

ROAD TO REBELLION
ANALYZING BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 19, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who wrote extensively on discipleship, vocation, and Christian ethics. However, he is best known for supporting a plot to overthrow Adolf Hitler during the Second World War. Were his actions justified? Is Bonhoeffer's example one other Christians should follow when faced with an unjust government? To answer those questions, this thesis will first demonstrate the theological threat Hitler's government posed to the church, followed by an historical overview of Bonhoeffer's theological and political activity. Next, this thesis will analyze the theological works of Bonhoeffer in order to understand his justifications for resistance. Bonhoeffer's theology will then be compared with Martin Luther's writings on disobedience to government, and to the *Magdeburg Confession*. Finally, this thesis will conclude by pointing out which parts of Bonhoeffer's theology are dangerous, and which would be beneficial for Christians to learn from today.

INTRODUCTION

I want you to imagine a scene with me. America has been taken over by white supremacists. Within a year of taking power, the new government passes a law banning churches from baptizing black people, communing with them, or ordaining them to be pastors; the law also requires that all pastors of African descent be removed from ministry. Any reference to Africans in the Bible is to be removed, with the exception of the Curse of Ham. How would the church respond to such a threat? What if all efforts for a peaceful solution failed? What if, all the while, black people were being mocked in the media, evicted from their homes, and beaten in the streets?

This was the situation in Germany after Adolf Hitler came to power, and the Nazis began persecuting the Jews. In the face of this threat, a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up against the poison of Nazi ideology. After many attempts at peaceful resistance failed, he finally became involved in a plot to overthrow Hitler's regime, and was executed on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance movement as a Lutheran has been a source of controversy. In the time of Emperor Nero the Apostle Paul wrote, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1 NIV). Paul makes it clear that Christians must obey the government. However, Scripture also makes it clear that this obedience is not absolute. When commanded to stop preaching the gospel by the Pharisees, Peter and the

other apostles protested, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29). When the truth of the gospel is at stake, Christians must disobey the government. However, could this resistance ever rise to the level of violence?

As Hitler ascended to power, Bonhoeffer was forced to ask many of the same questions. The Nazi Party had spread their tendrils through the political system, and also through German culture. In mid-twentieth century Germany, this meant that supporters of the Third Reich sought to gain influence in the church as well as the state. Jews and other minority groups experienced persecution from the government and near total exclusion from many German congregations.

Throughout the 1930s, Bonhoeffer and a number of other theologians looked for ways to speak out against the abuses of both the church and the state. These theologians eventually sought to end fellowship with German Christians who supported the Nazi cause. This activism ultimately drew Bonhoeffer into the resistance movement.

From the 1930s to the end of his life, Bonhoeffer wrote extensively on matters of theology and Christian ethics. Though he rarely deals with resisting government directly, a careful examination of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* shows that disobedience was an inevitable part of his theology. The writings of Martin Luther and the other Reformers concerning political resistance will be examined alongside Bonhoeffer, especially regarding their scriptural arguments from the Reformation era. By examining all these theologians together, it will become clear that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology of resistance is unscriptural and that confessional Lutherans must look elsewhere to find scriptural grounds for resistance.

Despite these cautions, Bonhoeffer’s works have much value for modern readers. His writings speak of service to others in a provocative way. Many of his thoughts on vocation and suffering are worth considering as well. Finally, the historical events surrounding his work and

life are impossible to ignore. The German church traded the cross for glory, and Scripture for lies. Believers today need to be aware of the mistakes made in Nazi Germany. They should read this history as a cautionary tale of what happens when theology is set aside for earthly glory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though Bonhoeffer's life was short, theologians and historians have written extensively about him. The resources used for this thesis focus on Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance. To better understand twentieth century Germany, the thesis also used some historical books.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's works provide valuable insight into his theology. *The Cost of Discipleship* does not deal explicitly with resistance to government. However, this book is foundational to understanding Bonhoeffer's theology as a whole, and also gives deep insight into his thoughts on Christian community and Christian love. A brief memoir included at the start of the book, written by Gerhard Leibholz, applies the teachings of *Discipleship* to the situation in Nazi Germany. Another one of Bonhoeffer's books, *Ethics*, deals more specifically with resistance. At its heart, this book is about vocation. As he touches on the Christian's ethical responsibility to neighbor and role in the secular world, Bonhoeffer also speaks about responding to corrupt government, and more specifically, to tyrants. Though *Ethics* remained unfinished at the time of Bonhoeffer's death, it offers many insights into the way he saw the conflicts of his time.

Two biographies provide much of the historical context for this thesis. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* was written by Eberhard Bethge, a close friend of Bonhoeffer who corresponded with

him frequently during his imprisonment and knew of his involvement in the German Resistance. Though not a scholarly biography, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy* by Eric Metaxas renders a contemporary retelling of the events of Bonhoeffer's life. The book is invaluable for readers looking for a more approachable portrait of this Lutheran theologian. *Twisted Cross* traces the pro-Nazi German Christian movement which deeply impacted the Protestant church at Bonhoeffer's time. Some of the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth century philosopher who inspired some aspects of Nazi ideology, provided insight into the philosophical origins of Aryanism in Germany. A book that focuses more specifically on Bonhoeffer's theology is *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to his Thought*. In this book, Sabine Dramm examines Bonhoeffer's sermons, letters, and essays in order to explore his impact on the secular world.

Many articles are also available on Bonhoeffer. "Bonhoeffer and Sasse as Confessors and Churchmen" compares Bonhoeffer with Hermann Sasse, a Lutheran theologian and co-author of the Bethel Confession. This article also relates the failure of the Bethel Confession, and the personal flaws of Bonhoeffer and Sasse. "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority" is a very useful article that explains the evolution that Luther underwent as he tried to navigate the complicated political landscape of the Holy Roman Empire. It also explains how Luther eventually encouraged the lords of Lutheran lands to use force if the Emperor decided to invade. "Bonhoeffer, *status confessionis*, and the Lutheran Tradition" helps to understand the non-violent phase of Bonhoeffer's resistance. The article also connects Bonhoeffer's theology to the *Formula of Concord* and the "Adiaphoristic Controversy."

In this thesis, Martin Luther's works provide a point of comparison for Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance. "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed" and "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved" provide a good framework for understanding Luther's

attitude towards resistance in the 1520s. Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* had a strong influence on Bonhoeffer, who broadly applied Luther's principle of serving neighbor to society, government, and Western civilization. The *Magdeburg Confession*, written by Lutheran theologians in 1550, shows how a group of pastors expounded on Luther's ideas after the Reformer's death. The Magdeburg pastors create an argument for resistance based on Romans 13 and Matthew 22. Anthony Pflughoeft's thesis, "Lutheran Political Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession of 1550 and the Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate," gives a nuanced analysis of this document. Pflughoeft's thesis is a valuable resource for readers who wish to learn more about the legal system of the Holy Roman Empire under which Lutheran theologians first formulated a doctrine of resistance.

This literature review barely scratches the surface of Bonhoeffer resources. However, few of these sources approach Bonhoeffer from a confessional Lutheran perspective. With the sources listed, this thesis aims to give a confessional appraisal of Bonhoeffer's theology, and to provide a starting point for readers who wish to continue studying Lutheran ethics and resistance theology.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

To properly examine Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance, it is important to understand his hermeneutical approach to Scripture, his theology of good and evil, and his view of the Christian life.

Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutic

Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic is very different from that of confessional Lutheranism. This is most clearly seen in a passage from *The Cost of Discipleship*. In a section on baptism, he states: "The Christ who is present is the Christ of the whole Scripture. He is the incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified, Christ, and he meets us in his word."¹ While these words sound Lutheran and scriptural on the surface, they are qualified by a footnote.

The direct testimony of the Scriptures is frequently confounded with ontological propositions. This error is the essence of fanaticism in all its forms. For example, if we take the statement that Christ is risen and present as an ontological proposition, it inevitably dissolves the unity of the Scriptures, for it leads us to speak of a mode of Christ's presence which is different e.g. from that of the synoptic Jesus.... This procedure is analogous to the fanatical doctrine of perfectionism, which arises from a similar ontological misunderstanding of the scriptural utterances on the subject of sanctification. In this instance the assertion that he who is in God does not sin is made a starting-point for further speculation. But this is to tear it from its scriptural context and raise it to the status of an independent truth which can be experienced. The proclamation of the scriptural testimony is of quite a different character. The assertion that Christ is risen and present, is, when taken strictly as a testimony given in the Scriptures, true only as a word of the Scriptures. This word is the object of our faith.²

What is Bonhoeffer saying here? By comparing the resurrection to perfectionism, is he denying that the bodily resurrection of Christ ever happened? Or does he simply mean to say that we should never seek to prove that it happened outside of the Bible, and make this simple truth the "object of our faith"? Bonhoeffer's complicated, cryptic writing often makes it difficult to discern his point.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 205.

2. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. 206.

What can be said for certain is that Bonhoeffer did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. He studied at the University of Berlin, where critical scholarship dominated biblical studies.³

In 1933 he wrote that the doctrine of verbal inspiration of scripture must be rejected in favor of biblical criticism. However, he indicated that biblical criticism is not decisive in interpreting scripture. According to Bonhoeffer, even though historical criticism has proved that Jesus did not speak some words ascribed to him in the Bible, this makes no difference. We must still preach the whole Bible and keep moving, like one crossing a river on an ice-pack that is breaking up. In all his works, including *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer stood on the Bible as on a breaking ice-pack. However, he ignored the fissures, since he had full confidence that the ice would support him long enough to get across.⁴

Bonhoeffer was not alone in this approach to Scripture. A number of contemporary theologians, such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, held similar views. They were part of the neo-orthodox movement, a group of theologians who disagreed with nineteenth-century liberalism and tried to give the Bible a more central place in the Christian life.⁵ Like Bonhoeffer, however, they did not believe in verbal inspiration. “Barth and Brunner denied that the Bible was the Word of God in an objective sense. They said that the Bible was, at most, a collection of merely human documents. But, they said, God uses these human documents to create an ‘encounter’ with the reader, so that the Bible becomes the Word of God as we read it. Reading the Bible, which is full

3. Richard Weikart, “Scripture and Myth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Fides et Historia* Vol. 25, no. 1 (1993): 15, https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/2022-06/scripture-and-myth-in-dietrich-bonhoeffer_richardweikart.pdf.

4. Weikart, “Scripture and Myth,” 15.

5. “The Neo-Orthodox View,” Ligonier, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/the-neo-orthodox-view#:~:text=They%20said%20that%20the%20Bible,God%20as%20we%20read%20it>.

of factual error, sparks this.”⁶ Karl Barth was a colleague and close friend of Bonhoeffer, and was a great influence on Bonhoeffer’s theology.⁷

Good and Evil

Like other neo-orthodox theologians, Bonhoeffer saw the ideas of Scripture as foundational to daily life. He wrote of this especially in his writings on the concepts of good and evil, which he explains at length in his *Ethics*. He starts with a philosophical examination of the Fall, stating: “Man at his origin knows only one thing: God. It is only in the unity of his knowledge of God that he knows of other men, of things, and of himself... The knowledge of good and evil shows that he is no longer at one with his origin.”⁸

According to Bonhoeffer, sin created a world of “disunity” from the divine origin, where man tries to define his existence apart from God. However, since God is the creator and source of all things, man is fundamentally unable to understand himself or the world around him. “Man knows good and evil, but because he is not the origin, because he acquires this knowledge only at the price of estrangement from the origin, the good and evil that he knows are not the good and evil of God but good and evil against God... In becoming like God man has become a god against God.”⁹

6. “The Neo-Orthodox View.”

7. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 112.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 17.

9. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 19.

The inner thoughts of man constantly seek self-justification. “Conscience pretends to be the voice of God and the standard for the relation to other men... Everything now is drawn in into the process of disunion. Knowledge now means the establishment of the relationship to oneself... And thus, for man who is in disunion with God, all things are in disunion.”¹⁰

Bonhoeffer’s prime example for his understanding of fallen man is the Pharisee. He explains: “The Pharisee is not an adventitious historical phenomenon of a particular time. He is the man to whom only the knowledge of good and evil has come to be of importance in his entire life; in other words, he is simply the man of disunion.”¹¹ The Pharisees constructed a system of rules in order to ease their own consciences and justify themselves. They attempted to apply their strict rules to whatever ethical problems they faced. Because of this, they fundamentally misunderstood the freedom with which Jesus approached challenging topics. Bonhoeffer speaks about how this disagreement played out in Christ’s ministry:

Jesus often seems not to understand at all what men are asking Him. He seems to be answering quite a different question from that which has been put to Him. He seems to be missing the point of the question, not answering the question but addressing Himself directly to the questioner. He speaks with a complete freedom which is not bound by the law of logical alternatives. In this freedom Jesus leaves all laws beneath Him; and to the Pharisees this freedom necessarily appears as the negation of all order, all piety and all belief... The freedom of Jesus is not the arbitrary choice of one amongst innumerable possibilities; it consists on the contrary precisely in the complete simplicity of His action, which is never confronted by a plurality of possibilities, conflicts or alternatives, but always only by one thing. This one thing Jesus calls the will of God. He says that to do this will is His meat. This will of God is His life. He lives and acts not by the knowledge of good and evil but by the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it the origin is recovered; in it there is established the freedom and the simplicity of all action.¹²

10. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 25.

11. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 26–27.

12. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 29–30.

In Bonhoeffer's theology, Christ's freedom is the antidote to Phariseeism and all of mankind's attempts to moralize since the Fall. Bonhoeffer saw in the moral problems of his own day a repetition of the arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees. In his view, the people of Germany had failed to confront the problem of Nazism because they were dealing with the problem through human morality and not through the freedom of Christ. Though Bonhoeffer never specifically mentions the Nazis as he addresses this issue, it is impossible to avoid thinking about the Nazis' rise to power as he charts out the ethical failings of people in his own time.

One is distressed by the failure of *reasonable* people to perceive either the depths of evil or the depths of the holy. With the best of intentions they believe that a little reason will suffice them to clamp together the parting timbers of the building. They are so blind that in their desire to see justice done to both sides they are crushed between the two clashing forces and end by achieving nothing... Still more distressing is the utter failure of all ethical *fanaticism*. The fanatic believes that he can oppose the power of evil with the purity of his will and of his principle. But since it is part of the nature of fanaticism that it loses sight of the totality of evil and rushes like a bull at the red cloth instead of at the man who holds it, the fanatic inevitably ends by tiring and admitting defeat... The man with a *conscience* fights a lonely battle against the overwhelming forces of inescapable situations which demand decisions. But he is torn apart by the extent of the conflicts in which he has to make his choice with no other aid or counsel that which his own innermost conscience can furnish. Evil comes upon him in countless respectable and seductive disguises so that his conscience becomes timid and unsure of itself, till in the end he is satisfied if instead of a clear conscience he has a salved one... A man whose only support is his conscience can never understand that a bad conscience may be healthier and stronger than a conscience which is deceived.¹³

The people of Germany had been seeking human solutions, or solutions apart from the origin, as Bonhoeffer would say. By doing this, they had chosen the path of the Pharisee, and had been rendered incapable of truly taking a stand against evil. In Bonhoeffer's mind, only one solution was capable of rescuing mankind from this ethical dilemma. Man must return to the origin. He describes it this way:

The origin is Jesus Christ... in the face of the Antichrist only one thing has force and permanence, and that is Christ Himself. Only he who shares in Him has the power to

13. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 65–66. Emphasis original.

withstand and to overcome. He is the centre and the strength of the Bible, of the Church, and of theology, but also of humanity, of reason, of justice and of culture. Everything must return to Him; *it is only under His protection that it can live*. There seems to be a general unconscious knowledge, which, in the hour of ultimate peril, leads everything which desires not to fall victim to the Antichrist to take refuge with Christ.¹⁴

This statement has far reaching implications. To Bonhoeffer, Christ served as the source of unity not only for the church but for all of Western civilization. He makes this claim more explicit later in his *Ethics*:

It is consequently in this sense that we regard the west as the region for which we wish to speak and must speak, the world of the peoples of Europe and America in so far as it is already united through the form of Jesus Christ. To take a narrower view or to limit our consideration to Germany, for example, would be to lose sight of the fact that the form of Christ is the unity of the western nations and that for this reason no single one of these nations can exist by itself or even be conceived as existing by itself.¹⁵

In Bonhoeffer's view, Western civilization as a whole had fallen away from Christ, the origin. A symptom of this disunion was the rise of nationalism as different countries tried to assert their dominance over one another. However, Bonhoeffer viewed the root of the problem as something much more sinister.

Luther's great discovery of the freedom of the Christian man and the Catholic heresy of the essential good in man combined to produce the deification of man. But, rightly understood, the deification of man is the proclamation of nihilism. With the destruction of the biblical faith in God and of all divine commands and ordinances, man destroys himself. There arises an unrestrained vitalism which involves the dissolution of all values and achieves its goal only in final self-destruction, in the void.¹⁶

The only possible solution was for the West to once again seek unity in Christ.

Reestablishing this unity would take the combined effort of both the Church and the state.

Two things alone have still the power to avert the final plunge into the void. One is the miracle of a new awakening of faith, and the other is that force which the Bible calls the 'restrainer',... that is to say, the force of order, equipped with great physical strength,

14. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 56. Emphasis added.

15. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 87.

16. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 103.

which effectively blocks the way of those who are about to plunge into the abyss. The miracle is the saving act of God... And the 'restrainer' is the force which takes effect within history through God's governance of the world, which sets due limits to evil... The place where the miracle of God is proclaimed is the Church. The 'restrainer' is the power of the state to establish and maintain order. The two are entirely different in nature, yet in the face of imminent chaos they are in close alliance, and they are both alike objects of the hatred of the forces of destruction, which see in them their deadliest enemies.¹⁷

Responsible Action in the Christian Life

According to Bonhoeffer, escaping from the nihilistic "void" required concrete action not only on the part of Western institutions, but especially through the actions of individual Christians. The basis of these concrete actions could not be the self-justification of the Pharisees, but an action that flowed from the freedom of faith.

Whoever wishes to take up the problem of a Christian ethic must be confronted at once with a demand which is quite without parallel. He must from the outset discard as irrelevant the two questions which alone impel him to concern himself with the problem of ethics, 'How can I be good?' and 'How can I do good?', and instead of these he must ask the utterly and totally different question 'What is the will of God?' This requirement is so immensely far reaching because it presupposes a decision with regard to the ultimate reality; it presupposes a decision of faith.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer had already developed these themes in an earlier work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. At the end of the book, he meditates on the image of Christ in the Christian:

This is what we mean when we speak of Christ dwelling in our hearts. His life on earth is not finished yet, for he continues to live in the lives of his followers. Indeed it is wrong to speak of the Christian life: we should speak rather of Christ living in us... By being transformed into his image, we are enabled to model our lives on his. Now at last deeds are performed and life is lived in single-minded discipleship in the image of Christ and his words find unquestioning obedience. We pay no attention to our own lives or the new

17. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 108.

18. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 188.

image which we bear, for then we should at once have forfeited it, since it is only to serve as a mirror for the image of Christ on whom our gaze is fixed.¹⁹

Undeniably, these are biblical concepts. Christians “have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col 3:10). The Apostle John tells us, “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). However, Bonhoeffer applied these concepts in a unique way.

Ultimate ignorance of one’s own good and evil, and with it a complete reliance upon grace, is an essential property of responsible historical action. The man who acts ideologically sees himself justified in his idea; the responsible man commits his action into the hands of God and lives by God’s grace and favour.²⁰

Martin Luther spoke in a similar vein when he admonished Christians to “venture all things”²¹ for the sake of God and neighbor. Christians certainly also have the freedom to make decisions on how best to use their time and talents in service of the Savior. But as Bonhoeffer continued to expound on these ideas, he took a more radical approach, especially as he applied the principles of the Christian life to the political sphere. While expounding upon the ethics of “statecraft”, Bonhoeffer wrote:

In the course of historical life there comes a point where the exact observance of the formal law of a state... suddenly finds itself in violent conflict with the ineluctable necessities of the lives of men; at this point responsible and pertinent action leaves behind it the domain of principle and convention, the domain of the normal and regular, and is confronted by the extraordinary situation of ultimate necessities, a situation which no law can control. It was for this situation that Machiavelli in his political theory coined the term *necessità*. In the field of politics this means that the technique of statecraft has now been supplanted by the necessity of state. There can be no doubt that such necessities exist; to deny their existence is to abandon the attempt to act in accordance with reality.

19. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 274–275.

20. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 234.

21. Martin Luther as cited in Michael Berg, *Vocation: The Setting for Human Flourishing* (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2020), 109.

But it is equally certain that these necessities are a primary fact of life itself and cannot, therefore, be governed by any law or themselves constitute a law.²²

After laying out a political situation where the normal “rules” no longer apply,

Bonhoeffer continues by stating what the attitude of the responsible Christian man should be.

The extraordinary necessity appeals to the freedom of the men who are responsible. There is now no law behind which the responsible man can seek cover, and there is, therefore, also no law which can compel the responsible man to take any particular decision in the face of such necessities. In this situation there can only be a complete renunciation of every law, together with the knowledge that here one must make one’s decision as a free venture, together also with the open admission that here the law is being infringed and violated and that necessity obeys no commandment. Precisely in this breaking of the law the validity of the law is acknowledged, and in this renunciation of all law, and in this alone, one’s own decision and deed are entrusted unreservedly to the divine governance of history.²³

Sometimes, Bonhoeffer argues, laws must be broken for the sake of order. Christians who enter such a situation cannot and should not keep their hands clean. He continues:

From what has just been said it emerges that the structure of responsible action includes both readiness to accept guilt and freedom. When we once more turn our attention to the origin of all responsibility it becomes clear to us what we are to understand by acceptance of guilt. Jesus is not concerned with the proclamation and realization of new ethical ideas; He is not concerned with Himself being good (Matt. 19:17); He is concerned solely with love for the real man, and for that reason He is able to enter into the fellowship of the guilt of men and to take the burden of their guilt upon Himself. Jesus does not desire to be regarded as the only perfect one at the expense of men; He does not desire to look down on mankind as the only guiltless one while mankind goes to ruin under the weight of its guilt; He does not wish that some idea of a new man should triumph amid the wreckage of humanity whose guilt has destroyed it.... As one who acts responsibly in the historical existence of men Jesus becomes guilty. It must be emphasized that it is solely His love which makes Him incur guilt. From His selfless love, from His freedom from sin, Jesus enters into the guilt of men and takes this guilt upon Himself.... In this Jesus Christ, who is guilty without sin, lies the origin of every action of responsible deputyship. If it is responsible action, if it is action which is concerned solely and entirely with the other man.... it cannot wish to shun the fellowship of human guilt.... *If any man tries to escape guilt in responsibility he detaches himself from the ultimate reality of human existence, and what is more he cuts himself off from the redeeming mystery of Christ’s bearing guilt without sin and he has no share in the divine justification which lies upon*

22. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 238.

23. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 239–240.

*this event. He sets his own personal innocence above his responsibility for men, and he is blind to the more irredeemable guilt which he incurs precisely in this; he is blind also to the fact that real innocence shows itself precisely in a man's entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men. Through Jesus Christ it becomes an essential part of responsible action that the man who is without sin loves selflessly and for that reason incurs guilt.*²⁴

The Pharisees sought to justify themselves with their adherence to human laws of right and wrong. Germans in Bonhoeffer's own day refused to stand up to the injustice, racism, and nihilism of the Nazis because they valued their own consciences more than they valued the lives of their neighbors. For Bonhoeffer, all of these attitudes were abhorrent and unchristian. To save Western civilization from the "void" of Hitler's Aryan humanism, responsible action was needed. Bonhoeffer believed the responsible man should not shy away from such an action, even if he became guilty in the process. This radical understanding of Christian freedom formed the bedrock for Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian life. He spoke of a freedom that he believed should not shy away from sin for the sake of neighbor. It was an attitude that would fundamentally shape Bonhoeffer's life.

HISTORY

Bonhoeffer wrote in a time where "the void" of nihilism had become a political force in the form of the National Socialist Party – the Nazis. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the Nazis took over Germany and began to implement sweeping changes that effected the German church and state. 19th century nihilist philosophy served as an inspiration for a number of the Nazis' beliefs.

24. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 240–241. Emphasis added.

The Nazi takeover of Germany first led Dietrich Bonhoeffer to peaceful resistance, then to an active role in the conspiracy against Hitler.

Nazi Ideology

The Nazis believed in the deification of man. This belief found its roots, in part, in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his best-known work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche tells the story of a prophet named Zarathustra, who comes out of a mountain hiding place to proclaim his wisdom to the world. Through this fictional prophet, Nietzsche proclaims:

*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment.... Behold I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak of otherworldly hopes!²⁵*

Nietzsche's overman rejected any notion of an afterlife and instead sought to impress his will on the world around him. In later works, Nietzsche expanded on his teaching of the overman, speaking of "lords of the earth"²⁶, a "new race"²⁷ that would seize power and unite humanity in order to overcome the petty morals of the past. "The aspect of the European of today makes me very hopeful. A daring and ruling race is here building itself up upon the foundation of an extremely intelligent, gregarious mass.... The same conditions which go to develop the

25. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 13. Emphasis original.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power, Vol. II.*, (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 360.

27. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power, Vol. II.*, 361.

gregarious animal also force the development of leaders.”²⁸ Nietzsche goes on to give a potential program for this “forced development”, which is worth quoting at length.

At present, and probably for some time to come, one will seek such colossally creative men, such really great men, as I understand them, in vain: they will be lacking, until, after many disappointments, we are forced to begin to understand why it is they are lacking, and that nothing bars with greater hostility their rise and development, at present and for some time to come, than that which is now called *the* morality in Europe. Just as if there were no other kind of morality, and could be no other kind, than the one we have already characterized as herd-morality. It is this morality which is now striving with all its power to attain to that green-meadow happiness on earth, which consists in security, absence of danger, ease, facilities for livelihood.... The two doctrines which it preaches most universally are ‘equality of rights’ and ‘pity for all sufferers’ – and it even regards suffering itself as something which must be got rid of absolutely. That such ideas may be modern leads one to think very poorly of modernity. He, however, who has reflected deeply concerning the question, how and where the plant man has hitherto grown most vigorously, is forced to believe that this has always taken place under the opposite conditions; that to this end the danger of the situation has to increase enormously, his inventive faculty and dissembling powers have to fight their way up under long oppression and compulsion, and his will to life has to be increased to the unconditioned will to power, to over-power: he believes that danger, severity, violence, peril in the street and in the heart, inequality of rights, secrecy, stoicism, seductive art, and devilry of every kind – in short, the opposite of all gregarious desiderata – are necessary for the elevation of man. Such a morality with opposite designs, which would rear man upwards instead of to comfort and mediocrity; such a morality, with the intention of producing a ruling caste – the future lords of the earth – must, in order to be taught at all, introduce itself as if it were in some way correlated to the prevailing moral law, and must come forward under the cover of the latter’s words and forms. But seeing that, to this end, a host of transitionary and deceptive measures must be discovered, and that the life of a single individual stands for almost nothing in view of the accomplishment of such lengthy tasks and aims, the first thing that must be done is to rear *a new kind* of man in whom the duration of the necessary will and the necessary instincts is guaranteed for many generations.... The aim should be to prepare a *trans-valuation of values* for a particularly strong kind of man, most highly gifted in intellect and will, and, to this end, slowly and cautiously to liberate in him a whole host of slandered instincts hitherto held in check.... The establishment has been made possible of international race unions which will set themselves the task of rearing a ruling race, the future ‘lords of the earth’ – a new, vast aristocracy based upon the most severe self-discipline, in which the will of philosophical men of power and artist-tyrants will be stamped upon thousands of years; a higher species of men which, thanks to their preponderance of will, knowledge, riches, and influence, will avail themselves of democratic Europe as the most suitable and supple instrument

28. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vol. II., 361.

they can have for taking the fate of the earth into their own hands, and working as artists upon man himself.²⁹

Nietzsche believed that through deception, violence, and any other means necessary the “lords of the earth” would seize power from the weak “herd-morality” of the Christian West, and then lead humanity to overcome itself in a despotic act of self-deification. The Nazis saw themselves and the perfect Aryan race they were trying to create as the fulfillment of Zarathustra’s “prophecy”,³⁰ and they proved themselves willing to use deception, propaganda, and force as they sought to become “lords of the earth.” Later in the same book, Nietzsche ominously states: “The object is to attain that enormous *energy of greatness* which can model the man of the future by means of discipline and also by means of the annihilation of millions of the bungled and botched, and which can yet avoid *going to ruin* at the sight of the suffering *created* thereby, the like of which has never been seen before.”³¹

On top of this philosophical background, many of Hitler’s top henchmen were neo-pagans who wanted Germany to return to ancient, warlike religions.³² Hitler himself saw Christianity as a religion for the weak: “Why didn’t we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? The Mohammedan religion too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?”³³ Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, believed Christianity was too

29. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power, Vol. II.*, 362–366. Emphasis original.

30. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 168.

31. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power, Vol. II.*, 368. Emphasis original.

32. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 169.

33. Hitler as cited in Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 165.

peace loving for the aims of the Nazis, and encouraged the Fuehrer to abolish the church outright.³⁴

Hitler, however, followed Nietzsche's logic. For the Nazis to implement their ideology, they had to introduce their teachings "as if [they] were in some way correlated to the prevailing moral law, and must come forward under the cover of the latter's words and forms."³⁵ Hitler believed the church could be a useful tool for such subversion, as long as its' leaders could be manipulated.

Unfortunately, many members of the German church were already in the Nazi camp. In the early 1930s, a group of Protestants formed what came to be known as the German Christian (*Deutsche Christen*) movement. They "regarded the Nazi revolution that began in 1933 as a golden opportunity for Christianity.... Members of the group expected the National Socialist regime to inspire spiritual awakening and bring the church to what they considered its rightful place at the heart of German society and culture."³⁶ The movement quickly gained momentum.

German Christians enjoyed open support from Nazi party and state organs. In the summer of 1933, they dominated the process that unified Germany's twenty-nine regional Protestant churches into the Protestant Reich church; they imposed one of their own, former naval chaplain Ludwig Müller, as Germany's first and last Protestant Reich bishop. German Christians gained control of ecclesiastical government in all but three regions – Bavaria, Hanover, and Württemberg.³⁷

34. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 166–167.

35. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power, Vol. II.*, 363.

36. Doris Bergen. *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–2.

37. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 15.

The German Christians published ten guidelines for their movement in 1932, even before the Nazis had completed their takeover. Doris Bergen records these guidelines in her book

Twisted Cross.

Point seven reads as follows: ‘We see in race, *Volkstum*, and nation laws of life that God has bequeathed and entrusted to us. It is God’s law that we concern ourselves with their preservation. Mixing of the races, therefore, is to be opposed.’ Point nine elaborated: ‘In the mission to the Jews we see a serious threat to our *Volkstum*. That mission is the entryway for foreign blood into the body of our *Volk*.... We reject missions to the Jews in Germany as long as Jews possess the right of citizenship and hence the danger of racial fraud and bastardization exists.... Marriage between Germans and Jews particularly is to be forbidden.’³⁸

German Christians also opposed baptism for people of Jewish or non-Aryan descent, warning that administration of this sacrament could “become a portal through which alien elements entered the Aryan bloodstream.”³⁹ Heretical views of Christ were also introduced. For example, at a 1933 meeting of German Christians one speaker not only denied Jesus’ descent from the Davidic line, but went so far as to reject his Jewish ancestry entirely, arguing that Jesus was “a person of Aryan blood from a Viking clan.”⁴⁰ Friedrich Tausch, leader of the German Christians in Berlin, denied objective justification for the Jews in a speech while commenting on John 4:22. “Christ himself was the greatest hater of Jews.... Because people did not accept Christ, from whom salvation came, a pious Jew out of defiance wrote in the margin: But salvation comes from the Jews! A subsequent scribe brought that remark into the text.”⁴¹ Others

38. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 23.

39. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 86.

40. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 155.

41. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 156–157.

simply denied the importance of Christ's humanity, stating that "he existed outside 'ethnicity and race.'"⁴²

German Christians also advocated for the implementation of the Aryan Paragraph, a document which "focused on restricting non-Aryans from pastoral office."⁴³ In the middle of their efforts to implement the clause in all the German churches, 20,000 members of the movement⁴⁴ staged a rally at the Berlin Sports Palace on November 13, 1933. In his biography on Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge describes the scene:

On 13th November the German Christians staged a mammoth demonstration in the Berlin Sports Palace at which the officers of the new Reich Church Government had appeared. Its main feature was the speech by the Berlin *Gauobmann* [the senior Nazi of the district], Dr. Krause. Now that leading ecclesiastical positions had been taken over by 'men of the movement', Krause declared, there must be further dismissals and the immediate implementation of the Aryan clause; above all he called for 'liberation from the Old Testament with its Jewish money morality and from these stories of cattle-dealers and pimps'. The Church Affairs officers and bishops who were present allowed this speech to pass without protest.⁴⁵

The Sports Palace rally initially backfired, receiving criticism from the German Press, and even from people within the German Christian movement.⁴⁶ German Christian leaders, "nervous about the movement's radical image, withdrew demands for immediate implementation of the Aryan Paragraph."⁴⁷ However, many moderate Christian leaders continued to seek compromise even after the controversy.

42. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 156.

43. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 88.

44. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 166.

45. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 263.

46. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 263.

47. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 89.

A source of weakness among the Protestants, moreover, was the circumstance that National Socialist ideology had infected, not only laymen in the synods, but also a large proportion of the clergy, even those in key positions. In this way they became either the instruments of the Party or else forfeited other freedom to negotiate and were eventually to lose every vestige of independence.⁴⁸

Though inaction plagued many Protestant clergymen, some began to recognize the warning signs. Bonhoeffer, for his own part, found himself personally impacted even in the early days of the Nazi regime. If the Aryan Paragraph took effect, some of his close friends would be removed from ministry.⁴⁹ One of his sisters was even married to a Jewish lawyer.⁵⁰ With racism and false doctrine running rampant, it became clear to Bonhoeffer and other theologians that the time had come to make a stand.

Peaceful Resistance

In the initial stages of his opposition to the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer did not immediately become involved in a conspiracy against the government. Instead, he used his respected position as a platform to speak against the Aryanism infecting the church and the state.

The Bethel Confession

The first phase of Bonhoeffer's peaceful, theological resistance came in the form of the Bethel Confession. The purpose of the document was "to spell out the basics of the true and historic

48. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 203.

49. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 151.

50. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 29.

Christian faith, which contrasted with Ludwig Müller’s facile and inchoate ‘theology.’”⁵¹

Bonhoeffer was one of the chief formulators, and he described the nature of the document in a letter to his grandmother.

Our work here is very enjoyable but also very hard. We want to try to make the German Christians declare their intentions.... It is becoming increasingly clear that what we are going to get is a big, popular, national church whose nature cannot be reconciled with Christianity, and that we must be prepared to enter upon entirely new paths which we shall then have to tread. *The real question is between Germanism and Christianity*, and the sooner the conflict comes out into the open the better. Nothing could be more dangerous than its concealment.⁵²

Another chief formulator of the document was Hermann Sasse. As a young man, Sasse had been trained in the historical critical method of interpreting Scripture, similar to Bonhoeffer. However, his combat experiences as an infantryman in World War I led him to question the value of liberal theology.⁵³ By the 1930s, he had become a staunch, Confessional Lutheran, making him an excellent foil to Bonhoeffer’s neo-orthodoxy. Though the two men were very different, “in 1933, as they each looked at the situation that Christians in Germany were facing – with a Nazi takeover of the state, as well as a takeover of certain levels of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy nationally and regionally by the Nazi-inspired ‘German Christians’ – they joined together as the primary participants in the preparation of the ‘Bethel Confession.’”⁵⁴

51. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 185.

52. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 232. Emphasis added.

53. John Pless, “Hermann Sasse: Courage for Confession,” *The Lutheran Witness*, July 2020, <https://witness.lcms.org/2020/herman-sasse-courage-for-confession/>

54. David Jay Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse as Confessors and Churchmen,” in *Logia* Vol. 21 no. 4 (October 2012): 13.

Sasse later referred to his work with Bonhoeffer as “a phase of happy collaboration.”⁵⁵ Both men were able to contribute unique strengths to the Confession. “Bonhoeffer was able to convince the other participants to accept his treatment of the Jewish question, while Sasse’s contribution is obvious in the areas of Scripture, church, and confession. The overall conception and plan was that of these two.”⁵⁶

Despite the strong start, however, the final document failed to meet the expectations of either of these Lutheran leaders. Before publication, the Bethel Confession was heavily edited without the approval of Sasse or Bonhoeffer. “Many of Sasse’s distinctive accents were diluted out of a concern that the document should be made more palatable to people in the Union and Reformed churches who did not identify with the theology of the Lutheran Confessions. Many of Bonhoeffer’s distinctive accents were diluted out of a concern that the document should be made less controversial and confrontational, especially in regard to its criticism of anti-Semitic racism.”⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer’s friend, Eberhard Bethge, provides an interesting comment: “The work was concluded in a spirit less happy than that in which it had begun. This may have been because the Bethel Confession was hampered from the start by the compilers’ anxiety not to omit anything, or perhaps because it took too Lutheran a turn. Whatever the case, its reception by the experts was unexpectedly disappointing.”⁵⁸ It is impossible to know whether this was the personal opinion of Bonhoeffer himself or simply the view held by other theologians in his circle.

55. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 232.

56. Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse,” 14.

57. Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse,” 14.

58. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 232–233.

The Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church

After the failure of the Bethel Confession, Bonhoeffer changed tactics. Instead of trying to draw false teachings into the open, he began to advocate for a separation and cessation of fellowship from the German Christians.⁵⁹ To this end, Bonhoeffer and some of his colleagues formed the Pastors' Emergency League. The League promised to "lend financial aid to those being persecuted by the new laws or by any kind of violence," and also rejected the Aryan Paragraph.⁶⁰ "By the end of [1933], six thousand pastors had become members. This was a major first step toward what would soon come to be known as the Confessing Church."⁶¹

Shortly after the formation of the Emergency League, Bonhoeffer went to London, where he participated in parish work and sought to gain perspective on the nature of the problems in Germany.⁶² During this time, he also made important contacts with British church officials. "[Bonhoeffer] deepened his relationships in the ecumenical world, and he made sure that whatever positive image Hitler's Germany might have in the English press was quickly corrected with facts. And given his extraordinary gifts as a leader, he was soon shaping the opinions of other German pastors in London."⁶³

While Bonhoeffer was rallying support against the German Christians in London, the Pastors' Emergency League was still hard at work on the continent. Members of the League held

59. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 187.

60. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 188.

61. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 188.

62. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 195.

63. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 204.

a meeting at Barmen in May of 1934.⁶⁴ “Under the chairmanship of Präses Koch, free and legal representatives of all the German regional churches proclaimed a Confession to the fundamental truths of the Gospel in opposition to the ‘false doctrine’ of the German Christian Government.”⁶⁵

The result of this meeting was the Barmen Declaration. Penned primarily by Karl Barth, the Declaration is often seen as the founding document of the Confessing Church.⁶⁶ In the opening paragraphs, Barth explains the purpose of the document:

We publicly declare before all evangelical churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this confession, and thus also the unity of the German Evangelical Church, is seriously endangered. It is threatened by the teaching and actions of the ruling church party of “German Christians” and of the church leadership exercised by them, which has become more and more apparent during the first year of the existence of the German Evangelical Church. This threat consists in the fact that the theological requirements on which the German Evangelical Church is united has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the ‘German Christians’, and by the church leadership. When these principles are held to be valid, the church ceases to be the church, according to all of the confessions held in authority with us, and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of confessional churches, becomes internally impossible. As members of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches we can and must speak together on this matter today. Precisely because we want to be and remain faithful to our various confessions, we must not remain silent, since we believe that we have been given a common word to utter in a time of common need and temptation. We commend to God what this may mean for the relationship between the confessional churches.⁶⁷

Bethge explains the significance of the theologians at Barmen ending fellowship with the German Christians: “Henceforward the opposition was no longer ‘opposition’ *within* the Reich Church under the obligation to recognize the latter’s governance, but must see itself as the one

64. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 222.

65. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 297.

66. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 222.

67. “Barmen Theological Declaration,” *Creeds and Confessions*, <https://creedsandconfessions.org/barmen-declaration.html>

‘Confessing Church’ in Germany.”⁶⁸ With the Barmen Declaration, the German Christians of the Reich church had been declared heretical and illegitimate. The pastors at Barmen had declared themselves the *only* true Christian church in Germany as an act of confession in the face of persecution from the government, and from within the church itself.

Though the Barmen Declaration was certainly not a confessional Lutheran document, it still drew some inspiration from Lutheran history. Shortly after Martin Luther’s death, Charles V had invaded and occupied the Lutheran territories⁶⁹ and began to reinstate Roman Catholic practices in the churches of the Reformation.⁷⁰ In an effort to save the fledgling Lutheran church, Philip Melanchthon attempted to forge a compromise with the Catholics. “[Melanchthon] believed that some concessions could be made in nonessential matters to preserve the security of Saxony... For he was convinced that Luther’s principle of Christian liberty permitted yielding in regard to ‘adiaphora,’ neutral practices neither commanded nor forbidden by God, for the sake of weaker fellow believers and for the sake of peace in the church.”⁷¹

Melanchthon’s position sparked a fierce debate in the Lutheran church, which later became known as the Adiaphoristic Controversy. One of Melanchthon’s fiercest opponents was Matthias Flacius Illyricus, who believed that allowing Catholic practices back into the church, even under duress, amounted to a denial of the gospel.⁷² “Flacius’s anti-interim, anti-compromise argument is encapsulated in this pregnant phrase: ‘in casu confessionis et scandali

68. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 297. Emphasis added.

69. Charles Arand, Robert Kolb, and James Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 173.

70. Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 175.

71. Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 178.

72. Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 180.

nihil est adiaphoron' (1549, sig. vi). Loosely translated, this means, 'when persecution demands confession, nothing is indifferent.'⁷³ In light of the persecution taking place under Charles V, Flacius insisted that Lutherans could not make any concessions without compromising the gospel. It was an application of Peter's bold response to the Sanhedrin when they demanded he and the other apostles stop preaching about Christ: "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29). Flacius argued that the Lutheran church, like Peter before the Sanhedrin, was in a *status confessionis* (state of confession) and needed to hold to the truths of the gospel rather than bow to the demands of the Holy Roman Emperor.⁷⁴ Years later, the *Formula of Concord* settled the debate. "The *Formula of Concord* settled the adiaphora controversy, siding against the Philippists [Melanchthon supporters] and with the gnesio-Lutherans [Flacius supporters]."⁷⁵

Article X of the *Formula* states:

We reject and condemn as wrong and contrary to God's Word when the following are taught... 2. When [human] ceremonies, ordinances, and institutions are violently forced on the community of God as necessary, contrary to its Christian freedom, which it has in outward things. 3. In a time of persecution and public confession, when a clear confession is required we may yield to the enemies of the Gospel in such adiaphora and ceremonies or compromise with them which dangers the truth.⁷⁶

Even before the meeting at Barmen Bonhoeffer had been arguing that the church was in a *status confessionis*. He believed the gospel was at stake because of the German Christian heresy. He had written a number of letters to Karl Barth, hoping to start a "Free Church" apart from the

73. Michael DeJonge. "Bonhoeffer, *status confessionis*, and the Lutheran Tradition," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (2017): 45.

74. DeJonge. "Bonhoeffer, *status confessionis*, and the Lutheran Tradition," 45.

75. DeJonge. "Bonhoeffer, *status confessionis*, and the Lutheran tradition," 45.

76. Paul McCain et al. eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 497.

influence of National Socialism.⁷⁷ Though Barth had been reluctant to declare a *status confessionis* at first, the Barmen Declaration showed that he had finally come to agree with his Lutheran friend.⁷⁸ Both the pastors at Barmen and their National Socialist opponents would have understood the significance of the name “Confessing Church”. Karl Barth had finally declared a *status confessionis*.

Despite the growing sentiment against German Christian false teaching, not every pastor who opposed the Aryan teachings of the Reich church was willing to sign the Barmen Declaration. One such theologian was Hermann Sasse. “In [Sasse’s] case this was chiefly because of the unionistic and Reformed character of Barmen.”⁷⁹ Both Bonhoeffer and Sasse had rejected the pro-Nazi unionism of the German Christians, who viewed racial unity as more important than doctrine.⁸⁰ This agreement had led them to collaborate on the Bethel Confession. However, while Bonhoeffer was willing to set aside concerns about fellowship, Sasse was not.

Sasse sought to evaluate the state of affairs in 1930s Germany from the ‘long view’ of history. He simply did not accept the notion that the crisis brought about by the Nazification of the German Evangelical Church in the twentieth century was a threat superlatively greater than any other that had been faced by German Protestantism since the Reformation era. Sasse rebutted the notion that the confessional barriers between Lutheran and Reformed must now finally be broken down.⁸¹

The Barmen Declaration created a rift between the two Lutheran theologians. Bonhoeffer, who already held to a liberal, neo-orthodox view of Scripture, had little trouble ignoring denominational lines in order to combat the German Christian threat. Sasse also saw the

77. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 187.

78. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 217.

79. Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse,” 15.

80. Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse,” 18.

81. Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse,” 18.

danger of Aryanism in the church – he would not have worked on the Bethel Confession otherwise. However, as a Lutheran grounded in the Confessions, he was not willing to join a group that brought together Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches without distinction. Sasse held to a difficult middle road, standing against Nazi heresy on the one side, and against unionism on the other. Sadly, his convictions led to the end of his active collaboration with Bonhoeffer.⁸²

For the rest of the decade, Bonhoeffer worked tirelessly in support of the Confessing Church. In 1935, he became a professor at two underground seminaries in the remote towns of Zingst and Finkenwalde,⁸³ and he continued teaching until the schools were shut down by the Gestapo in 1937.⁸⁴ Following the closure, he helped his sister and her Jewish husband emigrate from Germany⁸⁵ and remained heavily involved in the affairs of the Confessing Church congregations.⁸⁶ Throughout this time, he retained his ecumenical contacts abroad and travelled to Europe and even to America one final time.⁸⁷ However, though he had the opportunity to stay in America, Bonhoeffer decided to return. “When in 1939 [Bonhoeffer] could have saved himself within that ecumenical movement, he shut himself out from it, confining his way deliberately to the separate and deadly fate of Germany.”⁸⁸ One of the projects Bonhoeffer finished during these years was *The Cost of Discipleship*, published in 1937. In it, he wrote:

82. Weber, “Bonhoeffer and Sasse,” 15.

83. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 347.

84. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 490.

85. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 492.

86. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 493.

87. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 493.

88. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 582.

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁸⁹ Though Bonhoeffer didn’t know it, these words would prove prophetic. By the late 1930s, Bonhoeffer had taken a more active role in the resistance. The decision would eventually lead to his death.

Conspiracy

Bonhoeffer did not decide to become a part of the German resistance movement all at once, but he was aware of its existence almost from the beginning. This was due in part to his family. His father was a famous psychologist,⁹⁰ and the family was well known in Berlin. These connections eventually drew Bonhoeffer into the German Resistance.

Family Connections

Eberhard Bethge explains the unique position the Bonhoeffer family held in Berlin. “For a pastor, Bonhoeffer had unusual connections. His father was on familiar terms with Sauerbach, who was often able to bring along fresh news from the Party hierarchy; his mother cultivated the family relationship with her cousin Paul von Hase (executed after the attempted *coup* of the 20th July) when he was a military commander of Berlin.”⁹¹ Possibly Bonhoeffer’s most important contact, however, was his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi. Hans worked for the German Ministry of Justice, which gave him access to political and military leaders deep inside the Nazi

89. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 79.

90. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 10.

91. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 528.

Party.⁹² From early on, Dohnanyi put this information to good use. “In those years, Dohnanyi was constantly able to get a close-up view of the Nazis’ evil deeds. He began to document their crimes in a ‘chronicle of shame’ . . . which was to be of fatal consequence when certain parts could not be destroyed in time.”⁹³ Because of his brother-in-law, Bonhoeffer had a knowledge of Nazi atrocities that would have been unavailable to most other German citizens. This became important at the onset of the war, especially as Bonhoeffer and other members of his circle became aware of atrocities committed by the German military.⁹⁴

But even these close ties with the resistance did not immediately convince Bonhoeffer to join.

For Bonhoeffer, as a German theologian and a Lutheran Christian, the step into political action, over which he still hesitated, meant going into new and untraveled country. It was certainly a momentous step when one went over from silent opposition to open ideological protest and direct warning, as did individual bishops and that memorandum of the Confessing Church; but it was a further and more critical step into that politically accountable revolutionary planning for the future.⁹⁵

In 1939, Dohnanyi became special leader (*Sonderführer*) on the staff of Admiral Canaris. Canaris was the head of the German Military Intelligence (*Abwehr*), and also one of the key leaders of the resistance.⁹⁶ Shortly after this time, Dohnanyi and Bonhoeffer had an enlightening conversation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer met his brother-in-law every day when he was stopping in Berlin. Thus it came about that Dohnanyi introduced him relatively early to the narrower circle of conspirators. It was also he who one evening asked Bonhoeffer what he thought about the New Testament passage ‘all who take the sword will perish by the sword’ (Matt.

92. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 528.

93. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 528.

94. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 534.

95. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 526.

96. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 529.

26:52). Bonhoeffer's reply was that the word was valid for their circle too – we have to accept that we are subject to that judgement, but that there is now need of such men as will accept its validity for themselves.⁹⁷

Personal Involvement

Though the precise moment when Bonhoeffer became an active member of the German resistance is unknown, he had already begun to use code words in his diary between 1938 and 1939. He even tore out pages that would have included information on critical meetings.⁹⁸

The early 1940s saw Bonhoeffer become an actual agent in the resistance. “He was assigned to the Munich representative of the intelligence as a ‘V-Man’ (German: Vertrauensmann, ‘undercover agent’) but remained in close contact with the ‘Berliners’.”⁹⁹ During this period, he traveled to Switzerland, Scandinavia, and Italy to establish contact with other resistance groups and gave assistance to persecuted individuals.¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer did, in fact, express his revolutionary intentions to some of his contacts in the ecumenical movement.

Bonhoeffer made a statement in the autumn of 1941 that emphasizes his realistic evaluation of the situation and his own point of view with regard to it: ‘Only the military itself is capable of removing the present regime from power: every workers’ rebellion is bloodily quelled by the SS’ (DBW 16, 537). Another statement often quoted is the response Bonhoeffer made to Willem Visser’t Hooft from Holland... who asked him what he prayed for under the current circumstances. According to his biographer, Bonhoeffer responded, ‘If you really want to know, I am praying for the defeat of my country: I believe that it is the only way to pay for all the suffering my country has caused the world.’¹⁰¹

97. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 530.

98. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 530.

99. Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to His Thought* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 177.

100. Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction*, 177-178.

101. Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction*, 178.

In 1942, he met with British Bishop George Bell in Sweden and shared plans for a planned *coup* against Hitler. He encouraged Bell to pass the information on to the British government.¹⁰²

Bonhoeffer's activity as an agent for the resistance came to an end when he was arrested on April 5, 1943, along with his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi.¹⁰³ On April 9, 1945, he was hanged for his part in the conspiracy against Hitler.

THEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

Bonhoeffer's actions as a member of the resistance raise a number of questions. What was his justification for joining a conspiracy against the government? Did he believe the Nazi government had rendered itself illegitimate through its actions? What of the inspired words of Paul in Romans 13? "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Ro 13:1-2).

Bonhoeffer on Obedience to Government

102. Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction*, 178.

103. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 691.

In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer speaks at length about the relationship between the government and the church.

The true basis of government is therefore Jesus Christ Himself... Government, like all created things, 'consists only Jesus Christ'; in other words, it is only in Him that it has its essence and being. If Jesus Christ did not exist there would be no created things; all created things would be annihilated in the wrath of God... In addition to these relations to Jesus Christ which government shares with all created things, there is also a special relation in which government stands with respect to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was crucified with the permission of government.... Jesus submitted to government; but He reminded government that its power is not human arbitrary will, but a 'gift from above' (John 19:10). With this Jesus showed that government can only serve Him, precisely because it is a power which comes down from above, *no matter whether it discharges its office well or badly*... So long as the earth continues, Jesus will always be at the same time Lord of all government and Head of the Church, without government and Church ever becoming one and the same.¹⁰⁴

In this passage on governmental authority, Bonhoeffer recognizes that even wicked governments are established by God and serve his purposes. He even points out that Jesus submitted to a government that persecuted him and treated him unjustly. Bonhoeffer affirms obedience even more strongly when he speaks more specifically about the relationship between Christians and government.

The claim of government to obedience and deference extends also to the Church.... The spiritual office itself is not subject to government. Yet government possesses a full claim to obedience with regard to the Christian members of the congregation. In this it does not appear as a second authority side by side with the authority of Christ, but its own authority is only a form of the authority of Christ. In his obedience to government the Christian is obedient to Christ. As a citizen the Christian does not cease to be a Christian, but he serves Christ in a different way.¹⁰⁵

These statements show that Bonhoeffer did not simply disregard biblical teaching regarding governmental authority established in Romans 13. He believed that even unjust rulers derived their authority from Christ.

104. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 337–338. Emphasis added.

105. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 346–347.

Resistance as an Act of Christian Freedom

However, despite his scriptural position on obedience to government, Bonhoeffer still left open the possibility of disobedience.

If government violates or exceeds its commission at any point, for example by making itself master over the belief of the congregation, then at this point, indeed, obedience is to be refused, for conscience's sake, for the Lord's sake. It is not, however, permissible to generalize from this offence and to conclude that this government now possesses no claim to obedience in some of its other demands, or even in all its demands.

Disobedience can never be anything but a concrete decision in a single particular case. Generalizations lead to an apocalyptic diabolization of government. Even an anti-Christian government is still in a certain sense government. It would, therefore, not be permissible to refuse to pay taxes to a government which persecuted the Church. Conversely, the fact of obedience to government in its political functions, payment of taxes, acceptance of loyalty oaths and military service, is always a proof that this government is not yet understood in the sense of the apocalypse. An apocalyptic view of a particular concrete government would necessarily have total disobedience as its consequence; for in that case every single act of obedience obviously involves a denial of Christ (Rev. 13:7)... Even in cases where the guilt of the government is extremely obvious, due consideration must still be given to the guilt which has given rise to this guilt. The refusal of obedience in the case of a particular historical and political decision of government must therefore, like this decision itself, be a venture undertaken of one's own responsibility. A historical decision cannot be entirely resolved into ethical terms; there remains a residuum, the venture of action. That is true both of the government and its subjects.¹⁰⁶

From these words, it is clear that Bonhoeffer did not see the Nazi government as entirely illegitimate. He recognized that even Adolf Hitler was an authority figure established by God. Interestingly, he even points out that God forbids rebellion. "According to Holy Scripture, there is no right to revolution; but there is a responsibility of every individual for preserving the purity of his office and mission in the *polis*. In this way, in the true sense, every individual serves government with his responsibility."¹⁰⁷

106. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 343–344. Emphasis added.

107. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 351.

Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance was simple and stark. He believed that rebellion against the government was sinful. At the same time, he believed that in certain extreme circumstances, disobedience – even to the point of violence – was a necessary evil. Bonhoeffer did not use this argument of necessity to absolve himself. He recognized that he was guilty of sin in his political activities. However, he was willing to accept such guilt because he believed the alternative of inaction would lead him into even greater sin.

Bonhoeffer's actions reflect his attitude towards resistance. When his brother-in-law asked him about Matthew 26:52, Dietrich responded by telling him Germany needed men willing to accept God's judgment on themselves.¹⁰⁸ Eberhard Bethge relates that even before Bonhoeffer became directly involved in the conspiracy, he believed that "someone had to take on the shady business. And if he, Pastor Bonhoeffer, was not called on to be one of those directly involved, it could at least be his business to set [the conspirators] consciences at rest."¹⁰⁹ In his *Ethics*, he had written: "[Responsible action] cannot wish to shun the fellowship of human guilt.... If any man tries to escape guilt in responsibility.... he sets his own personal innocence above his responsibility for men, and he is blind to the more irredeemable guilt which he incurs precisely in this; he is blind also to the fact that real innocence shows itself precisely in a man's entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men."¹¹⁰

Bonhoeffer saw his resistance as an act of Christian responsibility. When faced with nothing but sinful alternatives, he chose to "sin boldly", as Luther might say. Therefore, he did

108. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 530.

109 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 533.

110. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 241.

not provide justifications for his actions, or even a program of resistance for others to follow. Instead, he made a series of choices in his own particular case and accepted the consequences.

Luther and the Reformers on Resistance

Is there a scriptural basis for Bonhoeffer's attitude? Two invaluable sources for answering these questions are the writings of Martin Luther and confessional Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth century.

Martin Luther

In 1523, Luther wrote the treatise, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed." Though he allowed for peaceful disobedience in cases where the gospel was at stake,¹¹¹ his stated goal for the treatise was to "provide a sound basis for the civil law and sword so no one will doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance."¹¹² In his 1526 treatise, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," Luther conceded that a ruler could be deposed in the case of insanity. However, he went on to argue: "It is my opinion that madmen and tyrants are not the same... If it is considered right to murder or depose tyrants, the practice spreads and it becomes a commonplace thing arbitrarily to call men tyrants who are not tyrants, and even to kill them if

111. Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed," (1523): trans. J. J. Schindel, in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society II*, American Edition, vol. 45 ed. Walther Brandt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962): 111—112. Hereafter AE.

112. Luther, "Temporal Authority," 85.

the mob takes a notion to do so.”¹¹³ In the same treatise, Luther goes on to speak of resistance to government in a broader sense. “Now no one can deny that when subjects set themselves against their rulers, they avenge themselves and make themselves judges. This is not only against the ordinance and command of God, who reserves to himself the authority to pass judgment and administer punishment in these matters, but such actions are also contrary to all natural law and justice.”¹¹⁴ From this statement, it is clear that Luther condemned all violent resistance or rebellion against an authority figure.

However, Luther’s views on resistance changed over time. This was due mainly to the volatile political landscape of the Holy Roman Empire. One of the Lutheran princes, Phillip of Hesse, lobbied for the formation of a Protestant military alliance in case the Roman Catholic Charles V should invade.¹¹⁵ Phillip and his jurors created a constitutional argument for military resistance to the emperor, stating that according to the legal code of the Empire, the electors were not actually subordinate to the Emperor. “If the princes under German law were, as [the jurors] described them, ‘pillars of the Empire,’ co-rulers with its head, and shared his responsibility to look after the welfare of the whole, then they were merely acting as executors of the German constitution in protecting their subjects against him, and not in their own interest.”¹¹⁶

A public disputation was held at Torgau in 1530 to debate these political matters. The proceedings ended with a striking result. “In the name of all the Wittenberg theologians, Luther

113. Martin Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” (1526): trans. Charles Jacobs, in *Luther’s Works: The Christian in Society III*, AE, vol. 46 ed. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967): 105.

114. Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” 108.

115. Cynthia Bowman, “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority,” in *Cornell Law Faculty Publications*, Paper 151 (1979): 8–9.

116. Bowman, “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance,” 10.

presented a brief opinion admitting that, although they had always preached nonresistance in the past, the theologians had not realized that the constitution of the Empire in fact provided for resistance under certain circumstances: ‘For when we previously taught, positively never to resist the established authority, we did not know that such a right was granted by the laws of that very authority, which we have at all times diligently instructed people to obey.’”¹¹⁷

By the end of his ministry, Luther had almost completely reversed his opinion. In 1539, under the threat of near imminent invasion by Charles V’s forces, Luther stated: “Thus as it is just now to fight against the Turk in order to defend oneself, how much more is it now right to fight against the Pope, who is much worse than the Turks.... Thus we shall judge the Emperor in this case not to be the Emperor, but a soldier and mercenary of the Pope.”¹¹⁸ In the same year, Luther participated in a disputation where he became even more extreme in his stance on resistance. “The most important new distinction to emerge from this debate was Luther’s concept of the ‘Beerwolf,’ who, in contrast to a mere tyrant, not only broke the law but also overturned the entire moral order upon which it was based. All the subjects of such a ruler, and not just the inferior magistrates, had the right to resist and even to kill him and all his supporters.... Luther thought the Emperor and the Pope were just such apocalyptic tyrants.”¹¹⁹

117. Bowman, “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance,” 10.

118. Bowman, “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance,” 18.

119. Bowman, “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance,” 18–19.

The Magdeburg Confession

In his later, more aggressive writings, Luther speaks little about the divine institution of authority. This is in part because Luther became much more apocalyptic towards the end of his life and no longer recognized the emperor's authority because he had allied himself with the Pope.¹²⁰ Shortly after Luther's death, a group of Lutheran pastors in the city of Magdeburg set out to give the doctrine of resistance a much more thorough treatment. This document, known as the *Magdeburg Confession*, provided a scriptural argument for resisting government.

Expounding on Romans 13:3, the *Confession* states: "The Magistrate is an ordinance of God for honor to good works, and a terror to evil works."¹²¹ With these words, the pastors of Magdeburg recognized that Charles, as chief magistrate of the Holy Roman Empire, was God's representative in his office of Emperor. However, the Magdeburg pastors argued that the lesser magistrates – the regional princes and electors – could resist the Emperor in extreme circumstances. "If the magistrate does not follow this order instituted by God, they are doing the devil's deeds. Therefore, in turn, those who resist the evil deeds of a magistrate are not resisting what God has ordained but rather the devil.... On these grounds, *the Confession* asserts that it is the duty of the lesser magistrate to resist the higher authority in the case of tyranny."¹²²

The Magdeburg pastors were aware of Luther's argument against tyrannicide in *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*. Anticipating objections, the writers of the *Confession* laid out four "levels of offense" for determining when resistance became necessary.

120. Bowman, "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance," 18.

121. The Magdeburg Pastors, *The Magdeburg Confession: 13th of April 1550 AD*, trans. Matthew Colvin (CreateSpace, 2012), 57.

122. Anthony Pflughoeft, "Lutheran Political Resistance: The *Magdeburg Confession* of 1550 and the Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate," (MDiv. thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2022), 24.

The first level of injury is when the magistrate causes injury that is not ‘extremely atrocious, but remediable’ because of their weakness. The second level of injury is when the harm is done to an individual or a few and does not cause others to sin. The third level of injury is when the inferior magistrate is ‘forced to certain sin, that he is not able to suffer it without sin if defense is omitted.’ The final level of injury is when the tyrant persecutes the people’s rights and persecutes God. The final two levels of injury are when the ruler is guilty of tyranny and can rightfully be resisted. The argument presented here is that the higher magistrate has a duty from God; they can be resisted if their duty is neglected.¹²³

The authors of the *Magdeburg Confession* based their argument on Romans 13.¹²⁴

“Whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason” (Romans 13:2–4a).

While the Magdeburg pastors recognized that Paul commands Christians to obey the government, they also argued that the verses implicitly hold those in authority to a certain standard. If an authority figure rules with justice and integrity, rewarding good and punishing evil among his subjects, he has fulfilled his duty. However, if an authority figure does the opposite, rewarding evil and punishing good, he has turned himself into a tyrant and can be resisted.

This is not the only time the Magdeburg pastors advocate for an implicit understanding of a Bible passage. They also see an implicit message in Jesus’s words recorded in Matthew 22:21, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” *The Confession* argues that Jesus’s statement is also true in the negative: “The things which are God’s are not to be rendered

123. Pflughoeft, “Lutheran Political Resistance,” 24–25.

124 Pflughoeft, “Lutheran Political Resistance,” 24.

unto Caesar.”¹²⁵ For example, if a ruler commanded his subjects to worship him as a god, Christians would have to disobey.

Anthony Pflughoeft argues that an implicit understanding of Romans 13 and Matthew 22 is legitimate. “The justification for this line of thinking is presented in the way that Christians handle the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments give negatives, ‘Thou shalt not.’ However, the affirmative can rightly be deduced from the Ten Commandments.”¹²⁶ In context, the Magdeburg pastors were also writing to an authority they presupposed was (nominally) Christian, meaning that the Emperor should have also understood his role as a servant leader.¹²⁷ Pflughoeft concludes, “Scholarship on Rom 13 has reached the same conclusion as the Magdeburg pastors. Rom 13 provides an expectation for governing authorities to rule and uphold justice properly... This is an expectation for government in general.”¹²⁸

Impact on Bonhoeffer

It is difficult to judge the influence these Lutheran works had on Bonhoeffer. Though Bonhoeffer often mentions Luther, he never makes specific mention of any of his treatises on government. He also fails to reference the *Magdeburg Confession*, a strange omission since this document contains the best scriptural argument for resisting an unjust government. The silence may be due to a difference in context. Both Martin Luther and the Magdeburg pastors wrote as subjects of

125. The Magdeburg Pastors, *The Magdeburg Confession: 13th of April 1550 AD*, 63.

126. Pflughoeft, “Lutheran Political Resistance,” 25.

127. Pflughoeft, “Lutheran Political Resistance,” 37.

128. Pflughoeft, “Lutheran Political Resistance,” 39.

the Holy Roman Empire, a land ruled by an immensely complex network of electors, princes, bishops, and free cities. Luther's change of heart concerning resistance and the *Confession* of the Magdeburg pastors were based on the archaic laws of the Empire as much as they were based on Scripture. Luther's explicit calls to violence were grounded in his belief that Charles V and his armies had become minions of the antichrist in a theological sense. Trying to connect these arguments to Germany in the twentieth century may not have appealed to Bonhoeffer's more modern sensibilities.

Despite the lack of direct connections, it is possible to find echoes of these sixteenth century writings in Bonhoeffer's works. Though Bonhoeffer never uses the term "Beerwolf" in his writings, his *Ethics* alludes to a similar concept when he speaks of the "tyrannical despiser of humanity." "It is easy for the tyrannical despiser of humanity to exploit the baseness of the human heart, nurturing it and calling it by other names. Fear he calls responsibility. Desire he calls keenness. Irresolution becomes solidarity. Brutality becomes masterfulness... The despiser of men despises what God has loved. Indeed he despises even the figure of the God who has become man."¹²⁹ Bonhoeffer clearly casts Hitler as a tyrant who has overturned the entire moral order, becoming an enemy of the gospel and of Christ himself.

The *Magdeburg Confession* offers interesting parallels as well. Bonhoeffer speaks of the government's relationship to the individual Christian and the church as a whole, and it alludes to the duties and responsibilities of authority figures. However, his treatment of Romans 13 shows a fascinating departure. The Magdeburg pastors argue that a leader who fails to follow his duties as laid out in Romans 13 and seeks to destroy the gospel can be resisted. Bonhoeffer refuses to make such a claim. Instead, he points to a bold venture of action, and of the Christian's personal

129. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 73–74.

responsibility to his community and to his neighbor. Whatever the reason, Bonhoeffer never reference the *Magdeburg Confession*.

This departure also highlights a significant difference in emphasis between Bonhoeffer and the writers of the *Confession*. The Magdeburg pastors wanted to present a legal argument for their resistance based on the laws of the land and, more importantly, upon passages of Scripture. Though Bonhoeffer speaks about the Bible, he makes no effort to claim that his actions in the resistance were scriptural.

Analysis of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Resistance

What should the Christian think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Were his actions in line with Scripture? Does his theology of resistance provide grounds for fighting back against an unjust government?

Resistance Activities

It is difficult to overstate the threat the Nazis posed to Christianity in Europe in the 1930s and 40s. Building on the foundation nihilistic philosophy, they sought to create a perfect Aryan race that could take on the role of Nietzsche's "overman". Many Germans within the church were enticed by this rhetoric and began to preach a false, Aryan gospel, throwing out any portions of the Bible that disagreed with their teachings.

With the Bethel Confession, both Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse tried to draw Nazi teachings out into the open. When this failed, Bonhoeffer urged pastors to terminate fellowship with members of the German Christian movement because their Aryan teachings jeopardized the gospel. Bonhoeffer's efforts in this regard should be applauded, and he is rightly remembered as

one of the few men to speak out publicly against the dangers of Nazism in both church and state. However, the Barmen Declaration revealed his weakness as a theologian. Hermann Sasse recognized the dangers of unionism, even for theologians opposing Nazi theology. Bonhoeffer, however, immersed himself in the unionism of the Confessing Church. While this is not surprising – Bonhoeffer never claimed to be a confessional Lutheran – his disregard for fellowship principles reveals that he failed to build on a solid scriptural foundation from the start.

Despite the theological problems, there is still a real Lutheran precedent for Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance. Even in his early writings, Luther allows for the deposition of leaders in case of insanity.¹³⁰ Interestingly, Bonhoeffer and other members of the conspiracy actually discussed the possibility of certifying Hitler as mentally ill in 1939, hoping that this might create a legal case against the dictator.¹³¹ In some ways, Hitler even resembles Martin Luther's description of the "Beerwolf". The arguments advanced by the *Magdeburg Confession* are even more intriguing. When a tyrant "persecutes the people's rights and persecutes God," resistance is justified. This is because the leader has failed to fulfill God's command in Romans 13 and has tried to usurp for himself authority that only belongs to God.¹³² This is what happened in Nazi Germany. With backing from the Nazi government, the German Christians actively tried to turn Christ into an Aryan superhero, stealing glory from God and directly threatening the gospel.

130. Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," 105.

131. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 535.

132. Pflughoeft, "Lutheran Political Resistance," 24.

Theology

In order to judge Bonhoeffer properly, however, he must be taken on his own terms. He did not attempt to prove that joining the resistance was necessary for the defense of the gospel. Instead, he spoke of concrete action and guilt. “Real innocence shows itself precisely in a man’s entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men.”¹³³ Bonhoeffer had a unique understanding of the role guilt played in the Christian life. He believed that as long as Christians were working for the greater good, they could sin and accept guilt. Bonhoeffer pointed to Christ’s willingness to accept the guilt of others as proof for his idea.

Christ took upon himself this human form of ours. He became Man even as we are men. In his humanity and his lowliness we recognize our own form. He has become like a man, so that men should be like him. And in the Incarnation the whole human race recovers the dignity of the image of God. Henceforth, any attack even on the least of men is an attack on Christ, who took the form of man, and in his own Person restored the image of God in all that bears a human form... By being partakers of Christ incarnate, we are partakers in the whole humanity which he bore. We now know that we have been taken up and borne in the humanity of Jesus, and *therefore that new nature we now enjoy means that we too must bear the sins and sorrows of others*. The incarnate Lord makes his followers the brothers of all mankind... The form of Christ incarnate makes the Church into the Body of Christ. All the sorrows of mankind fall upon that form, and only through that form can they be borne.¹³⁴

Admittedly, these words are confusing. Bonhoeffer often prefers ambiguity to clarity in his doctrinal writings. However, his words are clear enough to reveal dangerous implications. First, they betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the Christian life. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus explains that the Christian life is essentially the way of the cross. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” At first blush, Bonhoeffer’s

133. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 241.

134. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 272. Emphasis added.

words seem to reference the theology of the cross. He encourages love for others. He encourages suffering for the faith and for the sake of neighbor.

However, the Christian cross and the cross of Christ are not identical. Daniel Deutschlander explains an important distinction between Jesus's cross and our own. "In the case of Jesus's glory and his crown, suffering comes from beginning to end by way of the sin of others, since he has no sin of his own. His crown, therefore, is altogether his by right and merit, because he suffered in innocence. In our case, things are reversed. The suffering that is called our cross is rooted in our own sinfulness, while the crown comes from another, from Christ."¹³⁵

When Bonhoeffer speaks of "entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men," he makes it sound as though Christians are capable of bearing the sins of other people. This, however, is a misunderstanding of the theology of the cross. Only Jesus has the power to bear sin for others. Christians can point others to the cross of Christ, but in no way can they bear or pay for the sin of others. Individual believers also should not seek to incur guilt, as though they could bear sin vicariously.

Bonhoeffer attaches his concept of incurring guilt to sanctification. "Through Jesus Christ it becomes an essential part of responsible action that the man who is without sin loves selflessly and for that reason incurs guilt."¹³⁶ In contrast, the Bible encourages Christians to flee from sin. In Romans 6, Paul makes it crystal clear that believers should not incur guilt. "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1–2).

135. Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2008), 44.

136. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 240–241. Emphasis added.

Bonhoeffer often encourages Christians to take part in concrete, responsible action without citing passages from Scripture to explain what these actions might look like. Instead of encouraging believers to bear fruits of faith, or toward a life of sanctification, Bonhoeffer proposes an “ends justify the means” approach to life that could easily be twisted into a license to sin. Additionally, by equating the purpose of Jesus’s cross and our own, Bonhoeffer encourages Christians to do something that only Christ himself can do – bear the guilt of sin for the sake of others. By confusing Jesus’ cross with our own, Bonhoeffer robs Christ of his glory and cheapens the sacrifice on the cross.

Since the concept of incurring guilt is so central to Bonhoeffer’s argument, it is impossible to endorse his theology of resistance. Christians can be thankful that Bonhoeffer had the courage to speak up in the midst of a terrible and oppressive time. However, by presenting versions of sanctification and the theology of the cross that contradict Scripture, he encourages a cavalier attitude toward sin that Scripture condemns. For this reason, he should not be held up as an example for Christians to follow in their dealings with the government.

CONCLUSION

“A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything. A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.”¹³⁷ Martin Luther’s well-known words demonstrate that the

137. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 50.

believer's life is a paradox. Christians have been set free from the law and instead live under grace (Romans 10:14). However, as human beings with particular stations in life, they are bound to serve others within a vast network of relationships. Christians are bound to serve those in their families (Ephesians 5), the church, the government (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2:13—25), and the oppressed. Sometimes, the needs of one of these groups contradict the needs of one or more of the others. In such situations, Christians must use their freedom to make difficult choices. Only God's grace enables Christians to use their freedom properly. While nothing is more important than Scripture, Christians can still study history in order to learn from people who have faced difficult decisions in the past.

Bonhoeffer's life and theology teach the believer a number of important lessons. First, they teach Christians the danger of straying from the Word. Bonhoeffer was a man of his times, embracing a hermeneutic that failed to recognize the verbal inspiration of Scripture. This approach colored every part of his theology and led him to misconstrue important doctrines such as sanctification and the theology of the cross. Though a scriptural, biblical case could have been made to support resisting Hitler and his Nazi government, Bonhoeffer failed to make such a case. Christians cannot embrace Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance. Lutherans today must look elsewhere if they wish to find scriptural grounds for resisting unjust government.

The writings of Martin Luther and the *Magdeburg Confession* provide scriptural grounds for resistance. In their writings, these theologians explain that resistance must be a last resort and can only take place when an authority figure has abandoned the divinely instituted duties of his office by seeking to stamp out the gospel by force. Even then, Christians must resist within their vocation, and therefore cannot resort to revolution or popular uprising. Finally, one should not ignore the sixteenth century context of the Lutheran theologians. Both Luther and the pastors at

Magdeburg built on the framework of the Holy Roman Empire's legal code in their writings. These laws gave the lesser magistrates, provincial rulers, and electors of the Empire a duty to protect their subjects from all military threat, and granted these leaders a constitutional right to self-defense against even the Emperor himself. Believers today should not immediately assume that an argument which worked in the Holy Roman Empire would still work in their own context. The rights granted to citizens in a particular country would have to be studied in great depth in order to determine if a similar right to resistance existed in a different time and place. Such a study lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

There is a second lesson to learn from Bonhoeffer. On reading his works, one cannot help but notice his emphasis on suffering for others. "Any attack even on the least of men is an attack on Christ, who took the form of man."¹³⁸ The Bible also tells Christians to put the needs of others in front of their own. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14–15). Christ himself also explains the importance of loving other people. When asked to point out the most important commandment, Jesus answers: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30–31). One way Christians show love to others is by speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves (Proverbs 31:8). When believers fail to do this, it can lead to disastrous consequences. Martin Niemöller, a pastor who lived at the same time as Bonhoeffer, penned the following words from a Nazi prison cell in 1945:

138. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 272.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –
 because I was not a socialist.
 Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out –
 because I was not a trade Unionist.
 Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
 because I was not a Jew.
 And then they came for me –
 and there was no one left to speak.¹³⁹

Believers will never be able to love their neighbors perfectly in this life, but this does not need to paralyze them in their lives of sanctification. They can take comfort in the fact that Christ is in control, more powerful than any false ideology or cruel dictator (Ephesians 1:20–21). He died once for all (Romans 6:10), and nothing will take that salvation away (John 10:28). Even if a time comes when every believer on earth is jailed or beaten or killed, “God’s Word is not chained” (2 Timothy 2:9b), and “the Word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8b). Emboldened by this truth, Christians can live in this world victoriously. They preach the gospel with confidence, and they do not hesitate to help and love their neighbors, even to the point of death. As Christians today read Bonhoeffer, they should not seek to model his theology of resistance for themselves. They should, however, seek to model Bonhoeffer’s concern for his neighbors and his boldness in speaking out to protect others. Believers weep with those who weep, suffer with the suffering, and sit by the side of the dying, always putting the needs of others in front of their own, always seeking to share the good news of Christ crucified for a sinful world. Christians of every age can point to the cross, and to the heavenly Jerusalem, where Christ will reign in justice and righteousness, wiping away every tear from our eyes.

139. Martin Niemöller as cited in Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 192.

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