

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Evangelical Moment in American Public Life”

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I write not just as a religious scholar/activist, not just as a Christian scholar/activist, not just as a Protestant Christian scholar/activist, but as an American evangelical Baptist Protestant Christian scholar/activist.

While it is good to be clear about one's identity and context, I cannot speak for all who share that context. But I can reflect on what the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer means to me in these times. I can try to articulate the ways in which what I am trying to teach, write, and do these days reflects my longstanding effort to remain faithful to Bonhoeffer's demanding example—even as I am aware of the inherent danger of attempting to draw inspiration from Bonhoeffer for any context outside his own.

This leads to one especially important disclaimer: inevitably any effort to read Bonhoeffer for his contemporary significance involves making comparisons between interwar and wartime Germany on the one hand, and one's own context, on the other. If one sees similarities, parallels, and possible analogies, it is easy to be misread as *equating*, say, the United States with Nazi Germany, or US Christians with the *Deutsche Christen*. I am *not* attempting to offer such an equation. But I am attempting to think about the significance of Bonhoeffer (a man attempting to be faithful to his Christian calling in his own context) for my own efforts to be faithful to my Christian calling in my context.

The personal context that is most important for me to identify in this essay is my location as an American evangelical scholar-activist. I write in a time when it seems that all eyes are turned to evangelicals, who represent a massive slice of the American religious landscape, who have discovered and exercised their political power in quite visible ways in recent years, and in so doing have terrified many who do not share their/our convictions. This is the “evangelical moment” in American public life. I write during that moment and from within that community, simultaneously as an evangelical loyalist and as an internal critic. My exposition of key themes in Bonhoeffer's life and work must be understood within this context.

LOYALTY: CHRIST ABOVE ALL

Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught and modeled unrelenting loyalty to Jesus Christ. Like it or not, his was a Christ-centered theology and ethic. This theme works its way through his writings and his life.

This relentless commitment to Jesus Christ meant that all other loyalties were clearly distinguished from Christ, and relativized in relation to Christ. No human being, no nation, no ideology, no “race,” no cause of any sort must be confused in any way with the person or

mission of Jesus Christ. Nor can the cause of Jesus Christ be subsumed under some other, totalitarian scheme for organizing society. Note the paradox that this rigorous Christ-centeredness actually left him more concerned, not less, with the plight of his non-Christian fellow countrymen, especially the persecuted Jewish community, than most of his fellow church leaders. This shows us that it is not enough to be Christ-centered, which is a familiar enough slogan in the Christian community—it matters quite a bit what kind of Christ one is centering upon.

This clarity about his loyalties left Bonhoeffer far better prepared to resist the siren song of loyalty to race, Volk, nation, Party, State, and Führer than were most German Christians. Moreover, the more that leaders either of the Church or the State attempted to blur or blend or equate these loyalties, the more Bonhoeffer resisted. He was equipped with a theological alarm system, one might say, that alerted him to such dangerous syncretism and idolatry and kept him entirely clear of it. Karl Barth had the same alarm system, rooted in a similar Christocentrism. It was this spirit that animated the Barmen Declaration.

Today, for a variety of reasons, conservative American evangelicals regularly exhibit confusion about their loyalties. They (we—my people—though, again, I speak as a “connected critic” here) often conflate loyalty to Jesus Christ with loyalty to the United States of America. They weave together loyalty to Jesus Christ with loyalty to the president, the party, the troops, the flag, or the nation. They create labels, such as “traditional values” or “conservative values,” or “family values” or “our Judeo-Christian heritage” that are themselves symbolic of a confusion, even syncretism, of identities and loyalties.

It is in part my own loyalty to Bonhoeffer’s witness that drives me toward strong resistance to such confusion of loyalties.

COMMUNITY: THE CENTRALITY OF THE CHURCH

From his earliest academic work Bonhoeffer exhibited great interest in the church. If Christ is the “center,” as he said, Christ takes form in the church, the community of saints. Bonhoeffer’s robust ecclesiology was unusual in his day. The marriage of Church and State in Europe had weakened and corrupted both. It had certainly co-opted the church to the interests of the state, which became painfully obvious during the Nazi years as the church’s integrity was compromised by its loyalty to a radicalized State. Bonhoeffer’s writings about the church ultimately amounted to an ecclesiological revolution. He lifted up the centrality of the church as the primary community/polity for Christian people, practiced and taught renewed ancient Christian practices of study, worship, and fellowship (thus linking the church to its historic heritage), and reminded the church of its allegiance to Christ alone. In the end, he supported the abandonment by the church of its cultural privileges and thus had moved towards at least the germinal stage of a post-Christendom ecclesiology.

Such a robust ecclesiology left Bonhoeffer far better prepared than most of his peers to resist the extremely corrupt form of Christendom that was represented by *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller and the German Christian Movement. Like others in the Confessing Church, he strongly rejected any tampering by the State with the internal life of the Christian churches. He sought to disentangle and clarify the identities marked “German” and “Christian” at a time when they were being purposefully entangled by Nazi leaders and their allies in the church. One way he did so was by pioneering a new model of seminary training in his work with the underground Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwalde.

I believe that even though evangelicals have created vast numbers of churches, some of them massive cathedrals of our own age, filled to the brim with people, we have not been particularly strong in our theology of the church. On the one hand, our pietistic individualism creates a “Jesus and me” ethos that often weakens any loyalty to the community of faith or any willingness to submit to a disciplined covenantal vision. Like Christians in Bonhoeffer’s time, we retreat into a happy privatized faith. On the other hand, the moral mediocrity of this kind of church leaves us hopeless about the church as the center of God’s redemptive enterprise in the world. And so we turn inward or heavenward in despair, or we turn to the state to enforce the values we can’t seem to advance in our own churches. I believe that the weaker our ecclesiology, the stronger our tendency to confuse the identities “American” and “Christian” and to offer excessive loyalties to worldly powers.

Part of my own loyalty to Bonhoeffer is a strong emphasis on, and involvement in, a robust church, beginning with the local church. I have sought to be clear that the primary audience for Christian ethical reflection is the church, and the primary task of such reflection is to strengthen our faithful obedience to the concrete teachings and witness of Jesus Christ.

DESPAIR: RESPONDING TO CULTURAL DECLINE

Like all Germans, and many all around the world, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was deeply troubled by World War I and the cultural and political crisis that afflicted his nation after the war. And yet he never demonstrated any susceptibility to what Fritz Stern called “the politics of cultural despair.” I think it was because he believed in the interpretation of history offered by biblical revelation, which though realistic about human nature and history is never a counsel of despair.

It was this cultural despair—a toxic brew of reaction against secularism, anger related to the loss of World War I, distress over cultural disorientation and confusion, fears about the future of Germany, hatred of the victorious powers and of those who supposedly stabbed Germany in the back, and of course the search for scapegoats (mainly the Jews)—that motivated many Germans to adopt a reactionary, authoritarian, and nationalistic ethic that fueled their support for Hitler’s rise to power. A broadly appealing narrative of national decline (or conspiratorial betrayal) was met by Hitler’s narrative of national revenge leading to utopian unity in the Fuhrer-State.

Conservative American evangelicals in recent decades have been deeply attracted to a parallel narrative of cultural despair. Normally the story begins with the rise of secularism in the 1960s, the abandonment of prayer in schools, and the Roe decision, all leading to an apocalyptic decline of American culture that must be arrested soon, before it is too late and “God withdraws his blessing” from America. While very few conservative evangelicals come into the vicinity of Hitler in hatefulness, elements similar to that kind of conservative-reactionary-nationalist narrative can be found in some Christian right-rhetoric: anger at those who are causing American moral decline, fear about the future, hatred of the “secularists” now preeminent in American life, and the search for scapegoats. The solution on offer—a return to a strong Christian America through determined political action—also has its parallels with the era under consideration.

It is in part my own loyalty to Bonhoeffer’s example that has led me to a rejection of the toxic politics of cultural despair and commitment to a hopeful vision of Christian cultural engagement in light of the sure advance of God’s kingdom.

WITNESS: LIVING FOR CHRIST IN THE CULTURE

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was committed to Christian moral witness in contemporary culture. While refusing to identify Christian morality with any particular social or political program, he did seek to bring the teachings of Christ, indeed, the moral tradition of the church as a whole, to bear on a wide range of issues emergent in his day and time. Like most scholars who identify as Christian ethicists or public theologians, he sought to make a difference in his culture through faithful Christian witness. And his focus was not on a public witness that might protect the social privileges of the church, but instead on its solidarity with those in need.

The rise and appeal of the German Christian Movement is impossible to understand apart from the intense desire of at least some German Christians to regain greater influence on their own culture. Part of the appeal of the supposedly pro-Christian Nazis (in their early days) was that they promised to support “positive Christianity.” They would bring back “traditional” (=Christian) values. They would reverse secularism and cultural confusion by restoring a manly Christianity to the center of German culture. Thus the SA brownshirts marched into the swastika-draped churches for their weddings and ritualizing occasions. Worried Christian traditionalists could think, with relief, “Good, at least the young people are back in church again, communism has been defeated, and the secularists are on the run.”

Another way to say it is that Germany’s Christian people were anxious to exercise influence in the culture and avoid social marginalization, and the sign of their renewed influence would be a re-establishment of their historic power and cultural privileges. They were thus susceptible to the false promises of the Nazis that Christianity would again receive such privileges, and were deceived by the appearance of influence in the form of young men wearing brownshirts occupying their pews. I believe it is apparent that conservative evangelical Christians in the US are also anxious to exercise influence in the culture and also concerned to avoid social marginalization over against secularism and other alternative ideologies. Thus they are also susceptible to false promises of political leaders who speak their language and throw symbolic crumbs in their direction, promising the political and legal privileging of Christian values if not Christian faith itself. The desire to make a difference in the culture is then exploited by those who mainly want our votes in order to make a difference in their election campaigns. The cynicism of politicians both then and now is really quite obvious.

It is partly my loyalty to Bonhoeffer’s model (and awareness of the history of the German church in that era) that leaves me strongly resistant to this model of Christian influence on culture and strongly offended by the manipulation of religious language and symbols for political purposes. Instead, I seek to bear witness to Christian moral convictions while remaining fiercely independent of partisan loyalties and political manipulation.

RESISTANCE: PAYING THE PRICE TO SAY NO TO EVIL

It is certainly clear from *The Cost of Discipleship* that Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that following Jesus will be costly. Jesus taught a particular way of life that stands in opposition to the practices of most worldly powers. To say yes to Jesus is to say no to these powers. Such resistance will be costly. It can involve the ultimate cost of laying down one’s life.

And of course the enduring power of Bonhoeffer’s example is that on this score his life reflected his teachings. From the very first time their lives intersected, he resisted Hitler and the pernicious influence of Nazism. He resisted in small ways at small cost and then in larger ways at larger costs and finally in a conspiracy that cost him his life.

The proper pattern is thus established: we follow Jesus, come what may. Having already renounced the ultimacy of any loyalty other than loyalty to Jesus, we are prepared to pursue the path of discipleship (“following after”) where it leads. We do not seek confrontation with the powers, or suffering; we love life, and we are not looking for martyrdom. But having resolved our loyalty issue, and knowing what we know about Christ and about this sinful world, we are ready for whatever may come.

It is partly my loyalty to Bonhoeffer’s model that has inspired me as an evangelical to take what I would call small steps of resistance in our own context. I am deeply grateful to have been able to find a community of fellow evangelicals who share this common vision. Sometimes the practices and policies that we resist, such as mass divorce despite its negative effects on children, the routine resort to abortion, or the endless manipulation of human embryos and genes, earn us scorn from the cultural left.

Other times, such as our refusal to affirm US militarism and especially the justice of the war in Iraq; our protesting of US torture of detainees; our working for just policies for the poor and the racially marginalized; and our pressure for protection of God’s creation, we have garnered the angry attacks of powers on the American right.

But we interpret the discomfort that flows from our efforts to resist what we know to be wrong as part of the cost of discipleship. This too we have learned from Bonhoeffer, and from his Lord and ours, Jesus Christ.