, 135

To give a concrete example, Bonhoeffer explains that in contrast to the strict moralism he fears will result from the ‘orders and values’ approach to authorization mentioned above, that within the divinely mandated context of marriage:

The divine prohibition of adultery is then no longer the focal point of all I think and do in my marriage – *as if the meaning and purpose of marriage consisted in avoiding adultery!* Rather, marriage is kept and freely affirmed, which means moving beyond the prohibition of adultery, is actually the prerequisite for fulfilling the divine commission of marriage. Here the divine commandment has become permission to live married life freely and confidently.²⁸

Put another way, “It is not Christ who has to justify himself before the world by acknowledging the values of justice, truth, and freedom. Instead, it is these values that find themselves in need of justification, and their justification is Jesus Christ alone.”²⁹ In this statement Bonhoeffer again expresses that the grounding of all reality is ultimately found in Christ and is not subject to worldly artifice or human judgments. Not in an ambiguous divine grounding of values, but through Jesus himself. Furthermore, the burden is not on Christian defenders to establish the ethical legitimacy of Christ according to the criteria of values and principles held by anyone. To do so would be to mistakenly start from the view that the moral legitimacy of Christ was established by his agreement with those values and principles. Bonhoeffer turns this view upside-down: ethics do not justify Christ; Christ embodies the loving commandment of God. Justice, truth, and freedom find their affirmation in the crucified Christ and cannot be rightly invoked apart from their being oriented for him, but only experienced by human beings in the midst of their encounters within the movement of history.

Given this, does Bonhoeffer fit into the three paradigmatic schools of ethical philosophy? Is he advocating some variation of deontological, consequentialist, or virtue ethics? Certainly

²⁸ Ibid 382

²⁹ Ibid 345

not cleanly or clearly. Not at all if Bonhoeffer truly believes that the central ethical question posed to the Christian life is “what is the will of God?” or that this will is expressed through the person of Christ, then preserved as revelation in history. Instead, [t]he question of good must not be narrowed to investigating the relation of actions to their motives, or to their consequences, measuring them by a ready-made ethical standard.”³⁰ The root of the ethical decision cannot become about *being* a certain sort of person, adhering to certain abstract principles, or pursuing alternatives for the sake of their outcome alone. Under these circumstances, “[t]he commandment of God would again have become our own choice” rather than instated from above.³¹ Bonhoeffer’s ethics consist of choices of faith, the validity of which are measured only against the ultimate reality of God and Christ in the world. Ethics are not about *being* anything; they are about setting aside oneself and *following* the resurrected Christ.

The connection between the Christological and the ethical comes through when Bonhoeffer argues that only through the reconciliation of a world in naked rebellion against God can the problems of real life be overcome. He writes that “[n]ot ideals or programs, not conscience, duty, responsibility, or virtue, but only the consummate love of God can meet and overcome reality.”³² The Christological center of this ethical life is clear when Bonhoeffer explains that “[t]he world will be overcome not by destruction but by reconciliation. Not ideals or programs, not conscience, duty, responsibility, or virtue, but only the consummate love of God can meet and overcome reality.”³³ This declaration is Bonhoeffer’s resolute answer to the problem of death. The inescapable and horrible consequence of his real life choices is the

³⁰ Ibid 52

³¹ Ibid 378

³² Ibid 83

³³ DBWE 6:82-83

possibility of death, in the same way that a world in naked rebellion against God leads to death. If Hitler does not die in the assassination attempt, Bonhoeffer's life is certainly in danger. Furthermore, the lives of many of his friends and loved ones also involved in the resistance are at risk. But to overcome that death is to *follow* the one who reconciled the world to himself³⁴ in reliance on God's expression of mercy and love through Christ. Only by responding 'Yes' to the reality of Christ can Bonhoeffer escape the 'death' tied to his participation in the Abwehr plot since, through God alone, this death has been defeated.

Conclusions

With these Christological and ethical views in mind, it now becomes appropriate to shift toward an investigation of Bonhoeffer's understanding of church and government, as well as how his views inform the political actions of his own life. To this point, I have argued that Bonhoeffer's Christological focus prevents him from accepting any basis for human understandings of the *ought* apart from the redemption of humanity through Jesus Christ. Because God himself has taken on the human experience and, in so doing, bridged the divide between him and the godlessness of the world, Bonhoeffer argues that the historically real existence of Jesus has instituted a new status quo of reconciliation between God and humans. This revelation is now taught and preserved within the four mandates. The commandment of God—expressed in history as Christ and persevered through the mandates—*is* renewed humanity. God's 'will' is, therefore, a perfected humanity presented by God himself as an act of grace, the knowledge and experience of which is unveiled through the natural events and interactions of time and place. To Bonhoeffer, the ethicist who confuses this commandment with

³⁴ On this point Bonhoeffer quotes from John 16:33 "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" NRSV

universal principles, pursuits of virtue, or obedience to earthly authorities is a tragi-comic figure; a misjudger. Such a person has confused the person of Jesus with immanent phenomena or speculations. To *follow* the latter and not the former is the core ethical misunderstanding of the Christian West and, for Bonhoeffer, the dangerous basis of the approach to political life taken up by his German contemporaries.

CHURCH AND GOVERNMENT: I

Given the conclusions of the two chapters at the beginning of this thesis concerning the role of Bonhoeffer's Christology in informing his view of ethical life, I will now move on to the implications of these views for Bonhoeffer's understanding of church and government. The third and fourth chapters on church-government relations will address two periods of Bonhoeffer's thought: chapter three (entitled Church and Government I) will examine Bonhoeffer's earliest articulation of what may be considered a theory of politics. The primary text for this chapter, Bonhoeffer's 1933 sermon entitled "The Church and the Jewish Question," is developed in response to Nazi incursions into the practices of the German Evangelical churches. In it, we find a tripartite formulation of responses which the church can exercise toward the actions of a state. These responses come in three phases: questioning of the state, assisting the victims of the state, and direct resistance against the state. Church and Government: I addresses Bonhoeffer's opposition to Nazi infiltrations into the churches and explores the first two phases of the tripartite church-government relation mentioned above. The final chapter (Church and Government: II) will focus on the third phase of resistance toward government and whether or not Bonhoeffer's actions are consistent with the later political thought he articulates in *Ethics, Letters and Papers from Prison*, and his "Theological Position Paper on Church and State." Chapter four will also focus on the question of sin and how Bonhoeffer either justifies or condemns his participation in the Abwehr resistance on the basis of his aforementioned political theology.

Bonhoeffer and the "Jewish Question"

Bonhoeffer is very vocal in his protection of Jewish persons both before and during the war. Speaking in defense of the German Jewish population was more than a simple matter of

concern for others, however. Bonhoeffer's interest in the so-called "Jewish Question"¹ was rooted, like so much of his thinking, in the inseparable connection between Christ and the world. The German persecution of Jews was not only inexcusable on grounds of Christian care for suffering people, but also because the Jewish heritage of the Christian faith cannot be ignored. To abuse the Jews was to abuse the historical lineage of the German people's own religious identity.

The German Church Struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) "was the conflict between those who attempted the nazification of the ethos, beliefs, and principles of governance of the German Protestant churches and those, such as Bonhoeffer, who resisted these attempts."² An effort to infuse Nazi ideology and radical German nationalism into the churches was underway as early as the late 1920's. Led by the Faith Movement of German Christians (referred to as simply "German Christians" [*Deutsche Christen*]), these attempts to solidify right-wing radicalism within the Protestant churches reached a peak in January of 1933 when Adolph Hitler became the Reich Chancellor of Germany. In his introductory remarks to Bonhoeffer's collected works (during the 1933-1935 period of Bonhoeffer's residence in London), Clements notes that Bonhoeffer had engaged in fierce theological disagreement with the German Christians over the inclusion of concepts like "nation, race, and people (*Volk*) [as] fundamental items of Christian belief."³

Rooted again in his Christological views, Bonhoeffer vehemently opposed attempts to establish

¹ It is perhaps important to remember that the "Jewish Problem," as it was often termed, was a continental debate in Europe that had raged since before the time of Martin Luther. While modern readers might rightly sense the anti-Semitic undertones of the terms involved (I.e. a so-called Jewish "Question"), Bonhoeffer is choosing a softer noun than many Germans at the time adopted. By contrast, Adolph Hitler's "Final Solution" was coined in response to the blatantly racist Jewish "Problem."

²DBWE 13: Clements, 3

³ Ibid

these concepts as fundamental orders of human existence, dismissing any logic which argued that the “purity” of race or *Volk* could replace Christ as the center.

A long-held desire of the divided Evangelical⁴ churches before the rise of Nazism had been to establish a more unified organization of German Protestants, most of whom preached Lutheran doctrines. While this conviction may have arisen with noble intentions, Clements and Bonhoeffer both note that it made the churches susceptible to manipulation. Reflecting upon this fact in his letters from Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer writes that the submissive tendencies of German Lutheranism toward the state led to a civic vulnerability. He writes “[b]ut in this [the German] misjudged the world; he did not realize that his submissiveness and self-sacrifice could be exploited for evil ends.”⁵

In the summer of 1933, Hitler appointed Ludwig Müller, a former Chaplain in the German navy and strident member of the Nazi Party, as the official government liaison to the Protestant churches and tasked him with ensuring the unification of the German churches into one official Reich Church. The introduction of the so-called “Aryan Paragraph” by Müller and the German Christians into the institutional regulations of the German Evangelical Church had transformed the formerly unconnected German Protestant churches into a single organization dominated by Nazi influence and subservient to the regime’s civil codes of conduct. As a consequence, church members of “non-Aryan” (i.e. Jewish) descent would be banned from ministry and other church positions.”⁶ The Confessing Church, within which Bonhoeffer was a

⁴ Clements notes that, in translation, “‘Evangelical’ (*Evangelisch*) in the German context generally means ‘Protestant’ as distinct from ‘Catholic’ rather than a certain type of Protestantism, as in some parts of the English-speaking world” (DBWE 13:14). Where the term “Evangelical” is used in my thesis, it will reflect this translation unless otherwise stated.

⁵DBWE 13: Clements, 4; LPFP, 6

⁶ Ibid. Clements.

prominent figure, arose in opposition to these events. “The Barmen Declaration,” written by Bonhoeffer’s colleague and former teacher Karl Barth, contended that the state’s intrusions into the churches were unacceptable and that Christ himself, not the Führer, was the only rightful head of the church. Despite this public form of resistance offered by the Confessing Church, the declaration made no mention of the persecuted Jews within Germany.

Bonhoeffer’s heavily scrutinized (see footnote eight of this page) 1933 essay entitled “The Church and the Jewish Question”⁷ was written as a direct response to these developments within the German Evangelical Church, with particular interest shown in responding to the persecution of Jews and Jewish Christians. Since the document was written in response to the aftermath of the Aryan Paragraph, Bonhoeffer’s controversial comments here are best interpreted within the context of the problem raised: that is, baptized Christians of Jewish ethnic heritage were now being prohibited from participation in the churches. As a consequence, the majority of Bonhoeffer’s essay is a criticism of the exclusion of Jewish Christians from the Christian community, not a comprehensive response to Jewish persecution. His troublesome quotation of Martin Luther’s comments on the punishment of Jewish people is often regarded as a moment of anti-Semitism by observers.⁸ As we shall see from Bonhoeffer’s claims in later documents, however, this problem appears to have dissipated in the theologian’s later years.

In “The Church and the Jewish Question,” we see a relatively young Bonhoeffer attempting to address political infringements upon the German churches. According to my

⁷ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2009. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 12*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

⁸ Barnes cites three such critics: William Jay Peck, “From Cain to the Death Camps: Bonhoeffer and Judaism,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1973): 158-76; Ruth Zerner, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933-1945,” *Jewish Social Studies* 37 (1975): 235-250; and Stanley N. Rosenbaum, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish View,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (Spring 1981): 301-7.

opinion only, this document represents the thought of a younger Bonhoeffer who had not yet faced the prolonged atrocities of the Nazi regime. His commentary here is an admirable effort in reconciling his Christian beliefs with the suffering of the Jews within Germany's realm of influence. "The Church and the Jewish Question" by no means represents Bonhoeffer's most sophisticated commentary on political theory, nor is it to be connected too closely with his later decision to participate in the Abwehr resistance. While the implications of this essay set the stage for more serious political considerations later, it is primarily Bonhoeffer's public reaction to the crisis within the context of the churches.

For the purposes of my argument here, "The Church and the Jewish Question" will serve as a starting place for many of the themes and questions involved with Bonhoeffer's view of church and government, as well as the pressing ethical problem of tyrannicide. He begins by describing two problems posed to the church by the unequal treatment of Jews:

1. "How does the church judge this action, and what is the church called upon to do about it?"
2. "What are the consequences for the church's position toward baptized Jews in its congregations?"⁹

At the time of the conflict, Lutheran views of church and state relations dominated theological discussions concerning political affairs. The so-called "Two Kingdoms" doctrine of heavenly and worldly realms was commonplace among the Protestant clergy, not to mention the culture at large. On this view, church and state both exist within a worldly kingdom separated from the kingdom of heaven. The church is not separate from the world, but is part of it. While God has chosen to reign over the spiritual heavenly kingdom of believers through Christ -- the expression

⁹ DBWE 12:362

of God's grace -- the worldly kingdom of material and flesh is ruled exclusively by government through the creation and enforcement of laws. These laws are necessary in order to restrain the evil committed by those who are not members of the heavenly kingdom; or those who have not devoted themselves to the grace offered by Christ. As one commentator writes "[t]his state-supporting theology of Bonhoeffer's professors and most other church leaders, which lent itself to passive acceptance of state directives on the part of church and citizens (in theory and in fact), was consistent with the German ecclesial structure and history in pre-Weimar and Weimar years."¹⁰ The Lutheran interpretation of Romans 13:1-7¹¹, therefore, concludes that the state's authority reigns over the church as the primary establishment of God's will on Earth.

Bonhoeffer characterizes the Lutheran view this way:

There is no doubt that the church of the Reformation is not encouraged to get involved directly in specific political actions of the state. The church has neither to praise nor to censure the laws of the state. Instead, it has to affirm the state as God's order of preservation in this godless world.¹²

Though Bonhoeffer will soon challenge the doctrines of his inherited denomination later in the essay, he recognizes the role of the state as a righteous wielder of force, though the use of this force has complicated moral consequences. He writes that while the church "knows about the

¹⁰ Gides, 66

¹¹ "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Rom 13:1-7, NRSV.

¹² DBWE 12: 362-363

essential necessity for the use of force in this world, [it also] knows about the ‘moral’ injustice that is necessarily involved in the use of force in certain concrete actions.”¹³ This comment is striking for two reasons: first, Bonhoeffer admits an awareness from the perspective of a churchman that the state will often veer into unjust applications of its authorized role. Second, and directly relevant to the heart of my thesis, this comment suggests an early rendition of Bonhoeffer’s acceptance that sin is an inherent risk of direct political action. He is not yet ready to flesh out the implications of this fact on the lives of individual Christians, having yet to be pressured by the circumstances of the decade to come. Still, this admission demonstrates that his early view of government includes the possibility of unjust uses of force within the context of a larger enterprise.

However, Bonhoeffer does make clear in “The Church and the Jewish Question” that the church itself ought not to take direct political action against the state, a claim he will affirm for the remainder of his life. It is not the church’s role to presume to function as the state by creating or enforcing laws. Nor can the church act as a political force against specific declarations of the state. “Instead,” Bonhoeffer writes, the church “can and must, precisely because it does not moralize about individual cases, keep asking the government whether its actions can be considered *legitimate state* actions, that is, actions that create law and order, not lack of rights and disorder.”¹⁴ This statement is a rare but somewhat vague declaration about the specific functions of the state. As Bonhoeffer will go on to explain, the legitimacy of state action is whether the state is creating “law and order, not lack of rights and disorder.”¹⁵ The character of the state is to create law and order by exercising force. The role of the church is not to

¹³ Ibid 363

¹⁴ Ibid 364

¹⁵ Ibid

challenge for control of these operations, but the church must always clearly question the state as to whether it is truly fulfilling its legitimacy and character. This is not taking responsibility away from the state, but actually placing the burden of law and order entirely in the hands of the state.

It is also appropriate to note that Bonhoeffer's use of the term "state" will evolve over time and become something different in his later thought. In "The Church and the Jewish Question," he had not yet developed his work on the four mandates I have identified in previous chapters. As a result, the notion of 'government' as an authorized mandate of natural life had not been established. In this 1933 essay, the use of "state" tends to lump together Bonhoeffer's later understanding of government as a mandate with the actions of a particular regime. In the final chapter entitled Church and State: II, I will argue that Bonhoeffer's work in *Ethics, Letters and Papers from Prison*, and other later works, distinguishes between government and state. At the time of "The Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer's political theology did not yet recognize this distinction.

Bonhoeffer had, however, made a distinction between the actions of the church and individual Christians. He writes that the church "cannot prevent individual Christians, who know that are called to do so in certain cases, from accusing the state of 'inhumanity;' but as church it will only ask whether the state is creating law and order."¹⁶ The actions of individual Christians cannot, therefore, be confused with the ordained functions of the church at large. The scope of Christ's relevance to human lives cannot be reduced to only the domain of the church. On the other hand, neither can the church take on the moral freedom of individuals to act against the government whenever there are accusations of state malpractice. However, it is not until later in *Ethics*, LPFP, and "Theological Position Paper on Church and State" that his moral

¹⁶ Ibid 364

distinction between church and individual Christians is explained in a meaningful way. This too will be a subject of the final chapter.

Question One: Three Possibilities of Church Responses to the State

It is under these general parameters we find the somewhat famous (or infamous) “three possibilities for action that the church can take vis-à-vis the state” which Bonhoeffer describes as responses to Nazi persecution.¹⁷ The first two possibilities mentioned are the following:

- “[F]irst [...] questioning the state as the legitimate state character of its actions, that is, making the state responsible for what it does.”
- “*Second* is service to the victims of the state’s actions. The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”^{18 19}

While the first action is summarized by Bonhoeffer’s comments on the church’s ability to question the legitimacy and character of the state, the second action prompts us to reflect on the consequences of this possibility of action for the persecuted Jews in Germany. The second action is the charitable work of Christians for the world, but does not directly challenge the authority of the state in acting unjustly. At this stage, the church is not seeking to prevent injustice from the state. Instead, according to Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of Galatians 6:10, Christians are obligated to care for those who receive such injustices from the state. And, as Bonhoeffer notes, this obligation extends beyond help toward only fellow Christians. Rather, the good of all in response to persecution is given to Christians and non-Christians alike.

¹⁷ Ibid 365

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Here Bonhoeffer adds a quotation from Gal. 6:10: “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” NRSV

Interpreters of Bonhoeffer have argued that his return to Germany from a second trip to the United States in 1939 is an example of these first two actions. According to Gides, Bonhoeffer's return was an explicit break from the two-sphered thinking of traditional Lutheranism. The division of spirit and world is shattered by Bonhoeffer's direct participation in political matters on explicitly Christian grounds. This choice also defies the sequestration of the Confessing Church's "Barman Declaration," instead engaging directly with the damage within Germany. Bonhoeffer's return to his home country is a moment of interaction between church and state as described by the first possibility of action and a real world example of Bonhoeffer's rejection of the Lutheran Two Kingdoms doctrine. His desire to participate in the healing of Germany after the war is described by the second possibility. By noting his mistake in returning to America in his letter to Reinhold Niebuhr,²⁰ Bonhoeffer confirms that the church at large may question the state and assist the victims of state action. A tacit resignation to the authority of the state and the aftermath of its actions cannot exist.

Next, there are two widely read English translations of Bonhoeffer's third possibility for action by the church which can be found below:

- DBWE vol. 12, p.365-366:

“The *third* possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.”

²⁰ Bonhoeffer's letter to Niebuhr read as follows:

“I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this time with my people Christians in Germany will face a terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.” Bethge, 655

- *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, p. 225:

“The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”

For my purposes, the differences in these two translations are nuanced and I do not have the requisite knowledge of the German language to resolve any conflicts. I will instead assume that Bonhoeffer's phrase “direct political action” is a plausible interpretation which satisfies the intent of both translations.²¹ By this, I take him to mean the church taking on a posture of disobedience toward the government's authority to create and sustain law and order. Direct political action by the church is permissible “if the church sees the state to be failing in its function of creating law and order” by creating injustice and disorder. In the historical circumstances of the time, Bonhoeffer began to see state intrusions into the functions of the church through the actions of the German Christians and the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph as examples of the state failing to uphold its proper role.

According to Bonhoeffer, the “obligatory exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or a ban on missions to the Jews” as stipulated by the Aryan Paragraph, is an example of a state attack on the nature of the church.²² The German Christians' efforts to persecute Jews from within the churches themselves abused the mission of the church. Such an act by the state is one of self-negation; an instance of enforcing too much order upon the mandate tasked with teaching the truth of Christ to the world. Rather, “[t]he church cannot allow the state to proscribe for it the way it treats its members,” particularly baptized Jews within the churches.²³

²¹ DBWE 12: 363

²² Ibid 366

²³ Ibid 368

Question Two: “Gentile” and “Jewish” Christianity

Because of this view, Bonhoeffer answers his second question concerning the treatment of Jews, baptized or otherwise, in controversial ways.²⁴ To begin, Bonhoeffer writes the following:

From the point of view of Christ’s church, Judaism is never a racial concept but rather a religious one. Rather than the biologically dubious entity of the Jewish race, it means the ‘people Israel.’ It is God’s law that constitutes the ‘people’ Israel; thus, one can *become* a Jew by accepting the law.²⁵

A Christian church of the “Jewish” variety is one where the exclusion of members based on observances of divine law is valid. Biblically, Bonhoeffer is referring to controversies in the early Christian churches concerning the relations between Jews and Gentiles. Bonhoeffer writes, “*Jewish Christians* in the church’s sense are those who see their belonging to the people of God, to the church of Christ, as *determined* by their observance of divine law.”²⁶ The apostle Paul, according to one account,²⁷ confronts the apostle Peter about excluding Gentile Christians from sharing a meal with the Jewish Christians because the gentiles were uncircumcised, violating a sacred tradition of Jewish ritual practice. Bonhoeffer’s view of church does not accept exclusionary practices within the church beyond baptism.²⁸ Instead, “Gentile Christians [...] see no other prerequisite for their belonging to the people of God, to the church of Christ, than being called to it by God, through God’s Word in Christ.”²⁹ To reject membership from the churches because of a person’s ethnic heritage is to violate the basic mission of the church. He writes that

²⁴ Recall footnote eight of this section concerning Bonhoeffer’s critics.

²⁵ DBWE 12: 368

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Galatians 2:11-13

²⁸ Hence Bonhoeffer’s continual use of the term “baptized Jews” to describe individuals of Jewish ethnic heritage who had become members of the Christian church, as opposed to non-baptized Jews toward which the church has obligations to preach to and assist against the state.

²⁹ DBWE 12: 368

“to exclude persons who are racially Jewish from our ethnically German church would mean to make it into a church of the Jewish type.”³⁰

It is unfortunate that Bonhoeffer maintains the term “Jewish Christianity” in light of the atrocities around him. To the contemporary reader, the insensitivity of this description is disconcerting. However, it is not impossible to appreciate Bonhoeffer’s efforts from a charitable perspective. Central to the depth of Bonhoeffer’s Christology is the reconciliation between God and human beings on the cross. A further implication of this reconciliation is the creation of a church, centered around the reality of Christ, which no longer recognizes the in-group, out-group distinctions demanded by traditional law.³¹ Under this view, the so-called “Gentile Christian” approach according to Bonhoeffer, for the church to invoke any ritual or legalistic discrimination toward baptized members of the church, thereby preventing them from participating in the church-community, is to invoke an antiquated custom characteristic of early Jewish Christians as Peter did in his episode with Paul in Galatians. Bonhoeffer’s use of the “Jewish Christian” designation is misleading to those seeking to make sense of Bonhoeffer’s responses to the state in “Church and the Jewish Question.” In the German Christians’ efforts to exclude Jews from the churches, they have taken on a trait characteristic of the “Jewish” identity they claim to despise. It is the hypocrisy of Bonhoeffer’s opponents that, in the context of the Church Struggle, his criticism intends to expose.

It is instructive for us that Bonhoeffer chooses to focus on the Psalms, a centerpiece of the Hebrew Bible, in his teaching on Christian prayer. *Prayerbook of the Bible* [DBWE 5:155-160] confirms, in Greene’s view, that Bonhoeffer’s Christological emphasis included the use of

³⁰ DBWE 12: 369

³¹ Three passages from the Pauline epistles are relevant here: Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11, and Ephesians 2:11-22.

Old Testament scriptures in a time when German theological teaching had allowed anti-Jewish sentiments to obscure the role of the Old Testament in Christian life. Bonhoeffer controversially reminds his German students that the reality of Christ is affirmed by a tradition of prayer which includes the ancient King David of Israel. He writes that “we who pray are, first of all, the whole community of faith in which alone the entire richness of the Psalter can be prayed.”³² In order to learn how to pray, Christians must follow the practice of Jesus himself, who in teaching his disciples to pray, made use of his Hebrew ancestry. The Germans Christians cannot, therefore, purge the Christian church of Jewish influence without purging the tradition of Christ himself.

Conclusions

While “The Church and the Jewish Question” provides us with a beginning of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of resistance against state actions, the ambiguity of the “three possibilities of action” is problematic. Bonhoeffer is simply too vague. For example, it is not easy to tease out what Bonhoeffer means by claiming that the state must “create law and order, not lack of rights and disorder.”³³ The issue of ‘rights’ is raised here in reference to the proper role of the state but never addressed again. A sophisticated basis from which laws and rights are to be considered is not explored here, though we can infer that such topics would necessarily include the message of Christ since “it is from the Christian proclamation and faith that the state receives its own rights.”³⁴

What is more, Bonhoeffer contradicts himself about when the church may or may not oppose the state. Toward the beginning of his essay, he writes that “[e]ven on the Jewish question today, the church cannot contradict the state *directly* and demand that it take any

³² DBWE 5:160

³³ DBWE 12: 364

³⁴ Ibid 365

particular different course of action.”³⁵ Later, of course, such a “seizing of the wheel” is permitted when the state encroaches on the church’s ability to spread the Gospel and include baptized Jews in that mission. Still, Bonhoeffer’s efforts to stand against the German Christians are admirable regardless of how persuasive “The Church and the Jewish Question” is in terms of political theory. In light of the somewhat fickle response of the Confessing Church’s “Barmen Declaration” and its silence on the suffering of the Jews, Bonhoeffer defends the Jewish population like few others in his community.

What we can learn from Bonhoeffer’s early thought in this essay is two-fold: first, that the division between church and government is affirmed by Bonhoeffer’s description of their respective role, and that those role conflict with the broader Lutheran tradition. Second, this division of church and government conflicts with the “Two Kingdoms” doctrine since the church has obligations to question the state, heal the state’s victims even when asked to do otherwise, and to directly oppose the state when its rightful mission is usurped. Of course, the specific roles of church and government are impossible to know from “The Church and the Jewish Question.” But we see an early rendition of the themes which will become more broadly addressed toward the end of Bonhoeffer’s life.

³⁵ Ibid 364

CHURCH AND GOVERNMENT: II

“Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it? What decisions and painful separations will it entail? We must take this question to him who alone knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure.”¹

In this second chapter on Bonhoeffer’s views of the church-government relation, I will draw from *Ethics*, “Theological Position Paper on Church and State,” (TPPCS) and *Letters and Papers from Prison* to present his understanding of political life during his final years (1940-1945). Then, to conclude, I will examine the question of Christian sin with respect to Bonhoeffer’s complicity in attempted tyrannicide. How did Bonhoeffer view his actions from an ethical standpoint, and how does his Christology shape his self-understanding given the ethical problem confronting him? The repercussions of ‘seizing the wheel’ may come at great cost to both the government (see TPPCS) as well as the individual (see LPFP), but this is the risk Bonhoeffer takes in a bold venture of faith: he has no guarantee that he will not become guilty in this effort, but such a risk points him back to the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christ came as a merciful savior, and it is that mercy that Christians and Bonhoeffer must rely upon when taking action to oppose the mandated authority of government.

I. Government and Church: The Prison Years

Bonhoeffer’s Later Political Theology

Much of Bonhoeffer’s thinking had evolved between 1933 and his writings in *Ethics*, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and “Theological Position Paper on Church and State,” possibly as a result of the stresses of war or merely the passage of time, but I want to return to two key distinctions which Bonhoeffer vaguely alludes to in “The Church and the Jewish Question,” but

¹ DBWE 4:40

now explores in greater detail in TPPCS, as well as *Ethics*. First, the difference between government and state; second, the responsibility of individual Christians versus the role of the church generally. To begin this chapter, I will use TPPCS and *Ethics* to establish the basic political theory behind Bonhoeffer's decision to aid the conspiracy. Through the two major distinctions mentioned above, I will argue that Bonhoeffer maintains the Christological authority of government, while providing for the possibility of resistance against particular states by individual Christians. The more personal circumstances of Bonhoeffer's decision, as well as the consequences of that choice on his thought as a whole, will be addressed in the second part of this chapter.

In the TPPCS, penned by Bonhoeffer sometime during his later years (1940-1945), we see an affirmation of many of themes from "The Church and the Jewish Question" written nearly a decade earlier, except that his exploration of the specific roles of government and church in relation to one another is described in greater depth. Furthermore, this work is Bonhoeffer's most concise articulation of the boundaries between church and government when compared to the piece-meal approach we find in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. He is speaking with largely general language here, choosing not to relate his specific claims to the historical details of Germany at the time, though we again see his commitment to the importance of time and place considerations for making ethical choices.

Government Grounded from 'Above'

The measure of a good government is the extent to which it creates and preserves law and justice where the other mandates (church, family, and work) are free to affirm Christ.

Bonhoeffer interprets Romans 13² as the scripture's way of instituting a mandate that affirms the will of God by its very existence. He clarifies that "[t]he concept of the state is alien to the New Testament," but "[g]overnment is the vicarious representative action of God on earth."³

Bonhoeffer's vision of a Christian basis for government lies in his interpretation of scriptural references to the authority of governing powers, but does not equate such authority with an approval of every form of statecraft or every action of government. Furthermore, he believes that the intellectual tradition of the West has obscured the biblical grounding of government and replaced it with immanent sources of authority; or, what he calls government from 'below.'

What Bonhoeffer actually means by government from 'below' is the grounding of government in either human nature, sin, or in the life and culture of a people (*Volk*). Generally speaking,

Bonhoeffer makes clear that government cannot be authorized by worldly elements in the following passage:

Wherever the state is derived from created human nature, the concept of government is dissolved and reconstructed from below [...]. Where the state becomes the fulfillment of all spheres of human life and culture, it forfeits its true dignity, its specific authority as government.⁴

Government which is grounded in the fulfillment or right ordering of *human nature* is attributed to the Classical thinkers, especially Aristotle and much of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Meanwhile, the government grounded in life and culture is attributed to Hegelian influences and 19th century Romanticism. In response to both, Bonhoeffer writes that "[i]n distinction from the forms of commonwealth permitted by God, government is established and ordained by God

² "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is not authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Rom 13:1-2 NRSV

³ DBWE 16:503-504

⁴ Ibid 508

alone. People, culture, social nature, etc. are world.”⁵ These views typify Bonhoeffer’s understanding of government from ‘below,’ where any statecraft is constructed on the basis of some kind of human fulfillment. He writes that in Aristotle, for example, the *polis* is “the highest perfection of the rational nature of the human being.”⁶ Also, in his view, Augustine’s contribution to Western formulations of government was to ground its basis in the Christian doctrine of the fall—a view which later took hold in the Reformation. Bonhoeffer also rejects natural law as the legitimate basis of government because it has been historically ambiguous and justified under suspicious authorities. He argues that natural law “can establish the tyrannical state as well as the state governed by laws, the people’s state as well as imperialism, democracy as well as dictatorship.”⁷ Ultimately, Bonhoeffer is concerned that “the establishment of the state in sin as well as in human nature leads to a concept of the state in itself and thus apart from its relation to Jesus Christ.”⁸

Bonhoeffer rejects these ‘worldly’ groundings of government because, for him, to speak about government at all is only sensible with the understanding that all things are made through Christ. This mediating term, “through,” is essential since it places the validity of political life and government within the authority of what God has accomplished for human beings, not in what humans are capable of accomplishing for themselves. Any state, or particular iteration of government, can be measured against its obligation to affirm the other mandates regardless of its rhetoric or superficial efforts to appear religious.

⁵ Ibid 510

⁶ Ibid 506

⁷ Ibid 513

⁸ Ibid 510

The 'being' of government as a mandate has been instituted by the authority of God, but the actions of a particular government can always be questioned by the church. Bonhoeffer refers to four examples in the Bible where the language of 'for' and 'through' Christ appears most clearly:

- Colossians 1:16-17 “[F]or in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers”
- John 1:3 “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”
- 1 Corinthians 8:6 “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”
- Hebrews 1:2 “but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.”

For these reasons, Bonhoeffer believes it is impossible to view any category of the natural⁹ human experience as being apart from Christ if we are to accept the New Testament claims.

As has been mentioned before, the specific authorization of government as a mandate and the expectation for service and obedience under its rule is derived from Romans 13, and now Bonhoeffer adds 1 Peter 2. At the time of authoring his TPPCS, Bonhoeffer is comfortable with government having the power of the “sword,” to borrow Augustine’s term, in order to accomplish the “negative task of punishing the wicked but also the positive task of commending

⁹ Again, the term “natural” is understood in Bonhoeffer’s terms: “that which, after the fall, is directed toward the coming of Jesus Christ.” *Ethics*, 173

the good as well as the godly.”¹⁰ ¹¹ Bonhoeffer clarifies that the action of government “refers not to an action that is Christian but an action that does not exclude Jesus Christ.”¹² Whether or not governments are aware of their divinely authorized task of establishing and preserving order to create space for the other mandates, especially the church, to teach the world about Christ, is not relevant. A seemingly secular state can perform this function without necessarily setting out to do so. Indeed, even if the state explicitly desires to repress its task of preserving order and justice for the sake of Christ, Bonhoeffer believes that this rejection only proclaims the truth of God by creating a “witness to the name of Christ through the suffering of the church-community.”¹³ The government, in a way, inevitably serves the cause of Christ and his victory over death regardless of its intentions. It either embraces its role as a preserving power, or it makes martyrs out of those who become its victims.

But Bonhoeffer’s distinction between grounding government from ‘above’ rather than ‘below’ has frequently been misinterpreted by scholars who confuse Bonhoeffer’s use of government as a mandate with judgments of particular regime types. For example, Green and DeJonge note that Bonhoeffer’s “vision of government from above also challenges if not a democratic form of government, certainly a democratic justification for it”¹⁴ The initial implication of this statement is misleading, if not reckless. Bonhoeffer is clear in his own words

¹⁰ DBWE 16: 514-515

¹¹ Here Bonhoeffer cites 1 Peter 2:14; I will add verses 13-17 for the sake of improved context: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” NRSV

¹² DBWE 16:515

¹³ Ibid 516

¹⁴ DBR, Green and DeJonge, 699

that “the concept of government includes no definitive form of commonwealth, no definitive form of the state.”¹⁵ While he does view government as a mandate issued from ‘above,’ we should not take this as a defense or criticism of any particular form of statecraft as it is practiced in the real world. We see here that Bonhoeffer is not overtly an opponent of democracy per se, but opposes any basis of the state which opposes the role of God as creator by taking the functions of the other mandates upon itself. What would be objectionable to Bonhoeffer is grounding the authorization of a democracy’s existence in something worldly like ‘the will of the people’ or immanent laws. The role of laws or a democratic *vox populi* must function in tandem with the Christological center of gospel and law.

Government as the Restrainer

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer invokes scripture again to characterize the role of government within the Protestant doctrinal milieu of a fallen world. Due to the entrance of death into creation by the advent of sin, or godlessness, Bonhoeffer believes the mandate of government serve the spiritual purpose of creating and preserving order on earth in the face of evil and communal disintegration. While the function of government is spiritually relevant, Bonhoeffer distinguishes it from the role of the church. Neither government nor the church has the task or ability to take on the other’s role. In the case of government, Bonhoeffer refers to the mandated role as that of a “restrainer” against the disorder and disintegration of the world. Although this power is biblically sanctioned, Bonhoeffer does not believe government can remain guiltless in its application of the restraining power.

¹⁵ DBWE 16:504

In defining the function of government and its ability to enforce laws, Bonhoeffer refers to 2 Thessalonians 2:7¹⁶ for a biblical basis of government's authority to, as has been established from Bonhoeffer's interpretation of 1 Peter 2:13-17: to punish the wicked and reward the good. The government is tasked with creating and preserving law and order for the sake of keeping open the possibility of following Christ. We see Bonhoeffer double down on this stance during the "Restrainer" passage in *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer's view of government recognizes the necessary use of force in order to preserve law and stability in the world. In order to preserve the possibility of human beings having an openness to Christ, Bonhoeffer argues that government must wield enough force to punish those who could threaten that possibility by spreading disorder and sin. The "restraining power" authorizes government with "the ordering power, equipped with great physical strength, which stands in the way of those who would throw themselves into the abyss."¹⁷ Government as a mandated authority on earth exists with the power to clear a space for the other mandates to take hold among human beings. Thus, government only performs its Christo-centric function when it affirms the necessity of the other mandates by protecting them from the influence of sinful powers in the world.

This practical power to enforce laws is separate from the mandate of the church. As has been discussed previously, Bonhoeffer vehemently opposes government incursions into the functions of the church, but neither can the church take on the role of the state by openly challenging and replacing the state's role as the restrainer. There is a difference between the church and government, and the church ought not reach beyond its actual competence and presume to know where and how force must be applied. Bonhoeffer writes that "[t]he church is

¹⁶ "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed." NRSV

¹⁷ *Ethics*, 131

today the community of people who, grasped by the power of Christ's grace, acknowledge, confess, and take upon themselves not only their personal sins, but also the Western world's falling away from Jesus Christ as guilt toward Jesus Christ."¹⁸ The communal whole of the Christian church must share in the suffering of Germany's victims through confession of its own complicity in the crisis. The church shares the blame for Nazism's rise along with the other mandates, all of which play a part in the spiritual formation of the German people. The four mandates became misaligned by the government's over-assertion of authority. Bonhoeffer's frustration with the church's failure to adequately respond informs his understanding of the boundaries between mandates. Because of this shared responsibility, Bonhoeffer's later thinking still expresses the rightful roles of church and government in relation to one another: "The sword can never bring about the unity of the church and of faith; preaching can never rule the peoples. But the lord of both kingdoms is God revealed in Jesus Christ."¹⁹ Each mandate holds a proper role, yet each has failed to uphold the centrality of Christ. The solution cannot come from a competition of power between church and government, but from both mandates recognizing the necessity of Jesus to their formation and performance.

It is important to reaffirm Bonhoeffer's opposition to any ethical impunity for state actions. The mandated authority of government does not grant particular states a free pass on injustice. Bonhoeffer qualifies that concerning the role of the "Restrainer"—the power of the state—in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, "[t]he 'restraining power [das Aufhaltende] itself is not God and is not without guilt but God uses it to protect the world from disintegration."²⁰ The restrainer is not and cannot be guiltless. Government can become guilty of injustice by improperly applying its

¹⁸ Ibid 135

¹⁹ Ibid 112

²⁰ Ibid 131

power and punishing the innocent, or by setting itself up as the source of spiritual and ethical authority above God.

The restraining power Bonhoeffer believes is biblically granted to government is the power of the sword, given so that it may carry out its mandated task of preserving space for the other mandates to teach and preserve the revelation of Christ to the world. This force is given to prevent the disintegration and decay of the other mandates brought on by communal disintegration and godlessness. However, Bonhoeffer does not address the problem of human agency as the restraining power. More specifically, he provides no guidance for Christians who are themselves officials of the state. The restraining power of government may be authorized by the New Testament, but the violence necessary to “punish the wicked” can only be exercised by human beings with the same ethical culpability Bonhoeffer faces in his own experience with violence. This particular element of human life, especially for Christians, is not explored. A soldier or statesman might commit acts of violence in service to government, but the Christological center of such actions is difficult to see. Service toward government is consistent with Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the mandate, yet Christian participation in government poses a similar ethical problem to the one Bonhoeffer himself faces through the possibility of violence.

The Relationship between Gospel and Law

Moving away from the first distinction between government and state, which Bonhoeffer clarifies through his conception of government from ‘above,’ we begin to see the role of the church and individual Christians in contrast to the mandate of government. First, the integration of law and gospel for the church “refutes the view that the church could speak to the world on the basis of some kind of shared insights, derived from a rational or natural law, that is, by a

temporary disregarding of the gospel.”²¹ The church cannot separate itself from the functions of government without either undermining the rightful authority of the government by setting itself up in opposition to the government’s authority, or by creating a double morality. Bonhoeffer clarifies that synthesizing law and church under the centrality of Christ “leads to the rejection of a double morality of the church, namely, one for the world and another for the church-community, one for the pagans, and another for Christians, one for Christians in their worldly vocations and another for the homo religious.”^{22 23} Although the church, like government, cannot take the role of other mandates upon itself, Bonhoeffer’s view does not permit the church to isolate itself from the ethical problems of real life (sometimes exposed in the midst of political matters) by creating a separate code of laws or standards that apply to the church but not anyone else.

Not even the Decalogue can be thought of as law apart from Jesus Christ. Even while the commandments identify, in Bonhoeffer’s assessment, rights to life, property, marriage, and human honor, “this does not mean that these orders, codified in to law [*Rechtsordnungen*], would have an absolute divine value as such, but merely that God alone seeks to be honored and worshipped” through their implementation in daily life.²⁴ Like other universal principles or natural laws, the operational purpose of the Ten Commandments exists only for the sake of God himself. They are “not a second divine source of authority alongside and in addition to the God of Jesus Christ.”²⁵ Therefore, the message the church preaches to the world can never rightfully be a disintegration between the authority of laws as established by the state, and the authority of

²¹ *Ethics*, 357

²² *Ibid*

²³ “Homo religious:” religious person.

²⁴ *Ibid* 358

²⁵ *Ibid*

some abstract rubric of religious behavior. Ultimately, since both church and government serve the cause of Christ, the message of the church must be the unification of law and gospel through the power of Jesus.

Because of this unavoidable service to the will of God, Bonhoeffer stresses that obedience and service to governing powers is demanded by God's revelation in scripture as observed in Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2, not to mention Jesus' own words in Matt. 22:19-21.²⁶ This obligation can only be defied "where the government forces [Christians] into direct violation of the divine commandment."²⁷ However, the decision to resist, or in Bonhoeffer's words, "the refusal to obey within a specific historical political decision of government [...] can only be a venture of one's own responsibility."²⁸ Here we see a clear example of Bonhoeffer's distinction between individual Christians and the church at large. Bonhoeffer is skeptical of imposing church authority on matters of law and state policy. He writes in "Protestantism without Reformation" that, in America, "[t]he Prohibition legislation caused an unprecedented upsurge in crime in the large cities. A 'Christian' law had brought disaster for the state and had to be rescinded—with the consent of the churches."²⁹ The church, as a mandated body of believers, does not have the competence or jurisdiction to exercise its wisdom in the form of law in an attempt to supplant the appropriate role of government. In this case Bonhoeffer cites an instance of violence in order to empower his rationale, but pointing out explicit consequences of the church's usurpation of government's given authority is not necessary to Bonhoeffer's view of the

²⁶ "'Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'" NRSV

²⁷ Ibid 517

²⁸ Ibid 518

²⁹ DBWE 15: 456

mandates. The conclusion is that whenever the church attempts to circumvent, hijack, or replace the government as the lawmaking force on earth, it has defeated itself in the same way that government does when it infringes on the mission of the church.

Germany against Christ

It remains to be seen how Bonhoeffer relates the specific actions of Nazi Germany to his understanding of the church-government relation described in his aforementioned political theology. Bonhoeffer articulates his position in three different ways: first, the German churches had failed in upholding the cause of Christ; second, driving the Jews from Germany and Europe was akin to driving out Christ himself; and third, the crisis in the West has removed Christ from the center and redefined the value of human life by standards from ‘below.’

Bonhoeffer notes that Germany’s vulnerability to the allure of Nazism was rooted in its historical and intellectual attachment to community. From Luther to the German idealist philosophers, Bonhoeffer believes Germans have uniquely emphasized “deliverance from self-will through service to community.”³⁰ The ironic and tragic failure of many Germans was that through their service to community, they had assisted in the genocidal will of Hitler and his associates. When the German commitment to community manifested in service to a violent regime, Bonhoeffer believes the Christian churches were forced into tension with the government above them. On this point, Bonhoeffer compares the challenge of the German churches to the early struggles of ancient Christianity:

Once again we have the living experience on our side: we are talking about a time when, under the pressure of anti-Christian powers, small confessing congregations gathered and had to seek a clear decision for or against Christ through strict discipline of doctrine and life. In their struggle these confessing congregations were forced to recognize that the very neutrality of many Christians was the gravest danger that would lead to the

³⁰ LPFP, 6

disintegration and dissolution of the church, indeed, that it was essentially hostility toward Christ.³¹

Bonhoeffer viewed Nazi incursions into the German churches, including the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph, as a direct affront to the integrity of the church. Furthermore, Nazi abuses against the Jewish population in Europe directly conflicted with New Testament teachings concerning the treatment of others. Christians in Germany who either participated in or remained neutral to these atrocities had, as far as Bonhoeffer was concerned, aligned themselves with Hitler's regime against the true church. But the centrality of Christ to the creation and being of both church and government prevents faithful Christians from placing the authority of the state above their discipleship under Christ. On this point, Bonhoeffer quotes from Matthew 12:30.³² Given that the mandates are created through and for Christ, no Christian involvement with government can be justified when said government acts directly against the cause of Christ. Even the churches and "Christians" of Bonhoeffer's era are not safe from the foundational importance of living for Christ. Put simply: German Christians who chose to participate in the Nazi program, as well as those who remained passive or neutral to the regime's actions, were unquestionably *against* Christ.

The failure of the churches to uphold their biblical commitment to what Bonhoeffer understood to be the centrality of Christ allowed the persecution of the Jews to continue in Germany. Bonhoeffer believes this persecution was directly related to the absence of genuine Christian civil courage and represented a denial of Jesus' role in the cultural formation of the German people.

The historical Jesus Christ is the continuity of [the West's] history. Because Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah of the Israelite-Jewish people, the line of our forebears reaches back before the appearance of Jesus Christ into the people of Israel. Western history is

³¹ *Ethics*, 343

³² Jesus is quoted as claiming "Whoever is not for me is against me." NRSV

by God's will inextricably bound up with the people of Israel, not just genetically but in an honest, unceasing encounter. The Jews keep open the question of Christ; they are the sign of God's free, gracious election and of God's rejecting wrath; 'see the kindness and the severity of God' (Rom. 11:22). Driving out the Jews from the West must result in driving out Christ with them, for Jesus Christ was a Jew.³³

Bonhoeffer stresses that Jesus was not only ethnically Jewish, but also that his Jewish identity influences German Christianity from the standpoint of historical heritage. Because the appearance of Jesus as a real human being occurs within history and becomes inextricably embedded within the history of the West,³⁴ Christ's Jewish identity and the Jewish identity of his early followers attaches the Jews to the historical heritage of Germany and German Christians. Barnes notes that "Bonhoeffer as never before linked Christianity with the Jews *as Jews*, not as potential Christians."³⁵ Bonhoeffer's approach to the "Jewish Question" transitions from a concern primarily with the problems besetting the Evangelical Churches in 1933 to the impact of Nazism within Germany society at large. The Jewish population, by maintaining their rejection of Jesus as the prophesized messiah, represents the open and unresolved work of God in history, as well as in the present. Not only were Christ and his earliest followers Jewish, but by condemning the Jews within Germany, the Nazis had closed a worldly representation of God's redemptive work in the world. For Bonhoeffer and most of his Lutheran contemporaries, the Jewish rejection of the New Testament Jesus was a manifestation of God's openness to the necessity of Christian work on earth to spread the Gospel, but also the continuation of the Old Testament narrative of rejection and renewal between Yahweh and his followers. For

³³ *Ethics*, 105

³⁴ "The unity of the West is not an idea, but a historical reality whose only foundation is Christ." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 109

³⁵ Barnes, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler's Persecution of the Jews," 126

Bonhoeffer, Nazi persecution of the Jews was a direct attack on both the Christian practice of evangelism, as well as a rejection of Christ's own traditions.

The historical relevance of this claim demonstrates yet another denunciation of National Socialism. The Aryan Paragraph despite being a state-sanctioned document adopted by the Reich churches, can be vehemently opposed by appealing directly to the authority of Christ and the talk of government as a mandated space of human experience. Because the German Christians had introduced the Aryan Paragraph into the churches as a means of inserting a worldly grounding of Nazism into the mandated space of the church, Bonhoeffer determines that the Nazi state has violated its mandate from 'above' and inserted itself over the church as an authority from 'below.'

This third argument for how Germany had set itself against Christ is related to Bonhoeffer's earlier criticism of any form of ethics which grounds the treatment of others in any authority other than God's. This includes ethics endorsed by government or any system of values appealed to by political authorities. In persecuting the Jews, Bonhoeffer believed that the Nazis had exchanged basic human dignity for "the false presupposition that life consists only in its social utility. This ignores the fact that life created and preserved by God possesses inherent right, completely independent of its social utility."³⁶ Bonhoeffer writes this comment under the historical milieu of Nazi mass-murder programs, and this should be understood as a statement of political dissent against Nazi Germany's genocidal practices.³⁷ For Bonhoeffer, these social policies were indicative of the disintegration of community via the usurpation of values by

³⁶ Ibid 193

³⁷ His comments about "right" of a life preserved by God precludes the possibility that Bonhoeffer would view his participation in the Abwehr plot as mere a socially utilitarian good. Hitler must be defeated for reasons beyond simply the dangers he brings to society.

proclamations of the German state. He writes that “[t]he most astonishing observation one makes today is the people surrender everything in the face of nothingness: their own judgment, their humanity, their neighbors.”³⁸

In Bonhoeffer’s view, there can be little doubt that Nazi Germany had violated a proper understanding of government and its relationship with the church. The Aryan Paragraph exemplifies a deliberate effort to manipulate the prominence of German Evangelical churches to aid in the state’s systematic hatred of the Jewish community. To Bonhoeffer, this misapplication of government is a product of Western political, philosophical, and theological developments that culminate in the crisis besetting the continent. He writes “[t]his nothingness into which the West is sliding is not the natural end, the dying, the sinking of a flourishing community of people. Instead, it is again a specifically western nothingness: a nothingness that is rebellious, violent, anti-God, and anti-human.”³⁹ The West has removed Christ from the center and replaced him with an assortment of idols, ranging from conceptions of human reason, *Volk*, or state worship. While the Western crisis has gripped all of Europe, Germany has become the most destructive offender by its assault on the Jews and systematic extermination of its enemies.

II. Bonhoeffer’s Bold Venture of Faith

Given that Bonhoeffer has outlined some basic boundaries between church and government, and given that he views the actions of Nazi Germany to be unjust, how do we interpret his own experience in acting as an individual Christian against the regime? Does he provide a defense for his promotion of violence against Hitler? The consequences of his decisions are, in his mind, unmistakable. He writes that “[w]here there is even the smallest

³⁸ *Ethics*, 131

³⁹ *Ibid* 128

possibility of allowing the other to stay alive, then the destruction of this life would be arbitrary killing – murder.”⁴⁰ To kill another person cannot be one choice among a set of alternatives. There can be literally no other option, otherwise one has committed a cardinal sin of murder. Later, however, he reflects from prison that “[i]f I were to end my life here in these conditions, [they] would have a meaning that I think I could understand.”⁴¹ The fundamental problem of Bonhoeffer’s life is now clear: can he be complicit in the killing of Adolph Hitler while still maintaining his commitment to the will of God?

Some commentators on Bonhoeffer claim that his apparent shift in thinking between the Christian passivism of *Cost of Discipleship* and his later works on the subject of direct political action constitutes an endorsement of the just use of violence as a means of resistance against a government that has established itself as being against Christ. Gides and Barnes are two such examples. On this shift, Gides explains that, “Bonhoeffer’s changed church-world vision moved him from something close to absolute pacifism to a position that can be defined as ‘just war thinking including the possibility of tyrannicide.’”⁴² Barnes’ interpretation of quotations selected from *Ethics* also affords the possibility of violence within Bonhoeffer’s amended views on political action, as seen when he claims that “[b]reaking the laws of the state through the use of violence would be the lesser of two evils [and] might be the only way to preserve the law.”⁴³ Though it is clear that Bonhoeffer’s views on action against the state certainly evolved between “The Church and the Jewish Question” and *Ethics*, it is important to note that none of the quotations selected by Gides or Barnes mention the explicit use of violence. Gides inserts this

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, 190

⁴¹ LPFP, 272

⁴² Gides, 34

⁴³ Barnes, 126

term into his reading of Bonhoeffer while providing no textual support for his claim. Instead, Bonhoeffer remains characteristically ambiguous about the precise means of action the church or individual Christians may take in resisting the state.

The purpose of these final pages will be to examine whether Bonhoeffer gives his implicit approval of tyrannicide as these and other examiners have suggested. Contrary to the analyses mentioned above, I argue that Bonhoeffer is unwilling or unable to give his actions full ethical endorsement. After all, what is the purpose of Bonhoeffer's call to God's mercy if he is so convinced that his actions are justifiable in the way that Gides and Barnes have suggested? Grabbing hold of the wheel of government may be sensible in worldly terms and consistent with the moral conscience of some human beings generally speaking, but that does not satisfy the Bonhoeffer's desire for the grace of God in the final analysis. We see in *Ethics* and in *Letters and Papers from Prison* that Bonhoeffer does not give a clear sanctioning of his actions when he recollects these events. To do so would risk allowing the priorities of one's conscience or ethics to trump the authority for ethical authentication granted exclusively to God. To sanction murder may or may not have been the 'ethical' thing to do; but regardless, Bonhoeffer believes that God's graciousness toward those who act boldly against injustice is paramount. A theory of Christian ethics which defends tyrannicide on Just War grounds is simply not the world of Bonhoeffer.

Christian Love and Responsible Action

The core of Bonhoeffer's understanding of responsible Christian action is his interpretation of Jesus Christ's actions in the world as a human being. Participating in the world with the example of Christ at the forefront is how the distinction between "worldly" and "Christian" actions disappears for those following the call of God. Bonhoeffer writes that "[j]ust

as in Jesus Christ God and humanity became one, so through Christ what is Christian and what is worldly became one in the action of the Christian.”⁴⁴ Breaking down the divide between acting Christianly and acting as part of the world is a key component in appreciating Bonhoeffer’s view of political action. Jesus teachings in The Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7, are a way of pointing Christians toward action within this unity. Not as universal moral standards or laws, but proclamations of the Gospel as though neither the church nor government are subordinate to one another. These proclamations are motivated by and legitimized by God’s love.

The historical responsibility of the Christian is rooted in God having reconciled himself to the world through Christ as an act of love. In Bonhoeffer’s view, much of Western philosophy has misunderstood the Christian concept of love by turning Jesus’ teachings into metaphysical pseudo-realisms. He writes that “[l]ove—as understood by the Gospel in contrast to all Philosophy—is not a method for dealing with people. Instead, it is the reality of being drawn and drawing others into an event, namely, into God’s community with the world [...]. ‘Love’ does not exist as an abstract attribute of God but only in God’s actual loving of human beings and the world.”⁴⁵ To act as a Christian is to share in this fact with others by bringing them into that community of corporate love for Christ and for the world, i.e. the church. Just as God’s love appears as an incarnational fact in the person of Jesus, the love of God is also incarnate through the communal action of the church.

Christian love, therefore, is not a “pure” love devoid of worldly connections and understanding as a thing in itself, but precisely the opposite. The Sermon on the Mount, is “the

⁴⁴ *Ethics*, 238

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 241

proclamation of the incarnate love of God;” Jesus, teaching people to love each other by sharing in the circumstances of historical life through community.⁴⁶ Therefore, “Jesus’ teaching regards us responsible for others and knows nothing of persons as isolated individuals.”⁴⁷ Put another way, because of what Christ has done, Christians are called to share in the struggles of brokenness and suffering in their midst in the same way that Christ shared in the suffering of human life on the cross, as well as witnessing the painful experiences of his friends and family.⁴⁸ God’s love for the world came into being as Jesus Christ; Christ’s love for the world took place through his teachings and actions on the cross; Christian love is expressed through actions in the world as members of the church-community. Bonhoeffer believes that Jesus, through example and action, places responsibility on the shoulders of Christians to act in history as he did.

Furthermore, since Jesus’ teaching and life embraces and reconciles *all* of human life to God, his love for human beings is not reserved for some people of preferred circumstances but withheld from others. Because God’s love incarnate in Christ is not limited, “so the love that springs from the love of God cannot be limited to specific areas and relationships of life.”⁴⁹ Such a love must encompass everything, including political action. As a consequence, “political action means taking on responsibility.”⁵⁰ Answering the “call” of Christ (a term Bonhoeffer will use in *Letters and Papers from Prison*) does not mean that Christians must only act out of self-denial in moments of personal piety, or only affirm the individual ‘rights’ of selfhood found in Western political liberalism. Contrary to the thinking of Bonhoeffer’s friend and teacher at Union Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr, to separate individual Christian morality from the, in some

⁴⁶ Ibid 242-243

⁴⁷ Ibid 243

⁴⁸ See the biblical account of the death of Lazarus in John 11:1-44

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, 243

⁵⁰ Ibid 245

sense, larger arena of political morality would be to create a false “dual morality.”⁵¹ From the standpoint of Christian action in the world, the two are united by the love of God. The Sermon on the Mount is, according to Bonhoeffer’s reading, Jesus’ call for Christians to act responsibly in history and not forego the concerns of this life and the sufferings of others.

It is through these invocations of The Sermon on the Mount that the challenge of Bonhoeffer’s life with respect to his Christian commitments becomes palpable. As the biblical account is recorded in Matthew 5, Jesus speaks several times about murder and treatment of one’s enemies. These passages reveal how Bonhoeffer’s assistance to the conspiracy becomes problematic in light of Christ’s call to act responsibly as a servant of the embodiment of God’s love.⁵² In fact, Jesus argues that although his followers may have heard about ethical expectations set forth by ancient Israelite law, the actual commands are far stricter than they had been taught. Followers of God are not merely to abstain from murder, they are culpable for merely becoming angry at their enemies. They are not merely to demonstrate the love of God to their friends and family, they are expected to extend that love toward their bitter enemies. The

⁵¹ Ibid 244

⁵² Four such examples from Matthew 5:

1. Verse 9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”
2. Verses 21-22 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the Hell of fire.”
3. Verses 38-39 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also [...]”
4. Verses 43-44 “You have heard it was said ‘Love your neighbor but hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you [...]”

responsible action which Bonhoeffer connects to Christ's teachings includes *love* for enemies. As Jesus himself concludes, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."⁵³

After Ten Years: A Bold Venture of Faith

A decade after Bonhoeffer writes "The Church and the Jewish Question," his perspective on the cultural climate of Germany had become more critical. As New Year's Eve of 1942, passed and 1943 began, Bonhoeffer penned his reflective essay "After Ten Years." Here we find one of his first allusions to the ethical consequences of his participation in the assassination conspiracy. Furthermore, his commentary on standing fast against injustice and exposing the folly of the German people throughout the crisis is striking.

Bonhoeffer begins by affirming again (as he would also do in *Ethics*) that the "evil" of Nazism had appeared to the German people "disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice," having bewildered people's ethical sensibilities.⁵⁴ That such suffering and destruction could have come from what many thought would be a movement of restoration and unity had surprised "anyone brought up on our traditional ethical concepts."⁵⁵ Indeed, in a society so devoted to service toward authorities, the heinous betrayal of Hitler's regime would have been difficult to foresee or comprehend.

Bonhoeffer goes on to describe the failure of German society to prevent the atrocities in more detail, outlining the kinds of values and character failures which had been characteristic of the ethical responses of his peers. These categories are not intended to represent specific groups or individuals, but are ethical commitments which Bonhoeffer claims his experience has identified as destructive currents within Germany. So-called 'reasonable' people had naively

⁵³ Matthew 5:48, NRSV

⁵⁴ LPFP, 4

⁵⁵ Ibid

believed they could “bend back into position the framework that [had] got out of joint” by trying to “do justice to both sides” – trying to form compromises when the reality of the world would allow none.⁵⁶ Worse still were ‘moral fanatics,’ exhausting themselves by blindly appealing to “single-minded principles” without the wisdom to recognize who their real enemies were.⁵⁷ Next, individuals driven by a commitment to following the call of their ‘conscience’ or responding to ‘duty’ fared no better. While the former “becomes nervous and vacillating” when confronted by conflict brought on by the “respectable and seductive disguises” of the enemy, the latter can be led astray by the authority of whatever power they feel obliged to.⁵⁸ What is more, those who assert their ‘freedom’ as the guiding principle of responsible action can too easily fall into pursuing the injustices of one’s own unrestrained interests. Expressions of radical freedom produce nothing on their own. Finally, there are those who avoid engaging in historical realities by retreating into the safety of ‘private virtuousness.’ Bonhoeffer concludes that a person can “[o]nly do this at the cost of self-deception” and a fear of opposing the destruction around them.

Bonhoeffer believes that a quiet and personal virtue is not sufficient to restore or cultivate civil courage in Germany. But even a public virtuousness, while essential to shining a light on injustice, is not and cannot be the whole of a Christian ethic. For Bonhoeffer, as long as reality is orientated around the revelation of Christ, it is nonsense for Christians to consider ethics in terms of personal improvement or identifying examples of moral behavior and turning those actions into grand principles. Worse still is contemplating the principles of any ethic apart from time and place considerations. It is ultimately fruitless to try and pin down a single ethical incarnation divorced from its historical circumstances and remove Christ from the center of life.

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

To abstract ethical life away from the specific circumstances of life would be the ultimate form of self-defeat. “[A]nyone who does this (private virtuousness) must shut his eyes to the injustice around him.”⁵⁹ One must be willing to extend Christ’s reality to the world through real-life actions.

These descriptions are vague and not intended to be a systematic cultural diagnosis. Bonhoeffer himself begins the essay by explaining that these insights are “conclusions reached more or less in common by a circle of like-minded people” who share Bonhoeffer’s concerns about the failure of Germany’s political and moral institutions to prevent the events of the previous decade. However, the analysis he presents here draws us back to the core ethical claim made by Bonhoeffer throughout his work:

Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.⁶⁰

Bonhoeffer’s claim here echoes what we have seen in his *Ethics*: the central ethical concern of Christian responsibility in the world is not about *being* a particular sort of person, not is it about *adhering* to a standard of anything. The responsible Christian “depends on a God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith, and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture.”⁶¹ It is this faith in the mercy of God in light of Christ’s call to historical action that Bonhoeffer’s ethical standing with the Abwehr conspiracy becomes clear. He will not absolve himself on the basis of principles, laws, necessity, or aretaic pursuits. From the standpoint of God’s judgment, Bonhoeffer hopes only for grace. Expanding

⁵⁹ Ibid 5

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid 6

on this point he writes, “[t]he immanent righteousness of history rewards and punishes men’s deeds, but the eternal righteousness of God tries and judges their hearts.”⁶² Before the laws and standards of human artifice, Bonhoeffer may find himself absolved as a hero or martyr. But before the ultimate Christian ethical concern, the will of God, Bonhoeffer refuses to justify himself.

“Jonah”

The question of whether or not Bonhoeffer actually viewed his actions as sinful has yet to be determined from what has been said so far. Complicating matters is that Bonhoeffer seems to sway back and forth on this question during his stay in prison. While in Tegel military prison in Berlin during 1943, he writes in “After Ten Years”:

The world *is*, in fact, so ordered that a basic respect for ultimate laws and human life is also the best means of self-preservation, and that these laws may be broken only on the odd occasion in case of brief necessity, whereas anyone who turns necessity into a principle, and in so doing establishes a law of his own alongside them, is inevitably bound, sooner or later, to suffer retribution.⁶³

This quotation exemplifies the sort of comment which breeds confusion about Bonhoeffer’s approach to political resistance and the ethical consequences of participating in such resistance. While on one hand, he mentions the possibility of suspending the “ultimate laws” in some circumstances, he immediately turns back and warns his readers against forcing this possibility into a principle of action. Some circumstances may require them to violate the ultimate laws, but they cannot make a habit or rule out of doing so. Problematically, as is characteristic of Bonhoeffer, we are given little in the way of substance to resolve this confusion. What are these “ultimate laws” which can be violated? How are Christians to know when the “odd occasion” arises for them to step beyond these laws in pursuit of some other just cause?

⁶² Ibid 11

⁶³ Ibid

Perhaps part of the answer lies in what Bonhoeffer has already written about the ethics of one's historical circumstances: "God's commandment cannot be found and known apart from time and place; indeed it can only be *heard* by one who is bound to a specific time and place."⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer's warning against creating principles of action is necessary if God's call can only be heard in the midst of individual circumstances. Whether or not such "ultimate laws" exist is a secondary matter compared with obedience to the will of God. And violating said laws (the existence of which Bonhoeffer is inconsistent about) is possible if Christ is the center, as opposed to the laws themselves. If we take the "bold venture of faith" claim to be the key to Bonhoeffer's ethical claims in "After Ten Years;" at least, in terms of what is relevant to the problem of tyrannicide, we can recognize the possibility of sin in violation of the "ultimate laws" because such laws would have to be authorized by and through God. To violate the laws in moments of odd necessity is, by virtue of the centrality of Christ, akin to violating Jesus himself. Even if Bonhoeffer were to develop a more sophisticated view of these 'ultimate laws,' his Christological and ethical views would still require that these laws be grounded for and through Christ.

But because Bonhoeffer does not directly address the question of his sin anywhere in his corpus, and because his commentary in "After Ten Years" highlights a tension between acting in a "bold venture of faith" and the so-called "ultimate laws," I will suggest a more personal approach to the sin question. In one of the final known writings Bonhoeffer produces before his execution, a poem entitled "Jonah," he presents the story of the Old Testament prophet's struggle to flee the call of Yahweh on a ship caught in a great storm:

"In fear of death they cried aloud and, clinging fast
to wet ropes and straining on the battered deck,

⁶⁴ *Ethics*, 379

they gazed in stricken terror at the sea
that now, unchained in a sudden, lashed the ship.
'O gods eternal, excellent, provoked to anger,
help us, or give a sign, that we may know
who has offended you by secret sin,
by breach of oath, or heedless blasphemy, or murder,
who brings to us disaster by misdeed still hidden,
to make a paltry profit for his pride.'
Thus they besought. And Jonah said, 'Behold,
I sinned before the Lord of hosts. My life is forfeit.

Cast me away! My guilt must bear the wrath of God;
the righteous shall not perish with the sinner!
They trembled. But with hands that knew no weakness
they cast the offender from their midst. The sea stood still."⁶⁵

Bethge recalls that Bonhoeffer writes this poem near the beginning of October of 1944.

According to Bethge's account, Bonhoeffer gave up on any plans of escape from prison during this period and "faced a new series of interrogations by the Reich Security Head Office."⁶⁶ The interrogations themselves, persisting often for weeks at a time, began to take heavy psychological toll on Bonhoeffer, especially during the early months of 1945.⁶⁷ While it is impossible to know Bonhoeffer's exact frame of mind when the "Jonah" poem was written, I do not think it is a stretch to suggest that he was under enormous duress. The Abwehr plot had failed in July in 1944, the prison interrogations had become increasingly harsh and frequent, and Berlin—the residence of Bonhoeffer's family throughout the war—suffered from frequent bombings from Allied air forces. It is possible, of course, that Bonhoeffer's poem is just a meaningless indulgence written to pass time in prison (he never states otherwise). I contend, however, that Bonhoeffer's collected poetry from LFPF is likely more revealing of his internal

⁶⁵ LFPF, 398-399

⁶⁶ Ibid 407

⁶⁷ Bethge, 910

reflections on the subject of sin than his theological dialogues with Bethge. The tone and subject matter of “Jonah” are, if nothing else, teasingly *a propos*.

We can interpret parallels between the narrative of the poem and Bonhoeffer’s own experience: adrift in the midst of a crisis, Bonhoeffer cries out in existential tension. His friends and family are at risk, both within the prison and in the outside world, yet his efforts against Hitler may have endangered them by risking their well-being to reprisals from the regime. Bonhoeffer had written before in *Cost of Discipleship* and *Ethics* on the call to love enemies and the seriousness of God’s prohibition of murder, yet his actions were complicit in at least attempted murder. We recall from an earlier poem “Who Am I?” that Bonhoeffer wrestles with self-doubt over his identity in the wake of his imprisonment. Furthermore, his paraphrase of Jonah, “My guilt must bear the wrath of God” is pertinent in light of his claim in “After Ten Years” that the bold venture of faith is only sensible when responsible Christians are dependent on a God “who promises forgiveness and consolation” to the person who ventures out and falls into sin.⁶⁸ What is more, the storm surrounding Jonah and his shipmates is calmed only when the prophet announces his guilt and is thrown overboard. “This sea stood still” after Jonah dove into the sea. Aware of his guilt in running from Yahweh’s call, Jonah throws himself into the judgment of the God whom he has defied. Perhaps Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the bold venture of faith during his years in prison are his Jonah moment: he finds himself at sea, a sinner, ready to take the final plunge. He writes, after all, “God’s commandment cannot be found and known apart from time and place; indeed, it can only be *heard* by one who is bound to a specific place

⁶⁸ LPFP, 6

and time.”⁶⁹ Jonah hears God’s call in the midst of the storm and jumps in order to save his comrades.

One final time, Bonhoeffer’s reflections draw his readers back to the shared humanity God has with creation through Jesus. To suffer as Bonhoeffer does in the “Jonah” poem represents a core Christian connection to the humanity of Christ. In July of 1944, four months before Bonhoeffer writes “Jonah,” he pens a letter to Bethge arguing that the New Testament account of Christ in Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion shows God’s call for his followers to share in his suffering.⁷⁰ Not for the sake of suffering itself, or even for the sake of personal edification through perseverance, but as a means of coming to know and experience God within the circumstances of real life. Hence, Bonhoeffer’s claim that “Man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world.”⁷¹ Bonhoeffer understands God to be one who suffers along with his human children, not only in the direct experiences of Jesus, but as a divine Father who must witness the rejection of the world against him. To act responsibly in the world—or, as has been established before, to act out of love in the world—is itself a form of coming to know God.

The suffering Bonhoeffer endures in prison is akin to the suffering Peter ought to have endured with Jesus in Gethsemane. Not because Bonhoeffer or Peter were guiltless during their pursuit of God, having earned their right to suffer with their Lord, but because following the call in light of Jesus’ life and teaching is what it means to be Christian. This is why Bonhoeffer

⁶⁹ *Ethics*, 379

⁷⁰ Matthew 26: 40-41 “Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; he said to Peter, ‘So you could not stay awake with me for one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.’” NRSV

⁷¹ LPFP, 361

claims that his life “would have a meaning [he] thinks [he] could understand.”⁷² Not because he can be absolved of his guilt for conspiring to commit murder, but because he acted in a bold venture of faith against injustice.

Finally, we can recall another poem which I quoted at the beginning of this thesis, “Who am I?” in which Bonhoeffer relays a similar sense of self-doubt that we find in “Jonah.” He writes in the final lines:

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?⁷³

There can be little doubt that Bonhoeffer’s final years in prison forced the pastor to examine the spiritual and ethical implications of his life. If Bonhoeffer’s letters and poetry from prison imply any hint of guilt, then his readers ought to be struck by the magnitude of this view given his belief in Christ as the center of reality. Even Bonhoeffer’s most renowned (or infamous) historical achievement demands that his students focus on the reconciliation of all things through Jesus Christ. Not even the abhorrence of Hitler and Nazism could create an existential evil so severe that the Christian could stand in the presence of God without confessing an eternal need for forgiveness. The ethical problem of tyrannicide for someone whose sole basis for ethical thought is the expression of God’s love through the person a Christ bears a heavy burden. Bonhoeffer’s political theology does not allow him to ground any basis for ethical action outside of Jesus Christ. No theory of just war or programmatic moral standard can excuse Bonhoeffer from his primary obligation to the will of God. For that reason, Bonhoeffer’s political theology

⁷² Ibid 272

⁷³ Ibid 348

can only be characterized as one of faith. After all, Bonhoeffer concludes his ruminations in

“Who Am I?” thusly:

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Ibid

CONCLUSION

On July 20, 1944, the German resistance movement's assassination attempt against Adolph Hitler ended in failure. The bombing of a military conference at the so-called "Wolf's Lair" [*Wolfsschanze*] had resulted in the deaths of a handful of Gestapo members, but Hitler himself survived with superficial injuries. Shortly afterward, Bonhoeffer's association with other members of the resistance was uncovered and he was transferred out of Tegel military prison in Berlin. After several subsequent transfers, he ultimately arrived at Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he would be executed by hanging on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer's final letters written after the resistance's failure are filled with a doubling-down of his emphasis on the "profound this-worldliness of Christianity;" so much so that he outlined plans for a book to be written on the subject of a "religionless Christianity."¹ What is more, his letters to Bethge during these final months demonstrate a fervent commitment to his writing and speculations on what it meant to live for Christ apart from the religious and philosophical traditions that had so profoundly failed to prevent the rise of the crisis in Germany. His final theological musings focus on discipleship toward Christ apart from institutions and ritual practices of the contemporary world. What is more, this religionless Christianity challenges what Bonhoeffer believes to be the common way of talking about God. This common way places God at the boundaries or limits of human knowledge and experience, much like the modern and classical philosophies Bonhoeffer wishes to reject. He fears that people "speak of God when human knowledge [...] has come to an end, or when human resources come to an end."² This instrumental way of talking about God is a distraction from

¹ LPFP, 369; 380-382

² Ibid 281

true Christian concern with living in the world. It is instrumental because the space that God occupies in human experience is now pushed back to the realm of the unknown. Much like Isaac Newton's characterization of the 'god-of-the-gaps,' the common invocation of God comes when people have reached the peak of the knowledge or ability. When science no longer explains some question, God fills the gap. When hurtful experiences push a person to their emotional limit, God comes in to address the wounds when daily routines and relationships cannot. Bonhoeffer calls this *deus ex machina* attitude an oversimplification of biblical teaching. The Christological center of Bonhoeffer's theology challenges this view by seeing Jesus in middle of human life through all experiences, whether they are menial or extravagant. Bonhoeffer is consistent from the beginning of his theological explorations until the final months of his life when it comes to the importance of Christ and the faith connection his followers have with him.

Final Summary

In this thesis, I have argued that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's political theology is rooted in his desire to view Jesus Christ as the center of reality. In order to accomplish this, Bonhoeffer's work focuses on how Christians can view human experiences through the importance of what God has done through Christ. This focus prevents Bonhoeffer from accepting any basis for ethical or political thought that does not appeal to God as the final authority, and to Christ as the primary character in the development of historical events. This Christo-centric view, which I and others have called Bonhoeffer's Christology, leads to Bonhoeffer's conclusion that nature exists to affirm the reality of the Gospel, and that God has demarcated elements of human experience to direct human beings toward that reality. The elements of human experience tasked with this role are called mandates. These mandates (church, government, family, and work) exist to keep the possibility of being open to discipleship toward Christ. Thus, Bonhoeffer begins his

canon of work with the belief that the natural human experience is one directed toward an affirmation of Jesus Christ as God's expression of salvation and love. All subsequent concerns, including ethics and politics, must be grounded in this fundamental beginning.

As a result of this Christology, Bonhoeffer's view of ethics begins with the belief that Christians must ask themselves this question: what is the will of God? No other question can be more primordial to an exploration of ethics given Bonhoeffer's belief in Christ as the center. Because of this question, Bonhoeffer rejects other ethical programs which he believes set the fundamental concern of ethics apart from God's immediate concern with human life. To be concerned first and foremost with being a good person, discovering what the good is, or obeying a standard of goodness other than God himself, would be unacceptably starting places for any inquiry into Christian ethics. Instead, Bonhoeffer concludes that the ethical must be authorized by God himself, not any source 'below' his command. Human beings can never apprehend the will of God in a fully disclosed way, but the ethical can be encountered through the natural experience of the four mandates tasked with revealing Christ to the world. Within the confinement of the circumstances of life, individuals can encounter the meaning of Christ in the world and behave in fidelity to that revelation. With limited understanding, human beings have the capacity to open themselves to the work of God in the world by experiencing the revelation of his love through the concerns of daily life. Faith in the revelation of God as it is experienced through daily life -- whether that comes via scripture, church teaching, personal experiences of love and edification, or suffering at the hands of the world -- keeps the possibility to discipleship toward Jesus open. Bonhoeffer believes that if ethics can begin anywhere for the Christian, it must be with this perspective in mind.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relationship between church and government is informed by these theological and ethical perspectives, and is colored further by the intrusions of the Nazi state into the sanctity of the German Evangelical churches. Because God has issued mandates for church and government to each play a role in the formation of individuals as Christian believers, Bonhoeffer argues that it is anti-God for one mandate to infringe on the role of the other. The introduction of the Nazi-backed "Aryan Paragraph" into the bylaws of German Protestant churches banning participation of baptized Jewish Christians in the churches was the first violation Bonhoeffer chose to address during the crisis. In this essay "Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer's earliest articulation of the possibility of resistance against government comes in response to an affront against the church. In opposition to the Lutheran orthodoxy of his day, Bonhoeffer argued that the government can be resisted by the church in three ways: moral questioning of state actions, assistance toward the victims of the state, and direct political action in opposition to the state's interests. While little detail is provided in this early rendition of Bonhoeffer's political theology, the basis of later themes is established.

During Bonhoeffer's final years (1940-1945), his writings reflect a deep concern for understanding how Christians are to live in the here and now. His unfinished magnum opus, *Ethics*, as well as Eberhard Bethge's compilations in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, explore the fundamental question of extending Bonhoeffer's Christological views to the circumstances of daily human life. Although his approach is unsystematic, his arguments conform to the real-world actions he engaged in on behalf of the Abwehr conspiracy. Specifically, his belief in the separate mandates of church and government became firmer as the depth of Nazi atrocities became increasingly apparent. In the final section on Bonhoeffer's views of church and government, I argued that Bonhoeffer rejected any basis of government which he understood to

be 'below,' or founded outside the biblical claim that all things have been made through and for Christ. Because Bonhoeffer accepts this biblical claim, his view of government is directly linked to his Christology. Government exists as a force tasked with restraining the powers of chaos and injustice in this world so that the other mandates (the church in particular) have the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. As a result, Bonhoeffer accepts that the natural power of government constitutes the use of violence as a tool for increasing law and order, while preventing lawlessness and disorder. Bonhoeffer's later political theology understands government to be a biblically mandated force tasked with suppressing the effects of godlessness in the world. But in this effort, government is not immune from guilt. Contrary again to the prevailing Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine, Bonhoeffer's view of government expects sinfulness to accompany the government's ability to wield the proverbial sword. In the case of Nazi Germany, this anti-God disposition had reached unacceptable heights.

From the standpoint of the church-community, the collective body of Christians who affirm and preach the revelation of God through Christ, Bonhoeffer advocates responsible action in the world motivated by the teaching and accomplishments of Jesus in the Gospels. Bonhoeffer views Christ as God's love incarnate, tasked with reconciling a godless world with its creator. As such, Christ's ethical teachings recorded in the Sermon on the Mount represent, in Bonhoeffer's view, a biblical call for loving engagement with the world as a response to suffering and sin. In the context of Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer encourages Christians to allow the love of Christ to guide their response. As such, he creates an ethical tension by seemingly contradicting Jesus' command to love enemies and to show deference to the authority of government. Bonhoeffer's involvement with the Abwehr conspiracy prompts the question of sin with respect to his Christian ethical commitments.

Did Bonhoeffer view his complicit involvement with a tyrannicidal movement as a sin? The only extent to which he is able to answer that question leads us directly back to the Christology at the heart of his theological views. We see from his comments in *Ethics*, “After Ten Years” and other letters, as well as allusions found in the “Jonah” poem that Bonhoeffer refuses to justify his decision. He does not explicitly link his actions to the will of God, the core concern of his Christian ethics. To be sure, he recognizes more clearly than most that Germany’s situation under Hitler’s stewardship is perilous. The ethical question, as far as Bonhoeffer is concerned, is not dependent on a threshold of moral abhorrence which Hitler had not yet crossed. There is no standard of justice which Bonhoeffer appeals to in order to defend his decision. Instead, the “bold venture of faith,”³ the “blood [on which] lies heavy guilt,”⁴ the taking on of responsibility in political action through the love of Christ;⁵ all of these ingredients weave together into an acceptance of sinfulness in the midst of seeking to save a country from destruction. Bonhoeffer ultimately points to the mercy of God as the only resting place for his actions. If he has sinned in venturing out, he will be held to account by the God who he has claimed to obey.

If it is possible to encapsulate Bonhoeffer’s worldview at all, I would point to a poem he writes for his mother a few months before his execution in December of 1944. The letter containing the poem, written close to New Year’s Eve, comes during a time when many of Bonhoeffer’s friends and associates had been killed, the Allied powers were conducting aerial bombings of Berlin, and Bonhoeffer himself had begun to come to terms with the likelihood of his death. Aside from one final letter requesting a few books and hygienic supplies, this poem

³ LPFP, 6

⁴ Bethge, 155

⁵ *Ethics*, 245

was the last known correspondence Bonhoeffer had with his family. Having been transported to and from several different prisons, Bonhoeffer's family and fiancée could not be certain their final responses ever reached him before the execution. In the poem, entitled "Powers of Good," Bonhoeffer's last Christological refrain can be found.

POWERS OF GOOD

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.

But should it be thy will once more to release us
to life's enjoyment and its good sunshine,
that which we've learned from sorrow shall increase us,
and all our life be dedicate as thine.

Today, let candles shed their radiant greeting;
lo, on our darkness are they not light
leading us, haply, to our longed-for meeting? -
Thou canst illumine even our darkest night.

When now the silence deepens for our harkening,
grant we may hear thy children's voices raise
from all the unseen world around us darkening
their universal paeon, in thy praise.

While all the powers of good aid and attend us,
boldly we'll face the future, come what may.
At even and at morn God will befriend us,
and oh, most surely on each newborn day!⁶

⁶ LPFP, 400

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VITA

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