

An 'Ancient' In Evil Days: Dietrich Bonhoeffer
by
J. Chester Johnson

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WE WILL BE EXPLORING THIS MORNING ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL, ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX SPIRITUAL, CHURCH (IN THE BROADER SENSE) FIGURES OF THE 20TH CENTURY: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, A DEVOTED PACIFIST WHO HELPED ORGANIZE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS AGAINST ADOLPH HITLER; BONHOEFFER, A DEVOTED CHRISTIAN WHO BELIEVED UNWAVERINGLY IN TRANSPARENT TRUTH, WHO ALSO WORKED AS A DOUBLE AGENT – A SPY, IF YOU WILL – PROVIDING INFORMATION TO THE ALLIES FROM HIS POSITION IN ABWEHR, THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE ARM OF NAZI GERMANY. AND THAT’S JUST TO GET US STARTED.

WE COULD LOOK AT ANY ONE OF SEVERAL ASPECTS OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND SPEND THE ENTIRE HOUR AND MORE ON THAT FACET. A RECENT BIOGRAPHY OF BONHOEFFER IS ENTITLED “PASTOR, MARTYR, PROPHET, SPY.” WE’LL INSTEAD CONCENTRATE ON HIS SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY; HE DISLIKED THE WORD, “RELIGIOUS,” SO WE’LL GIVE HIM DUE DEFERENCE AND USE “RELIGIOUS” IF AT

ALL, SPARINGLY, THIS MORNING. BEFORE CHARGING HEADLONG INTO THIS THEOLOGY, OR MORE ESPECIALLY, THE PHASES OF HIS THEOLOGY, WHICH WERE MEANINGFULLY ADJUSTED OVER TIME BY LIFE'S EXPERIENCES, I HAVE AN ADDITIONAL COMMENT OR TWO. WHILE BONHOEFFER STANDS FOR MANY AS THE SYMBOL OF THE MODERN OR POST-MODERN CHRISTIAN, I DON'T BELIEVE HE WAS EITHER. IF NOT, THEN WHAT? HE DID NOT WARM TO THE RELATIVE; HE ALIGNED WITH THE ABSOLUTE. I WOULD ACTUALLY CALL HIM A THROWBACK TO ONE OF THE "ANCIENTS." INDEED, BONHOEFFER IS OFTEN DUBBED GERMANY'S JEREMIAH, WHICH PROBABLY COMES CLOSE – AN OLD-TIME PROPHET; I THINK HE WOULD HAVE ACTUALLY FAVORED THAT HANDLE.

WITH THOSE WORDS AS A MOST SUMMARY INTRODUCTION, LET'S NOW MAKE OUR WAY INTO HIS SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY. WE'LL TALK BRIEFLY ABOUT EACH OF HIS MAJOR BOOKS THAT WILL COLLECTIVELY DISTILL THE PROGRESSION OF HIS VIEWS, AS MODIFIED, AS EVENTS IN HIS LIFE STEERED HIS THINKING AND APPROACH INTO MORE REFINED OR DECIDEDLY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. THE FIVE BOOKS WE'LL CONSIDER ARE *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*, *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP*, *LIVING TOGETHER*, *ETHICS*,

AND *LETTERS & PAPERS FROM PRISON*. BEFORE INITIATING THAT PROCESS, I THINK WE SHOULD ACTUALLY START AT THE POINT IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING HIS DEATH IN ORDER TO CONNECT THE MARCH OF HIS LIFE AND SPIRITUALITY. ONLY THEN CAN WE START TO PUT HIS AUTHENTICITY AND INFLUENCE INTO PERSPECTIVE. IN THE MOVIES, IT WOULD BE AN INITIAL FLASHBACK; OR CONCEPTUALLY, IN THE WORDS OF T. S. ELIOT, “THE END PRECEDES THE BEGINNING.”

HERE ARE COMMENTS FROM BONHOEFFER’S BROTHER-IN-LAW, GERHARD LEIBHOLZ, MARRIED TO BONHOEFFER’S TWIN SISTER, SABINE. GERHARD AND SABINE LIVED IN LONDON IN EXILE DURING GERMANY’S MOST TURBULENT YEARS. AS THE BONHOEFFER STORY UNFOLDS THIS MORNING, BEAR IN MIND THAT LEIBHOLZ WAS JEWISH ON HIS FATHER’S SIDE – THE REASON FOR THE FAMILY’S EXILE TO LONDON – THOUGH HE WAS A BAPTIZED CHRISTIAN. LEIBHOLZ REFERS HERE TO THE TORTURE AND, IN TURN, THE MARTYRDOM OF BONHOEFFER BY HANGING IN FLOSSENBURG CONCENTRATION CAMP TWO WEEKS BEFORE AMERICAN FORCES LIBERATED THE CAMP:

“THOSE WHO ATTENDED THE SERVICE HELD AT HOLY TRINITY IN LONDON AT THE INSTIGATION OF THE LATE BISHOP OF CHICHESTER ON JULY 27TH, 1945, FELT THAT, ON APRIL 9, 1945, WHEN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER MET HIS DEATH AT THE HANDS OF THE S.S. GUARDS, SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED IN GERMANY THAT COULD NOT BE MEASURED BY HUMAN STANDARDS. THEY FELT THAT GOD HIMSELF HAD INTERVENED IN THE MOST TERRIBLE STRUGGLE THE WORLD HAS WITNESSED SO FAR BY SACRIFICING ONE OF HIS MOST FAITHFUL AND COURAGEOUS SONS TO EXPIATE THE CRIMES OF A DIABOLICAL REGIME AND TO REVIVE THE SPIRIT IN WHICH THE CIVILIZATION OF EUROPE HAS TO BE REBUILT.”

TORTURED. HANGING ON A TREE. EXPIATION. WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE? OF COURSE, A DREADFUL, IRONIC REENACTMENT OF THE MESSIANIC PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST, THE CENTER OF BONHOEFFER’S BELIEFS. SO, WHAT DID BONHOEFFER BELIEVE AS A CHRISTIAN, AND HOW DID IT LEAD TO HIS MARTYRDOM?

AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN – SOON AFTER THE CLOSE OF WORLD WAR I, DIETRICH BONHOEFFER DECLARED TO HIS FAMILY HE WANTED TO STUDY THEOLOGY. IN THOSE YEARS, THE CHURCH’S POSITION IN

GERMAN SOCIETY SUFFERED ENORMOUSLY FROM A LACK OF CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY. THE GERMAN CHURCH – I’M REFERRING TO THE REGIONAL PROTESTANT CHURCHES – HAD SUPPORTED GERMANY ENTERING WORLD WAR I, OFTEN PREACHING THAT GOD WOULD BE ON GERMANY’S SIDE. HOWEVER, THE WAR PROVED DEVASTATING WITH DEATH AT THE DOORS OF MOST GERMAN FAMILIES; THE COUNTRY EXPERIENCED A HUMILIATING DEFEAT, AND THE VERSAILLES TREATY THAT ENDED THE WAR PUT GERMANY ON ITS KNEES, RESULTING IN RAMPANT INFLATION AND RAMPANT POLITICAL INSTABILITY. THE AVERAGE GERMAN SAW THE CHURCH, PARTIALLY BUT DIRECTLY, RESPONSIBLE FOR THE THEN UNPRECEDENTED CARNAGE AND THE COUNTRY’S DEGRADATION. EVEN AT BONHOEFFER’S YOUNG AGE, HE WOULD HAVE TO RESPOND TO CRITICISM FOR HIS DECISION TO STUDY THEOLOGY AND FOR HIS ASSOCIATION WITH THE CHURCH BY DECLARING, “WHERE THE CHURCH IS CORRUPT, I’LL PURIFY IT.” AT THE TENDER AGE OF 21, BONHOEFFER RECEIVED HIS PHD AND FINISHED WRITING HIS FIRST BOOK, BASED ON HIS DISSERTATION, *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*, THE COMMUNITY OF SAINTS. AT THE TIME, THE EMINENT THEOLOGIAN, KARL BARTH, AT THE TIME, CALLED IT, “A THEOLOGICAL MIRACLE.”

IN THIS BOOK, BONHOEFFER LAYS OUT HIS VIEWS ON THE CHURCH, IF NOT HIS VIEWS FOR THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH.

INDEED, HIS FUTURE POSITIONS ON THE CHURCH AND THEOLOGY OFTEN DRAW FROM *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*. THE ENTIRETY OF THE VOLUME DWELLS ON ASPECTS OF A COMMUNITY IN CHRIST. TO BONHOEFFER, THE COMMUNITY OF GOD EXISTS ONLY THROUGH CHRIST, WHICH EXISTS ONLY IN THE CHURCH. THE HUMAN SPIRIT, TO BONHOEFFER, IS REAL ONLY IN THE SOCIAL; THERE CAN BE NO SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT COMMUNITY. HUMAN BEINGS KNOW THEIR 'I' ONLY IN THE YOU-RELATION, AND LOVE FOR GOD IS A SELF-SURRENDER AND WILL FOR COMMUNITY. THE CHURCH-COMMUNITY IS CHRIST HIMSELF IN THE PRESENT, AND THIS IS WHY, ACCORDING TO BONHOEFFER, 'BEING IN CHRIST' AND 'BEING IN THE CHURCH-COMMUNITY' IS THE SAME THING. INDEED, A LOCAL PARISH CHURCH IS A PIECE OF THE WORLD ORGANIZED EXCLUSIVELY BY *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*. THIS BONHOEFFER WORK IS A BLEND: SOCIOLOGY, ENVELOPED BY A DEEP RESERVOIR OF THE THEOLOGICAL – HIS PERSONALIZED VISION OF THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST.

AT AGE 24, AFTER HAVING SERVED IN A CURATE POSITION FOR A GERMAN-SPEAKING PARISH IN BARCELONA, SPAIN, BONHOEFFER, IN 1930, COMES TO UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY HERE IN NEW YORK CITY ON A POST-DOCTORATE FELLOWSHIP. WHILE HIS STUDIES WITH REINHOLD NIEBUHR AT UNION IN SOCIAL ACTION BORE FRUIT LATER, IT WAS ACTUALLY HIS TIME AWAY FROM THE CLASSROOM AT UNION THAT BROUGHT HIS VIEWS, EXPRESSED IN *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*, MORE CLEARLY INTO FOCUS. THROUGH AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FELLOW STUDENT AT UNION, FRANKLIN FISHER, WHO, INCIDENTALLY, YEARS FOLLOWING, WORKED ON CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUES WITH MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., IN ATLANTA, BONHOEFFER ATTENDED SERVICES AT THE ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH IN HARLEM, THE LEGENDARY CHURCH, THEN LED BY ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, SR. SOME OF YOU HAVE HEARD ME SAY THE BLACK CHURCH IN AMERICA PRODUCED THE TWO MOST SIGNIFICANT CHRISTIAN MARTYRS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY – MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND DIETRICH BONHOEFFER. I MAKE THIS CONCLUSION, RELYING ON THE SUBSTANTIAL INFLUENCE THAT ABYSSINIAN EXERTED ON BONHOEFFER. THE COMBINATION OF MUTUAL SUPPORT AND MUTUAL SERVICE, PRESENT WITHIN ABYSSINIAN, AND THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM, FACING

AND EXTENDING OUTWARD FROM THE HARLEM CHURCH, COMPORTED WITH BONHOEFFER'S CONCEPT OF CHRIST'S COMMUNITY, THE COMMUNITY OF SAINTS. HE TAUGHT SUNDAY SCHOOL AT ABYSSINIAN, AND PASTOR POWELL WOULD, ON OCCASION, ALLOW BONHOEFFER TO PREACH. HE WAS SWEEPED UP BY THE ENERGY AND THE COMMITMENT HE ENCOUNTERED AT ABYSSINIAN. BONHOEFFER WROTE TO HIS FAMILY BACK IN BERLIN THAT "THE BLACK CHRIST IS PREACHED WITH PASSION." THESE MOMENTS NEVER LEFT HIM, AND HE RELIED ON REMEMBRANCES OF ABYSSINIAN FOR HELP IN BUILDING A SANCTORUM COMMUNIO WHEN HE LATER BECAME, IN 1935, DIRECTOR OF THE SEMINARY FOR THE ILLEGAL CONFESSING CHURCH IN GERMANY. HE EVEN BOUGHT ALBUMS OF SPIRITUALS HERE AND TOOK THEM BACK TO GERMANY WITH HIM – HIS STUDENTS BEING REQUIRED TO LISTEN TO THEM TOGETHER, OFTEN AS PART OF THEIR SEMINARY CURRICULUM AND TRAINING.

UPON BONHOEFFER'S RETURN TO GERMANY IN 1931, HE FACED A STEADILY DEVOLVING COUNTRY, RAPIDLY FALLING INTO EXTREMISM AND PESSIMISM. HE WITNESSED THE GERMAN CHURCH BECOMING INCREASINGLY COMPLICIT IN THE AGENDA OF NAZISM

AND ADOLPH HITLER, THE PERSON BONHOEFFER CAME TO VIEW AS THE ANTI-CHRIST. TWO YEARS AFTER HIS RETURN, BONHOEFFER APPEARED ON A NATIONAL GERMAN RADIO STATION THAT INVITED HIM TO GIVE HIS IDEAS ON THE THEN CURRENT GERMAN ENVIRONMENT. DURING THE BROADCAST, HE STARTED TO DESCRIBE THE VALUES AND ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AS GOD AND CHRIST AS CHRIST AND THEN HE TURNED TO A DISCUSSION OF THE DANGERS OF A POLITICAL LEADER (WITHOUT NAMING NAMES) WHO WOULD THINK OF HIMSELF AS GODLIKE, WHO ATTEMPTS TO BECOME GOD ON EARTH WITH THE RESULTANT CONSEQUENCES OF HELL ON EARTH. AT THAT VERY POINT IN HIS PRESENTATION, THE RADIO BROADCAST WAS IMMEDIATELY CUT OFF. IN THIS SOIL, BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY CONTINUED TO MATURE AND EXPAND, LIKE BREAD UPON THE WATER. HIS NEXT BOOK, NOURISHED IN ADVERSITY AND PROSPECTS FOR GERMANY SLIDING INTO BEDLAM, WAS PUBLISHED IN 1937 – A CLASSIC, *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP*. IN THIS WORK, HE REFLECTS THE PROPOSITION THAT FALSE FAITH IS CAPABLE OF TERRIBLE AND MONSTROUS THINGS WITH RELIANCE ON MAN-MADE DOGMAS AND INTERPRETATIONS. HE FOUND THAT THE REFORMATION, LED BY MARTIN LUTHER, HAD ULTIMATELY LED TO CHEAP GRACE; BRINGING CHRIST TO BE MORE CLOSELY ALIGNED

WITH THE WORLD CAUSED THE WORLD TO HAVE SINFUL EFFECTS ON THE CHURCH, WHICH BECAME MORE LIKE THE WORLD. ‘COSTLY GRACE,’ RELYING UPON TRUE DISCIPLESHIP TO CHRIST, WAS TURNED INTO CHEAP GRACE. DISCIPLESHIP MEANT ADOPTING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. BONHOEFFER’S WORDS IN *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP* SAY IT BEST:

“WE HAVE LISTENED TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND PERHAPS HAVE UNDERSTOOD IT. BUT WHO HAS HEARD IT ARIGHT? JESUS. . . DOES NOT ALLOW HIS HEARERS TO GO AWAY AND MAKE OF HIS SAYINGS WHAT THEY WILL, PICKING AND CHOOSING FROM THEM WHATEVER THEY FIND HELPFUL AND TESTING THEM TO SEE IF THEY WORK. HUMANLY SPEAKING, WE COULD UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT IN A THOUSAND DIFFERENT WAYS. JESUS KNOWS ONLY ONE POSSIBILITY: SIMPLE SURRENDER AND OBEDIENCE, NOT INTERPRETING IT OR APPLYING IT, BUT DOING AND OBEYING IT. . . HE REALLY MEANS US TO GET ON WITH IT.”

BONHOEFFER GOES FURTHER IN THIS VOLUME TO SAY IT IS A THEOLOGICAL ERROR TO INVOKE CHRIST THE MEDIATOR TO JUSTIFY DIRECT RELATIONSHIPS WITH THINGS OF THIS WORLD, FOR JESUS

GOES TO JERUSALEM AND THE CROSS, AND THE DISCIPLES ARE FILLED WITH FEAR AND AMAZEMENT AT THE ROAD JESUS CALLS THEM TO FOLLOW. DISCIPLESHIP MEANS ADHERENCE TO JESUS ALONE AND TO THE WILL OF GOD, AS REVEALED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW AND PROPHETS. BONHOEFFER WITNESSED LUTHER'S CHURCH, THE CHURCH OF CHRIST, FALLING TO CIVIC AUTHORITY IN GERMANY. WILLIAM SHIRER HAS WRITTEN THAT THE MAJORITY OF PROTESTANT PASTORS IN GERMANY SUBMITTED IN THE FACE OF NAZI TERROR. BONHOEFFER'S FINAL LESSON IN *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP* IS FOR US – IN THE MOST IMMEDIATE CASE, THE GERMAN PEOPLE, BUT TO CHRISTIANS EVERYWHERE – TO REALIZE THAT WHEN WE CREATE OUR OWN GOD AND OUR OWN WORLD, WHAT WE REALLY DO IS TO DEIFY OUR OWN LUST IN ITS VARIOUS FORMS: GREED AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION, AMONG OTHERS.

SO, BONHOEFFER GOES INTO DISASSOCIATION, AWAY FROM ANY PUBLIC NATIONAL GERMAN CHURCH THAT ULTIMATELY PROCEEDS TO ADOPT A PRONOUNCEMENT THAT THERE IS A NEW REVELATION IN THE FORM OF THE FUHRER, ADOLPH HITLER, AND DEGRADATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT. BONHOEFFER HAS ALREADY SAID FOR MANY

TO HEAR THAT “ONLY HE WHO CRIES OUT FOR THE JEWS CAN SING GREGORIAN CHANTS.”

FROM THERE, BONHOEFFER RETURNS IN HIS WRITING TO THE FOCUS OF HIS EARLIER WORK, *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*, THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST – BUT NOW WITH MORE URGENCY. IN 1937, THE CONFESSING CHURCH’S SEMINARY AT FINKENWALDE, GERMANY, FOR WHICH BONHOEFFER WAS ITS DIRECTOR, IS SUMMARILY SHUT DOWN BY THE GESTAPO. FOR THE PURPOSE OF PROMOTING THE CONCEPTS OF CHRIST’S COMMUNITY WITH ADHERENCE TO DISCIPLESHIP AND IN PREPARATION FOR LIFE AMONG ONE’S ENEMIES, BONHOEFFER COMPOSED IN 1938 A FOLLOW-UP PIECE ON THE FINKENWALDE EXPERIENCES ENTITLED *LIFE TOGETHER*. HE REITERATES AND EMPHASIZES PRACTICES THAT BRING SPIRITUAL SUSTENANCE TO A CHRISTIAN, SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY. THIS VOLUME DESCRIBES THE DAILY DISCIPLINE TO BE FOLLOWED – FROM MORNING PRAYERS TO THE ROLE OF THE PSALTER (WE ONLY PRAY THE PSALMS BECAUSE CHRIST DID), AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMUNITY SINGING TOGETHER, WHICH IS THE VOICE OF THE CHURCH, NOT THE VOICE OF ‘I.’ IN THE COMMUNITY OF THE FAITHFUL, LET NOTHING BE DONE BY FORCE, BUT EVERYTHING BE

DONE IN FREEDOM AND LOVE. IN THE COMMUNITY, IT IS OUR BREAD WE EAT, NOT OUR OWN. THE DIVERSITY OF INDIVIDUALS IN THE COMMUNITY IS NOT A REASON TO JUDGE OR CONDEMN AND IS NOT A PRETEXT FOR SELF-JUSTIFICATION. THE FIRST OBLIGATION TO OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY IS LISTENING. WE ARE SINNERS TO GOD, BUT GOD WANTS US AS WE ARE, SAYING, “MY CHILD, GIVE ME YOUR HEART.” BONHOEFFER IS NOT ARGUING FOR THE VALUES OF A STRICTLY MONASTIC LIFE; RATHER, HE BELIEVES THE COMMUNITY, WHICH FOLLOWS HIS *LIFE TOGETHER*, WILL BE BETTER ABLE TO BE CHRIST’S PRESENCE WITHIN THE WORLD, IN THE WORLD OF THE COMMUNITY’S ENEMIES.

AFTER PUBLICATION OF *LIFE TOGETHER* IN 1939, BONHOEFFER DEVOTES HIMSELF LARGELY TO POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM; FOR SHORT SNIPPETS HERE AND THERE, HE DOES CONTINUE TO WRITE. BY 1940, HE HAS JOINED HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW, HANS VON DOHNANYI, ONE OF THE CO-CONSPIRATORS AGAINST HITLER AND NAZISM, AT ABWEHR, THE GERMAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE OFFICE, TO OPERATE AS A DOUBLE-AGENT; THE NAZIS CONCLUDE BONHOEFFER’S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION COULD HELP THE GERMAN REGIME, BUT BONHOEFFER HAS OTHER PLANS FOR TRAVEL

OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY – FOR COMMUNICATING WITH INTERNATIONAL PEACE GROUPS AND PROVIDING VALUABLE INFORMATION ABOUT GERMANY’S PLANS TO NAZI OPPONENTS OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY. THOUGH A MEMBER OF ABWEHR, HE WAS, NEVERTHELESS, NOT SEEN BY THE NAZI GOVERNMENT AS A FULLY RELIABLE PERSON – IN JULY, 1940, FOR EXAMPLE, THE GESTAPO BREAKS UP A BIBLE STUDY GROUP BEING CONDUCTED BY BONHOEFFER; TWO MONTHS LATER, HE IS ORDERED TO START REPORTING HIS MOVEMENTS TO THE POLICE; THE FOLLOWING MONTH, HE RECEIVES AN ORDER THAT PROHIBITS HIM FROM SPEAKING IN PUBLIC.

HIS WRITINGS NOW TAKE A SIGNIFICANT TURN. FOR THE BOOK, *ETHICS*, BONHOEFFER IS ON A NEW PLANE. HE HAS WATCHED THE GERMAN CHURCH CRUMBLE UNDER THE WEIGHT OF NAZISM AND BECOME HERETICAL – TO BUY INTO A NEW REVELATION WITH HITLER AT THE CENTER, TO REMAIN SILENT, IF NOT COMPLICIT, IN AN INCREASED CONCENTRATION OF ATTACKS ON AND POSSIBLE ANNIHILATION OF THE BEARERS – THE JEWS – OF CHRIST’S OWN HERITAGE, FOR CHRIST HIMSELF WAS JEWISH, A FACT BONHOEFFER CONTINUALLY REPEATS.

IN *ETHICS*, HE IDENTIFIES HIS FOE CLEARLY (EVEN, ON OCCASION, MENTIONING HITLER BY NAME) AND DEVELOPS THE RATIONALE FOR HIS BEHAVIOR AS A CHRISTIAN, AS A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST, FIRST AND ALWAYS. HE SEES AND SAYS WHAT AND WHOM HE IS PERSONALLY FIGHTING IN *ETHICS*, WHICH HE WRITES AS HE PARTICIPATES IN CLANDESTINE EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE FOR THE ASSASSINATION OF ADOLPH HITLER, WHOM BONHOEFFER OFTEN SAYS (AND APPARENTLY, IN TRUTH, BELIEVES) IS, IN FACT, THE ANTI-CHRIST: THE GREAT DESTROYER; THE FALSIFIER, POSING THE NEGATIVE AS POSITIVE; ENDORSER OF DEATH, SLAVERY AND EXTINCTION; THE MANIPULATOR; THE EXPLOITER, OPPOSITE OF THE SERVANT, JESUS. IN *ETHICS*, WE SEE THE DECISION POINT FOR BONHOEFFER: WHAT HE IS AGAINST AND WHAT IS HIS CAPACITY, AS A MAN, AS A MAN OF CHRIST, TO FIGHT IN ACCORDANCE WITH CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF BEHAVIOR UNDER NAZISM. *ETHICS* IS HIS INDICTMENT OF HITLER AND THE NAZIS; IT IS ALSO A DECLARATION OF HIS OWN FREEDOM TO FIGHT, AT ALL COSTS, FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ANTI-CHRIST AND NAZISM.

SO, HOW DOES BONHOEFFER, A DECLARED AND DEVOTED PACIFIST, JUSTIFY THE KILLING, THE ASSASSINATION OF ANOTHER HUMAN BEING? HOW DOES HE BREAK THE PROHIBITED ACT OF MURDER IN

THE DECALOGUE, THE TEN COMMANDMENTS? AS A RESULT OF THE CRUCIAL NATURE OF THIS CRUCIBLE FOR HIS OWN PERSONAL BEHAVIOR, I'LL LET BONHOEFFER SPEAK FOR HIMSELF. LET IT BE UNDERSTOOD THAT THE MOMENT HE DESCRIBES BELOW IS TO BE SEEN AS HIGHLY UNUSUAL, FOR HE HAS SPOKEN ELSEWHERE THAT GOD'S COMMANDMENTS ARE INDEED THE FOUNDATION FOR BEHAVIOR. BUT WHAT BONHOEFFER HAS COMMITTED TO DO IS DONE IN A CONTEXT WELL BEYOND THE CONTEXT FOR WHICH THE COMMANDMENTS APPLY – AT LEAST IN BONHOEFFER'S MIND AND SOUL:

“RESPONSIBLE ACTION IS A FREE VENTURE; IT IS NOT JUSTIFIED BY ANY LAW; IT IS PERFORMED WITHOUT ANY CLAIM TO A VALID SELF-JUSTIFICATION. GOOD IS PERFORMED IN THE SURRENDER TO GOD OF THE DEED WHICH HAS BECOME NECESSARY; FOR IT IS GOD WHO SEES THE HEART, WHO WEIGHS UP THE DEED. THE RESPONSIBLE MAN ACTS IN THE FREEDOM OF HIS OWN SELF, WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF MEN, CIRCUMSTANCES OR PRINCIPLES, BUT WITH A DUE CONSIDERATION FOR THE GIVEN HUMAN AND GENERAL CONDITIONS AND FOR THE RELEVANT QUESTIONS OF PRINCIPLE. THE PROOF OF HIS FREEDOM IS THE FACT THAT NOTHING CAN ANSWER FOR HIM,

NOTHING CAN EXONERATE HIM, EXCEPT HIS OWN DEED AND HIS OWN SELF. HE DOES IT IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THIS LIBERTY IS FORCED UPON HIM AND THAT IN THIS LIBERTY HE IS DEPENDENT ON GRACE. BEFORE OTHER MEN THE MAN OF FREE RESPONSIBILITY IS JUSTIFIED BY NECESSITY; BEFORE HIMSELF HE IS ACQUITTED BY HIS CONSCIENCE; BUT BEFORE GOD HE HOPES ONLY FOR MERCY.”

LET IT ALSO BE SAID, BONHOEFFER DOES NOT TALK AT ALL IN *ETHICS* ABOUT THE SPECIFIC COURSE HE AND HIS CO-CONSPIRATORS HAVE CHARTED FOR THEMSELVES TO THROW A STICK INTO THE SPOKES OF THE NAZI MACHINE. IT IS BY CORRESPONDING TIME AND ACTION THAT WE KNOW WHAT IS DRIVING THE MEDITATIONS AND CONTEMPLATIONS, IF NOT PRAYERS, BEHIND THESE WORDS I JUST QUOTED. IN FACT, THE MANUSCRIPT, MOLDED LATER FROM VARIOUS SCRAPES OF HIS MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS DURING THIS PERIOD THAT WERE HIDDEN, BURIED FOR SEVERAL YEARS, DID NOT SEE PUBLICATION UNTIL WELL AFTER THE END OF WORLD WAR II IN 1949 AND WELL AFTER BONHOEFFER’S MARTYRDOM. BEAR IN MIND HE IS IN THE MIDST, WITH HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW, DONHANYI, OF SMUGGLING JEWISH FAMILIES OUT OF GERMANY INTO SWITZERLAND, SYPHONING MONEY FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO

FINANCE THE TRANSFERS, AND HE IS TAKING TRIPS OUTSIDE OF GERMANY, MEETING WITH INDIVIDUALS WHO WOULD WORK WITH HIM IN ESTABLISHING PEACE. AT HOME, BONHOEFFER AND HIS CO-CONSPIRATORS ARE STEADFASTLY AT WORK TO CREATE CONDITIONS WHEREBY SYMPATHETIC GERMAN GENERALS CAN BE ENLISTED TO TURN ON HITLER AND HIS HIGH COMMAND; AND SHORT OF A FULL-SCALE COUP, BONHOEFFER AND HIS GROUP ARE ORGANIZING TO IMPLEMENT ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS ON HITLER. BECAUSE OF THE RISKS HE AND OTHERS ARE TAKING TO BRING DOWN HITLER AND THE NAZIS, HE REALIZES THE NOOSE IS TIGHTENING, AND IT WOULD CONCEIVABLY BE ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL HE AND HIS CO-CONSPIRATORS ARE DISCOVERED IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. IT IS IN THIS CAULDRON OF ANXIETY, IF NOT DESPERATION, THAT BONHOEFFER CONTEMPLATES AND WRITES ON THE REALITY AND RELEVANCE OF HIS COMMITMENTS. BUT REMEMBER THE CENTER OF BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY IS CHRIST, BOTH AS GOD'S OWN INCARNATE SON AND THE CHURCH AS CHRIST. IN THIS RESPECT, BONHOEFFER SAW ANY ATTACKS AGAINST AND DESTRUCTION OF THE JEWS AS ALSO ATTACKS AGAINST AND DESTRUCTION OF CHRIST, FOR JESUS CHRIST WAS A JEW. TO BONHOEFFER PERSONALLY, THE PROMINENCE OF THIS RECOGNITION GOES BACK TO

KRYSTALLNACHT IN NOVEMBER, 1938 (“THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS”) WHEN JEWISH SYNAGOGUES, HOMES, BUSINESSES AND PERSONS WERE ATTACKED IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA. AT THAT TIME, BONHOEFFER WROTE REFERENCES TO THE JEWS IN THE MARGINS OF HIS PSALTER ALONGSIDE THESE WORDS FROM PSALM 74:

“YOUR ADVERSARIES ROARED IN YOUR HOLY PLACE; THEY SET UP THEIR BANNERS AS TOKENS OF VICTORY. THEY SET FIRE TO YOUR HOLY PLACE; THEY DEFILED THE DWELLING-PLACE OF YOUR NAME AND RAZED IT TO THE GROUND. THEY BURNED DOWN ALL THE MEETING PLACES OF GOD IN THE LAND.”

WE’VE SEEN HOW BONHOEFFER JUSTIFIES HIS ACTIONS AND PLANS IN THE FACE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, BUT HOW CAN HE DO THE SAME IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST? LET’S AGAIN RETURN TO BONHOEFFER’S OWN WORDS:

“THE ORIGIN AND THE GOAL OF MY CONSCIENCE IS NOT A LAW BUT IT IS THE LIVING GOD AND THE LIVING MAN AS HE CONFRONTS ME IN JESUS CHRIST. FOR THE SAKE OF GOD AND OF MEN, JESUS

BECAME A BREAKER OF THE LAW. HE BROKE THE LAW OF THE SABBATH IN ORDER TO KEEP IT HOLY IN LOVE FOR GOD AND FOR MEN. HE FORSOOK HIS PARENTS IN ORDER TO DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF HIS GOD AND THEREBY TO PURIFY HIS OBEDIENCE TOWARDS HIS PARENTS. HE SAT AT TABLE WITH SINNERS AND OUTCASTS; AND FOR THE LOVE OF MEN HE CAME TO BE FORSAKEN BY GOD IN HIS LAST HOUR. HE WISHED TO SHARE IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF HUMAN GUILT. THUS IT IS JESUS CHRIST WHO SETS THE CONSCIENCE FREE FOR THE SERVICE OF GOD AND OF OUR NEIGHBOR.”

SO, BONHOEFFER CAME TO UNDERSTAND THAT FOR THE SERVICE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR, INCLUDING THE JEW (IF NOT ESPECIALLY THE JEW, FOR CHRIST WAS JEWISH), HE, BONHOEFFER, COULD, IF NOT SHOULD, PURSUE THE BREAKING OF A COMMANDMENT OF GOD HIMSELF IN ACCORDANCE WITH AN IMITATION OF CHRIST.

HOWEVER, AS BONHOEFFER AND HIS COLLEAGUES ASSIDUOUSLY AND SECRETLY LABOR TO HINDER AND DISRUPT GERMANY’S NAZI MACHINE, THE MILITARY VICTORIES FOR GERMANY KEEP PILING UP. BY THE FALL OF 1942, HITLER’S TERRITORY NOW ENCIRCLES MOST OF THE MEDITERRANEAN – FROM SPAIN TO TURKEY ON THE NORTH

AND FROM TUNISIA TO NEAR THE NILE ON THE SOUTH. HE ALSO CONTROLS THE HUGE LAND MASS FROM NORTHERN NORWAY AT THE ARCTIC OCEAN TO EGYPT AND FROM THE ATLANTIC TO THE SOUTHERN PARTS OF THE VOLGA RIVER IN RUSSIA. AND YET, WITHIN MONTHS, THE THIRD REICH'S FORTUNES ARE REMARKABLY REVERSED – IN RUSSIA AND NORTH AFRICA. BY EARLY 1943, TALK ACCELERATES AMONG THE CO-CONSPIRATORS AND EVEN HIGH-LEVEL ARMY OFFICERS ABOUT A POSSIBLE COUP. IN MARCH, 1943, AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ACTUALLY OCCURS, BUT FAILS. HITLER AND THE NAZIS THEN BEGIN TO FOCUS OBSESSIVELY ON THOSE WHO MAY BE BEHIND THE ANTI-HITLER AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT ACTIONS WITHIN GERMANY. IN TURN, A SERIES OF QUESTIONS ARE RAISED ABOUT THE VARIOUS ACTIVITIES WITHIN ABWEHR OF BONHOEFFER AND DOHNANYI, INCLUDING MONEY TRANSFERS AND JEWISH ASSISTANCE. ON APRIL 5, 1943, BONHOEFFER, DOHNANYI, AND DOHNANYI'S WIFE, CHRISTINE, BONHOEFFER'S SISTER, ARE ARRESTED – BONHOEFFER AT HIS PARENTS' HOME. CHRISTINE IS RELEASED WITHIN A MONTH, BUT BONHOEFFER AND DOHNANYI WILL BOTH REMAIN INCARCERATED FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES, BEING EXECUTED TWO YEARS LATER ON APRIL 9, 1945 AT SEPARATE LOCATIONS – BONHOEFFER, AT THE

AGE OF 39. THIRTEEN DAYS THEREAFTER, ON APRIL 22, 1945, BONHOEFFER'S BROTHER, KLAUS, AND ANOTHER BROTHER-IN-LAW, RUDOLPH SCHLEICHER, ARE ALSO EXECUTED FOR THEIR ROLES IN THE CONSPIRACY. EIGHT DAYS FOLLOWING THOSE LATTER EXECUTIONS, HITLER HIMSELF COMMITS SUICIDE IN A BERLIN BUNKER; THE THIRD REICH IS IN RUINS.

FROM BONHOEFFER'S ARREST UNTIL THE END OF CALENDAR 1944 – OR FOR A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AND A HALF – HE IS ESPECIALLY PRODUCTIVE IN HIS WRITINGS FROM PRISON – SERMONS, RUMINATIONS AND POEMS, EXTENSIVE LETTERS TO HIS FUTURE BIOGRAPHER, EBERHARD BETHGE, AND ALSO TO FAMILY MEMBERS WITH THESE PIECES BEING LATER COLLECTED IN THE EARLY 1950S INTO A BOOK ENTITLED *LETTERS & PAPERS FROM PRISON*.

TOWARD THE END OF 1944, WHEN HIS ROLE IN THE ORGANIZATION OF ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS AGAINST HITLER IS CONFIRMED BY THE NAZIS, HE'S REMOVED FROM TEGEL PRISON, WHERE HE HAD BEEN HELD FOR LESS OFFENSIVE ACTS AND GIVEN MANY LIBERTIES TO READ, WRITE AND RECEIVE VISITORS, AND TRANSFERED TO MUCH MORE SEVERE INCARCERATION FACILITIES RUN BY THE

GESTAPO, INCLUDING TO HIS FINAL DESTINATION, THE FLOSSENBURG CONCENTRATION CAMP. DURING THIS LATTER PERIOD, HIS WRITINGS FALL OFF TO A MERE TRICKLE; IN A JANUARY, 1945 NOTE, WRITTEN FROM A GESTAPO CONTROLLED PRISON IN BERLIN AND FORESHADOWING THE EVENTS OF HIS OWN MARTYRDOM LESS THAN THREE MONTHS LATER, HE TELLS HIS PARENTS TO TAKE COMPLETE CONTROL OF HIS THINGS, SAYING:

“WHEN ONE THINKS HOW MANY PEOPLE LOSE EVERYTHING EACH DAY, ONE REALLY HAS NO CLAIM ON POSSESSIONS OF ANY KIND.”

THE WRITINGS CONTAINED IN *LETTERS & PAPERS FROM PRISON* ILLUSTRATE ANOTHER MAJOR AND DRAMATIC SHIFT IN BONHOEFFER’S THEOLOGICAL THINKING. HE ESPECIALLY ALTERS HIS VIEWS TOWARD THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH, WHICH HE NOW CRITICIZES EVEN MORE EXTENSIVELY. THERE IS REASON TO BELIEVE THAT WHILE HE DOESN’T SPECIFICALLY SINGLE OUT THE GERMAN CHURCH FOR HIS CONDEMNATION, IT IS CLEAR HE HAS THE GERMAN CHURCH PROMINENTLY, BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY, IN MIND. AS HE DISCUSSES A FUTURE WITH “RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY,” HE EMPHASIZES THAT THE CHURCH HAS BECOME INTERESTED IN ITS OWN PRESERVATION AT ALL COSTS – NOT SERVING AS THE BODY OF

CHRIST. IN BONHOEFFER'S WORDS, "THE CHURCH IS ONLY THE CHURCH WHEN IT EXISTS FOR OTHERS."

BONHOEFFER IS NOW ON ANOTHER COURSE, CONCLUDING THAT THE HISTORICAL REFORMATION HAS BEEN A FAILURE – WITH THE WORLD HAVING MORE OF AN IMPACT (NEGATIVELY SPEAKING) ON THE CHURCH THAN THE CHURCH HAVING ON THE WORLD – THE CORRUPTIVE INFLUENCES OF THE WORLD AIDING THE COMPLICITY THE CHURCH DISPLAYED IN ADHERING TO THE DESIRES AND ATTITUDES OF THE ANTI-CHRIST AND THE NAZIS. HE ASKS THE QUESTION: WHAT IS CHRIST FOR US TODAY? PEOPLE HAVE LITTLE USE FOR THE CHURCH, WHICH PROVIDES OLD ANSWERS TO NEW QUESTIONS. IN THE PAST, FOR WHAT HUMANKIND CANNOT ANSWER, THE CHURCH WOULD PLACE GOD AS THE STOP GAP OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE, REPLACING SCIENCE WITH AWE AND WONDER. HOWEVER, AS HUMAN KNOWLEDGE OF SCIENCE EXPANDS, THOSE STOP GAPS OCCUPIED BY A SPACE FOR GOD HAD BEEN EXCEEDED. WHAT ANSWERS DOES THE CHURCH NOW PROVIDE, HE ASKED? HE SUGGESTS THAT CHRISTIANS HAVE RELIED TOO MUCH ON THE NEW TESTAMENT IMPLYING A CONCENTRATION THAT HAS LOST ITS POWER – HE BELIEVES WE SHOULD GO BACK TO THE OLD

TESTAMENT, TO SOME OF THE ORIGINAL, FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS THAT OCCUPIED HUMANKIND, THE QUESTIONS SO OFTEN HEARD IN THE PSALMS. AND SIGNIFICANTLY, DO WE HAVE AN ANSWER TO THIS BURNING QUESTION: HOW COULD GOD OR, IN PARTICULAR, HIS CHURCH, ALLOW THE HOLOCAUST TO OCCUR, THE NEAR EXTINCTION OF CHRIST'S OWN PEOPLE, FOR CHRIST WAS A JEW? THE HOLOCAUST, WHICH ELIE WIESEL CALLS IN *NIGHT*, "THE MADNESS, THE IMMENSE, TERRIFYING MADNESS THAT HAD ERUPTED IN HISTORY." BONHOEFFER HINTS CHRISTIANITY SIMPLY COULD NOT HAVE BEEN ALIVE TO ALLOW SUCH MADNESS. SO, HE THEN LOOKS TO THE FUTURE FOR GUIDANCE AND ANTICIPATED TRANSFORMATION. THIS IS THE PROPHET BONHOEFFER'S VISION OF THAT FUTURE, IN WAITING:

"IT IS NOT FOR US TO PROPHECY THE DAY (THOUGH THE DAY WILL COME) WHEN MEN WILL ONCE MORE BE CALLED SO TO UTTER THE WORD OF GOD THAT THE WORLD WILL BE CHANGED AND RENEWED BY IT. IT WILL BE A NEW LANGUAGE, PERHAPS QUITE NON-RELIGIOUS, BUT LIBERATING AND REDEEMING – AS WAS JESUS' LANGUAGE; IT WILL SHOCK PEOPLE AND YET OVERCOME THEM BY ITS POWER; IT WILL BE THE LANGUAGE OF A NEW RIGHTEOUSNESS

AND TRUTH, PROCLAIMING GOD'S PEACE WITH MEN AND THE COMING OF HIS KINGDOM. . .TILL THEN THE CHRISTIAN CAUSE WILL BE A SILENT AND HIDDEN AFFAIR, BUT THERE WILL BE THOSE WHO PRAY AND DO RIGHT AND WAIT FOR GOD'S OWN TIME. MAY YOU BE ONE OF THEM, AND MAY IT BE SAID OF YOU ONE DAY, AS IN PROVERBS, 'THE PATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS IS LIKE THE LIGHT OF DAWN, WHICH SHINES BRIGHTER AND BRIGHTER TILL FULL DAY.'"

HOW DO WE THEN LEAVE BONHOEFFER? IF YOU RECALL, I REFERRED EARLIER TO BONHOEFFER AS AN 'ANCIENT.' IN THAT CONTEXT, I'M REMINDED OF THE WISDOM OF A LINE FROM *THE IMITATION OF CHRIST* IN WHICH THOMAS KEMPIS WRITES, "DO NOT BE DISPLEASED WITH THE SAYINGS OF THE ANCIENTS, FOR THEY WERE NOT MADE WITHOUT PURPOSE." I THINK IT BEST WE LEAVE BONHOEFFER WITH THAT SENTIMENT. THANK YOU.

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