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INTRODUCTION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For Christians throughout the world, the name conjures various emotions and mental pictures. Outside of Christianity, he is hardly even known. While some may find this a pity, it is fitting for a theologian whose home was the church and whose desire was for the health of that church.

The first time I seriously heard of the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was as a seminary student reading his *Letters and Papers from Prison* in a Christian devotional class. At the time, while also studying Martin Luther King, Jr., I was struck by the tenacity of both theologians while under extreme pressure from their own faith communities as well as their own governments. How could they continue serving in communities that were so disappointing and where the work of Christ was not demonstrated, I wondered. From this the question for this dissertation arose. What caused Bonhoeffer to endure?

Growing up as a Methodist and having studied at a Methodist seminary, there was a certain influence of Arminianism involved in my question. Obviously, there is the presupposition within the question that Bonhoeffer had the choice to endure or not. This is a reflection of the understanding within Methodism that people can lose their faith or “backslide” as phrased by John Wesley in his sermon, “A Call to Backsliders”:

> ...But that hope soon fails: They then cease to strive, and "are taken captive of Satan at his will."

> 4. This is frequently the case with those that began to run well, but soon tired in the heavenly road; with those in particular who once "saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," but afterwards grieved his Holy Spirit, and made shipwreck of the faith. Indeed, many of these rush into sin, as a horse into the battle. They sin with so high an hand, as utterly to quench the Holy Spirit of God; so that he gives them up to their own heart's lusts, and lets them follow their own imaginations. 1

Since this theology is accepted by the author, she chose to enlarge the question to consider how Bonhoeffer continued to endure without walking away from the faith that he had before the occurrence of the Third Reich.

That part of the question also includes for a Methodist the understanding of holiness. In the Methodist tradition it is believed that true Christianity brings an obvious change into the life of the Christian, as Arminius taught:

> But when we treat about man, as a sinner, then sanctification is thus defined: It is a gracious act of God, by which he purifies man who is a sinner, and yet a believer, from the darkness of ignorance, from indwelling sin and from its lusts or desires, and imubes him with the spirit of knowledge, righteousness and holiness, that, being separated from the life of the world and made conformable to

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God, man may live the life of God, to the praise of the righteousness and of the glorious grace of God, and to his own salvation.  

Wesley himself believed that once a person is justified they will no longer live sinfully:

The very least which can be implied in these words, is, that the persons spoken of therein, namely, all real Christians, or believers in Christ, are made free from outward sin. And the same freedom, which St. Paul here expresses in such variety of phrases, St. Peter expresses in that one (1 Pet. iv.1,2): ‘He that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that he no longer should live to the desires of men, but to the will of God.’ For this ceasing from sin, if it be interpreted in the lowest sense, as regarding only the outward behavior, must denote the ceasing from the outward act, from any transgression of the law. 

For Wesley the most outward sign of faith and the repudiation of sin was the exhibition of love within the Christian’s character. For Wesley, love is the necessary outworking of a true faith in God and is tied to justification:

The chief sense of the words is, doubtless, this: That whatsoever we do, and whatsoever we suffer, if we are not renewed in the spirit of our mind, by "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us," we cannot enter into life eternal. None can enter there, unless in virtue of covenant which God hath given unto man in the Son of his love.

There is no escaping Wesley’s demand for love as a sign of justification by claiming a love for God while hating your neighbor, or even the stranger in your midst. Wesley was very clear about this point:

I only mention one more of the properties of this love: "Love is not puffed up." You cannot wrong one you love: Therefore, if you love God with all your heart, you cannot so wrong him as to rob him of his glory, by taking to yourself what is due to him only. You will own that all you are, and all you have, is his; that without him you can do nothing; that he is your light and your life, your strength and your all; and that you are nothing, yea, less than nothing, before him. And if you love your neighbour as yourself, you will not be able to prefer yourself before him. Nay, you will not be able to despise any one, any more than to hate him. [Nay, you will think every man better than yourself.] As the wax melteth away before the fire, so doth pride melt away before love. All haughtiness, whether of heart, speech, or behaviour, vanishes away where love prevails. It bringeth down the high looks of him who boasted in his strength, and maketh him as a little child; diffident of himself, willing to hear, glad to learn, easily convinced, easily persuaded. And whosoever is otherwise minded, let him give up all vain hope: He is puffed up, and so hath not love.

Because of the above teachings by Wesley, one can understand that the author has a presupposition that a true Christian community should be a community that does not exhibit evil by the absence of love, but a community that loves and treats the downtrodden with special protection and care. This understanding of Christian community, from a different faith

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tradition than Bonhoeffer’s, caused wonderment when reading about Bonhoeffer’s endurance in faith. If one knows the occurrences of the exact opposite of love that came from Hitler’s political party, the question enlarges to how Bonhoeffer endured when he saw fellow Christians—even the Reich church federation—aligning themselves with Hitler’s violent and exclusive regime that hatefully targeted people in their own country. Why did Bonhoeffer not become discouraged and question why the absence of love was so prevalent in the churches that aligned themselves with Hitler?

While understanding these arguments and questions may be unreasonable presuppositions for some in other faith traditions, it led to the study before us. This study is not a comparison between Wesley and Bonhoeffer. Although, Wesley’s theology and its understanding is the contextual background of the author and provided the impetus and history for the questions asked.

Questions
Since the observation of Bonhoeffer included the wonderment that he endured in his faith when he saw it scantily exhibited in his own religious environment, the question was asked about how he continued to believe in the transforming power of salvation when it was not frequently (in the questioner’s mind) exhibited in his own church community. How could he still believe after seeing many in the Christian community refuse to act lovingly to the victims of the Third Reich? What would have been loving and just for the Christian community to do towards the victims of the Third Reich?

The questions posed also occurred from contextual events. The proposal was formulated shortly after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001. At that time, tensions were high between faith religions with accusations of evil being used not only to condemn terroristic attacks, but also opinions that might disagree with the Judeo-Christian norm found in much of my native USA. This constant use of the word ‘evil’ led me to ask what we really know about evil and was our definition of evil a religious propaganda tool? Did evil occur simply from a lack of love (and therefore a problem with saving faith), or are there other aspects of evil that we need to take into consideration?

This led to the idea that Bonhoeffer, a theologian who lived during and resisted against the Third Reich, may have insight into evil and faith. Other private situations in the author’s life developed the accompanying question, “How does one keep their faith when facing people who act in an evil manner while at the same time claiming to be Christian or maybe just moral.” This was another question that Bonhoeffer seemed well positioned to answer.

As for the question regarding justice, the author questioned how in difficult circumstances one finds the path to acting justly in muddy choices. For the same reasons as named above, the question regarding justice was asked: “What is justice, and how does one act justly in difficult situations offering opposing ethical claims.”

Finally, it was assumed that if Bonhoeffer had opinions about these two topics they would be part of his character that also contributed to his endurance. Although, we must be careful to point out that these two questions were not expected to offer the complete answer about his persistence, but would directly indicate whether the questions of evil and justice played a role in, and to what extent they were important to, Bonhoeffer’s endurance.

Method
The method used was simple but effective. Through the method of close reading the author asked Bonhoeffer the above questions in order to ascertain if he had an opinion regarding the questions and if they were important in his theology. It was determined that a systematic and chronological approach to his writings would offer the most comprehensive exploration and
highlight any changes that occurred in his thinking. *Sanctorum Communio* was chosen because this was the beginning work that Bonhoeffer wrote. *Creation and Fall* was chosen because it deals with the beginning, including the beginning of evil (due to the fall). *Discipleship* was included because Bonhoeffer exegeted the Sermon on the Mount and therefore evil was addressed in that work. *Ethics* was chosen because this was the work that Bonhoeffer wrote during his resistance and during the time of the Third Reich. *Letters and Papers from Prison* was chosen to compare Bonhoeffer’s final years with his previous work in order to see if there was new theology that arose from his latter experiences.

Although close reading implies a focused approach to the theologian’s own writings, secondary literature was introduced when it pertained directly to Bonhoeffer’s theology and the topic of endurance. Secondary literature that introduced other topics in Bonhoeffer’s theology or was contextual rather than directly dealing with Bonhoeffer’s use of his theology in endurance are not included. While bright and competent Bonhoeffer scholars such as Christiane Tietz and Kirsten Busch Nielsen are beginning to write about Bonhoeffer and his theology regarding evil, the offerings are still scant. Peter Frick, author of *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation*, makes note of this situation and the cause for it:

> On the other hand, the fact that his written oeuvre was published slowly, in bits and pieces, and concentrated initially on the major and popular works meant that research itself was directed along the path of the published works. The inevitable consequence was that the emerging picture of Bonhoeffer was tinted with a spiritual, theological, ethical or “religionless” colour.⁶

The author is aware of these materials regarding other aspects of Bonhoeffer’s theology and the influences upon his theology, but since they do not deal with the topic of Bonhoeffer’s view of evil directly, they have not been used for reference. In some instances, this literature is listed in the bibliography and, if directly pertinent to the study, is footnoted in the body of the study.

In relation to the subjects of evil and justice, there is simply too much information written on these topics, both in the Christian market and the general market, to be able to deal with each subject in a satisfactory manner in one dissertation. Therefore, a choice has been made for material that has relevance for the topic of endurance in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life.

The assumption in this method is that we would learn something about how Bonhoeffer saw his society and context, and we would learn about his theology throughout his development and resistance. It is assumed that human beings can only react and rely on the knowledge and belief system that they possess. Therefore, Bonhoeffer’s beliefs would impact how he endured, or he would have discarded them.

The author is aware with this method that she is doing exactly what Frick criticized in his introduction:

> Correspondingly, much of the lay and scholarly interest in Bonhoeffer proceeded in a specific manner: since Bonhoeffer was a man of such strong convictions that he would choose to die at the hands of the Nazis rather than be found compromising these convictions, the question arose what kind of assumptions had been the cause and backbone of this man’s life and world view. In other words, the fateful end of Bonhoeffer’s life prompted the questions of its intellectual and ethical grounding.⁷

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The author believes with the historical background of Bonhoeffer these will always be the driving forces behind a scholarly or lay interest in the theologian. As well it should be since resistance was important enough for Bonhoeffer to lose his life over.

However, the theologian should speak for himself about what was important to him and from his own perspective without being molded into a champion for a cause that may not have been his own. Therefore, the author hopes her approach is in agreement with Frick’s continuing analysis:

The main problem here is not the raising of these questions, but the kind of angle and direction they occupied in the overwhelmingly retrospective approach to Bonhoeffer’s thought. Clifford Green rightly rejects such an approach as a “teleological bias” or “teleological method,” especially with regard to Bonhoeffer’s theology.8

The author hopes that by choosing to start from the beginning of Bonhoeffer’s work and systematically walking through his manuscripts that she is, in fact, doing what Frick sees as a need in studying Bonhoeffer:

…it is apparent from even a fleeting look at the International Bibliography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that there is much room and a great need for investigations that examine Bonhoeffer’s theological formation on their own terms.9

*The Purpose for This Study*

While Bonhoeffer is the case study used, enlarging the Bonhoeffer reception was not the primary reason for this study. Attempting to add a small bit of information to the question of why a person endures in their faith is the purpose of this study. Therefore, it is hoped that this work will not primarily enlarge the Bonhoeffer materials, but will be a benefit to systematic theology instead.

Endurance is a topic that gains little attention in modern theology. There are other cases studies examining Christians who successfully endured hardship, such as John Piper’s work, The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce. However, the benefit of this study is that the subject has, in addition to activism and resistance, a substantial offering of theological work. Therefore, we can examine the actual theology of Bonhoeffer to understand what theology he held and how his theology impacted his endurance. This study asks if there are beliefs or contextual situations that help an individual endure outside of normal faith propositions. Is there a certain understanding that Bonhoeffer possessed that gave him strength when he encountered trying times? And is there something in theology that adds to that endurance?

The assumption is that the answers to these questions will be a benefit to the faith. Not only in providing answers regarding one Christian’s endurance, but also by providing foundational theological information regarding endurance that can be supplemented and enlarged by further studies.

*Arrangement of the Dissertation*

This work is arranged in five chapters. Chapter one is the introduction to the work. Chapter two examines the childhood of Dietrich Bonhoeffer throughout his young adult life and his participation in the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler’s life until his imprisonment at the

8 Frick, “Introduction,” 2.

age of 39. This chapter is written in a chronological time frame rather than treated as subjects independent of the time they were important to Bonhoeffer. The works used in this chapter as resource materials are primarily the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that his friend, Eberhard Bethge wrote, and Bonhoeffer’s PhD dissertation that was later published as a manuscript, *Sanctorum Communio*. This chapter investigates the personality development and influences in Bonhoeffer’s early years and, therefore, includes his desire to become a theologian. It also considers his passion for the church that he addressed in *Sanctorum Communio*.

In chapter three the problem of evil is addressed. In this chapter we ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer what he believes evil is, where it comes from, and how it affects his endurance. The source material for this chapter is *Creation and Fall*. *Creation and Fall* was chosen because Bonhoeffer discusses evil within it and, in particular, because of the question of the origination of evil. Since Bonhoeffer lectured on creation in this book, he also found it necessary to treat the origin of evil. This was the deciding factor for choosing *Creation and Fall* as the second manuscript for consideration. Since *Discipleship* discusses evil due to the exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, the material within *Discipleship* that covers evil has been included. Due to the fact that Bonhoeffer’s last work, *Ethics*, contains many references to evil similar to *Creation and Fall*, *Ethics* is also included in the evaluation. The progression through these works will highlight Bonhoeffer’s initial thought and show any development in the mature theologian.

Chapter four follows the same steps, and justice is the topic for this chapter. Since Bonhoeffer lived during the time of the Third Reich and was witness to many acts of injustice, *Ethics* was chosen as the book that contains the materials he wrote while dealing with these acts of injustice.

Chapter five addresses Bonhoeffer’s endurance. It examines the information found in the previous chapters and uses Bonhoeffer’s last writings, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, to verify that the findings are accurate. The assumption in chapter five is that if the themes chosen helped Bonhoeffer to endure in faith until the end, then they should be found in his final materials.

Chapter six is the conclusion for the work.

*Constraints and Limitations of the Study*

The most noticeable limitation for the study was limited materials regarding endurance. Most available sources in this area are not of scientific quality; but rather, Bible studies or character sketches. Therefore, there was not much qualitative material available for use. Qualitative studies were mostly Calvinistic theology and focused on the idea of perseverance of the saints from the presupposition of eternal election and support for that argument. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to reargue the centuries old debate between Arminianism and Calvinism regarding election, but is entered into from the understanding of Wesleyanism and the issues that surround this theological perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to learn from one individual what thoughts, theology, and influences he had that contributed to his endurance throughout his resistance, imprisonment, and until his death.

The hope is that this work will lead to a better understanding of the three subject areas—evil, justice, and endurance—through the examination of one Christian theologian and will stimulate further study in the area of endurance through other case studies.
HISTORIC INFLUENCES IN BONHOEFFER’S LIFE

Bonhoeffer’s Family

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into a remarkable family—a fact that he was aware of. His family was not only aristocratic, but also intellectual. Dietrich fit well into both of these categories, which—along with his cultural influences—developed his distinctive personality and influenced how he performed theology.

His mother, Paula Bonhoeffer, née von Hase was the daughter of a countess—Clara von Hase, née Kalckreuth. It was from this side of the family that Bonhoeffer inherited his artistic talents and his awareness of the cultural aspects of his environment. His grandmother’s father and brother were famous painters, and Eberhard Bethge—Bonhoeffer’s biographer and friend, writes that “in his parents home and that of his grandparents Hase, Dietrich was surrounded by the paintings of the Kalckreuths and their teachers, friends, and students…” Included in this lineage was the fact that through Dietrich’s maternal great-aunt his mother actively engaged in the court at Potsdam.

This introduction into the social scene of aristocratic Germany made its mark on Bonhoeffer. Exposed to social life and its requirements, there was a certain, proper behavior expected of the Bonhoeffer children, and which served Dietrich even in his years as a theologian. Bethge says that it “gave him a certainty of judgment and manner that cannot be acquired in a single generation.” While the Bonhoeffer parents raised the children in a home that sheltered them from many of the difficulties of a less fortunate heritage, they were at the same time exposed to prestigious family friends, such as Adolph von Harnack, Karl Holl, and Reinhold Seeberg—all valuable contacts for a young man who became a theologian.

On the other hand, his family was also a family of intellectuals—due to his father as well as his maternal great-grandfather. While his maternal side offered a renowned theologian (Karl August von Hase, a professor of church and dogmatic theology), his father was famous in his own right.

Karl Bonhoeffer was a well-known psychiatrist, who became the head of the psychiatry and neurology department at Berlin University—the “leading professorship for

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13 The Dictionary of Historical Theology says that Harnack “was the outstanding church historian of his day and one of the most influential academic administrators in the Wilhelmine empire.” *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, Trevor A. Hart, General Editor. Richard Bauckham, Jan Milic Lochman, Paul D. Molnar, Alan P.F. Sell, Consulting Editors (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 241.
14 Professor of church history at the University of Berlin.
15 Professor of systematic theology at the University of Berlin and supervisor of Bonhoeffer’s doctoral dissertation.
psychiatry and neurology in Germany.” This meant that the Bonhoeffer family was deeply involved in the world of academics.

Bethge offers a further picture of the home where Bonhoeffer’s personality developed. He says about Paula Bonhoeffer that she was a strong and involved presence in the life of Dietrich. She homeschooled the children during their primary years because she was critical of German schooling. Bethge says that under her “excellent start” the children were “able to skip entire grades and eventually take the school graduation examinations at a remarkably early age.”

However, she was involved in more than education. Bethge says she was able to “make every task interesting and help the children over any obstacles.” He also says, “Despite all her energy, she never stifled any sign of initiative in others, but encouraged it to develop in its own way.” In reading Bethge, one receives the impression that Bonhoeffer’s mother was a strong but warm and nurturing presence in Dietrich’s life.

Reading about Bonhoeffer’s father is different. While it is apparent that Bethge has great respect for Bonhoeffer’s father (Bethge’s grandfather-in-law), it is also apparent that from this influence Bonhoeffer learned reservedness. Bethge says Karl Bonhoeffer was always present at family dinners, but “the children’s table manners were strictly supervised, and they were expected to speak only when asked about events of the day.” Bonhoeffer’s sister, Sabine, describes that her father developed their ability to speak clearly and concisely. The other sister, Christine, reported that “when he was needed he was as firm as a rock.”

The guidance from both of these very strong personalities formed Bonhoeffer’s personality.

In addition to his aristocratic mother and famous intellectual father, other individuals of achievement surrounded Bonhoeffer. His oldest brother, Karl Friedrich, was an outstanding chemist who split the hydrogen atom and received invitations from universities throughout the Western world. His brother Klaus was an international lawyer who worked for the League of Nations and later became legal representation for Lufthansa, while one of his brother-in-laws was Hans von Dohnanyi, who became a military judge in the Abwehr—Germany’s military intelligence.

The reason that this family line is important is threefold. First, it demonstrates the cultural and academic abilities and standards that made it possible for Bonhoeffer to enter into any profession that he had capabilities in. In fact, his parents once had him play piano for a well-known virtuoso because they thought that Bonhoeffer had talents that could have allowed him to become a professional musician. We also see that Bonhoeffer’s social and intellectual circle meant that most doors in Germany would have been accessible—if not open—to him, regardless of what career he chose.

The second observation about his family is that it provided a sheltered culture wherein Bonhoeffer theologized during his early years (1927-1933). In chapter three, when we study

16 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 21. Berlin University is now known as Humboldt University in Berlin, and was the university where Einstein was a professor until he left for Princeton University (USA) as a result of pressure from Nazi anti-Semitism.
17 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 17.
18 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 17.
19 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 18.
20 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 15.
21 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 15.
22 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 15.
23 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 45.
24 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 37.
evil, it will become apparent that Bonhoeffer developed an idea about ethics that works very well for cultured or educated individuals, or for cultures with a strong hierarchical system of governance. However, one must question if his method of ethics works for a more populist audience. This is a weakness that must be attributed to his family and educational environment. When he worked in Berlin and also while he studied in New York City, Bonhoeffer had exposure to the working class population, but for the most part rationality and the properness of his family and social connections surrounded him.25

The third important point that we notice is that this family was what also, in essence, determined Bonhoeffer’s death. Had he decided to remain only a theologian fighting for the freedom of the church, he may not have been killed. The reason for his death came not as a result of his theology, although naturally his theology played the major role in his decisions, but because of his connections to his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, as well as his other brother-in-law, Rudiger Schleicher, and brother, Klaus.26 We will see how these connections led to his death later in this chapter.

Within this family to be a theologian was a decision that was a bit unusual because Bonhoeffer was not really a child of the church. While his immediate family was moral and socially conscious, they were not deeply religious. As a matter of fact, Bonhoeffer’s decision to be a theologian did not impress his father, and later Karl Bonhoeffer wrote to Dietrich, “At the time you decided to devote yourself to theology I sometimes thought to myself that a quiet, uneventful minister’s life, as I knew it from my Swabian uncles and as Mörike describes it, would really almost be a pity for you.”27

To point out just how unusual this was in the Bonhoeffer family, we will include autobiographical material from Bonhoeffer that describes the decision as a bit of a surprise and a burning embarrassment for Dietrich as well.

One day in the first form, when the master asked him what he wanted to study, he quietly answered “theology,” and flushed. The word slipped out so quickly that he did not even stand up; having the teacher’s gaze and that of the whole class directed at him personally and not at his work, and being suddenly called upon to speak out like this, gave him such conflicting feelings of vanity and humility that the interruption of ordinary class conduct seemed an appropriate expression of the consternation caused by the question and the answer.28

However, while his own answer amazed Dietrich, he was sure in his decision. Why Bonhoeffer was committed to theology is not a simple question to answer. Bethge thinks it was in competition to his illustrious brothers and sisters combined with his early exposure to death (by living across from a cemetery and from losing one brother during WWI).29

While that decision might never be answerable, what is an important point for this section is that by reviewing Bonhoeffer’s family we see that Bonhoeffer’s choice to be a theologian was not a choice that was made as the last choice. It is noteworthy that Bonhoeffer chose to become a theologian after being raised in such an erudite environment—although, until he visited Rome, Bonhoeffer treated theology in the scientific manner that was common within his family and “plunged with intellectual curiosity into theology as a branch of

25 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 269.
26 Rudiger Schleicher and Klaus Bonhoeffer were also members of the resistance against Hitler, and the Gestapo murdered them in Berlin on April 23, 1945.
27 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 37.
28 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 40, italics mine.
29 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 37-39.
knowledge.” Still we see that this was a decision based not on social experience, but from Bonhoeffer’s own desire. Obviously, if he chose to be a theologian when he had a whole smorgasbord of choices before him, he was serious about his choice. We must remember these important points when we later consider Bonhoeffer’s motivation during the Third Reich. Theology was Bonhoeffer’s choice and the primary influence in his work and life choices.

Now that we have considered his family, the second issue that we must consider is Bonhoeffer and the church. Here again, we see another perplexing development in Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, after spending a year studying theology in Tübingen, was able to spend time studying in Rome. Little did he know that this decision would map out his passion and his future. It was in Rome that Dietrich Bonhoeffer fell in love with the church because of his exposure to Roman Catholicism—but he remained Protestant.

The Blossoming of the ‘Theologian of the Church’

It can be said that Bonhoeffer is the theologian of the modern Protestant church. Not because he developed institutes as John Calvin did, or even led reform as Luther (although Bonhoeffer attempted it), but because Bonhoeffer had a passion for the institution of the church that few Protestant theologians possessed. As we said, the fact that Bonhoeffer focused on the church is somewhat an enigma. Perhaps it was because the church was largely a stranger to the young man who decisively decided to become a theologian, and therefore she intrigued him. It was not because it was his family’s habit to attend church. Renate Wind records that Dietrich “did not have what the majority of theological students bring with them as a matter of course—socialization in the church.” It was even more negative than that. “Karl Bonhoeffer’s rationalism and Paula Bonhoeffer’s vitality cut them off from a church in which ‘the mould of a thousand years lies under the gowns’.”

Eberhard Bethge agrees with Wind. “Only later did the church enter his field of vision. Unlike theologians who came from families that were active in the church and theology, and discovered the existence of the ‘world’ only later, Bonhoeffer embarked on his journey and eventually discovered the church.”

This discovery did not happen until Bonhoeffer studied in Rome in 1924. Here he became truly aware of the church. He wrote in his diary that through a Roman Catholic service he was able to begin to understand what the church is.

On Sunday afternoon to Trinità dei Monti. It was almost indescribable. About 6 o’clock around forty young girls who wanted to become nuns were brought in a solemn procession. The organ began and they sang their vespers with great seriousness, with incredible simplicity and grace. The whole thing was so fresh, and made an unprecedented impression of the deepest piety. When the door was opened again after the brief half-hour, one had the most splendid day, the first day on

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30 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 44.
33 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 44.
When he was in Rome, he was only 18 years old, but, according to Bethge, Bonhoeffer was “tremendous(ly) impact(ed).” The liturgy impressed him, but even more the “universality of the church” challenged him. Bethge writes that in comparison to the Roman church, the church “at home struck him as provincial, nationalistic, and narrow-minded.” Bonhoeffer also wrote “compared with the tremendous scale of the ceremonies here, the Protestant church looks like a small sect.” The ‘large scale’ of Rome left a lasting impact on him. He was so impressed and the church became so important to him that it later became the topic of his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*.

To be able to interpret Bonhoeffer correctly, one must understand the central nature of the church for him. Clifford Green, the English editor of *Sanctorum Communio* for the English edition of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, correctly asserts that to understand, the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer requires a thorough understanding of *Sanctorum Communio*, his doctoral dissertation and first published work. Here are found central ideas that inform all his writings—and, indeed, his life—notwithstanding theological and personal developments associated with later works such as *Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

John W. de Gruchy, giving a glimpse of what will be addressed in the following section, also understood the importance of *Sanctorum Communio*. He writes,

> His radical thoughts in prison are built on foundations laid in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*; they also reflect the deep biblical spirituality and commitment to the church which characterized his witness to Christ during the church struggle against Nazism.

*Sanctorum Communio* was Bonhoeffer’s treatment of the church—and indirectly, his treatment of society. His subtitle was “A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church.” However, in his preface, he writes, “the issue of a Christian social philosophy and sociology is a genuinely theological one, because it can be answered only on the basis of an understanding of the church.” We find from reading that sentence that for him the church was central to understanding life from a Christian worldview. We also read in that sentence that his relationship to society was based upon his understanding of the church. In fact, Clifford Green also writes that *Sanctorum Communio* “set(s) out the distinctive conceptuality which is formative for Bonhoeffer’s whole theological development. I call this conceptuality

his theology of sociality.”

For Bonhoeffer the church was not simply a gathering of Christ’s followers on a Sunday morning or a religious community where Christians could come for support and teaching. Bonhoeffer said that this view was one of “two ways to misunderstand the church” and that it “overlooks the fact that the new basic-relations established by God actually are real and points instead to the ‘religious motives’ that in fact lead to empirical community (the missionary impulse, the need to communicate, etc.)” Instead, the church had much more serious implications. According to Bonhoeffer, the church “is the world Christ reconciled and made into a new humanity, Christ’s church.”

Bonhoeffer says before Christ redeemed humanity “human beings belong together and are bound together in status corruptionis [state of corruption],” according to the doctrine of original sin. He explains, “the human being, by virtue of being an individual, is also the human race.” Therefore, “when, in the sinful act, the individual spirit rises up against God, thus climbing to the utmost height of spiritual individuality—since this is the individual’s very own deed against God, occasioned by nothing else—the deed committed is at the same time the deed of the human race (no longer in the biological sense) in the individual person.”

It is this common guilt that forms the “peccatorum communio”—the community of sinners. Bonhoeffer says, “every deed is at once an individual act and one that reawakens the total sin of humanity.”

At this point, Bonhoeffer introduces the idea of a “collective person.” He says that God’s call is experienced in much the same way as the “Israelite concept of the ‘people of God’.” God calls each individual, but because each individual comprises the whole human race—as we saw previously—the call of the individual means that the collective person is also called. In that case “the people must do penance as the people of God.” He applied this thought of the collective person not only to the peccatorum communio, but to the sanctorum communio as well.

It is this collective person existing in peccatorum communio that indicates the reality of the sanctorum communio. The collective person in Adam “can only be superseded by the collective person ‘Christ existing as church-community’.” How Christ superseded the collective person of Adam was by reconciling the world to God and forming the new collective person, ‘Christ existing as church-community.’

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42 Clifford Green, Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 19.
43 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 158.
44 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 125.
45 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 107.
46 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 107.
47 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 109, italics Bonhoeffer.
48 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 115, italics Bonhoeffer.
49 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 115, italics Bonhoeffer.
50 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 118.
51 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 116.
52 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 118.
53 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 118.
54 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 119.
55 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 121.
Bonhoeffer says that this collective person, Christ existing as church-community, is a revelation of God. He writes, “the reality of the church is a reality of revelation, a reality that essentially must be either believed or denied.” The work of Christ at the cross is the basis for the revelation. It is a work of Christ, and at the same time the very presence of Christ that cannot be separated from him. “Rather there is no relation to Christ in which the relation to the church is not necessarily established as well.” For him the church was as necessary as Christ was because it was the very presence of Christ. “The church is the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence of God.”

Later, when Bonhoeffer wrote *Ethics*, he expanded the idea of this “reality.” He wrote, “there is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God.” Shortly after he says, “On the contrary, in line with New Testament statements about God becoming flesh in Christ, it expresses just this—that in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne, and that the church-community of believers is to make this known to the world by word and life.” As in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer reiterates that “the church-community is separated from the world only by this: it believes in the reality of being accepted by God—a reality that belongs to the whole world—and in affirming this as valid for itself it witnesses that it is valid for the entire world.”

We see from this a mature outworking of his preliminary statement about the church being “the reality of God’s church-community as a revealed reality,” and it expands his statement in *Sanctorum Communio*: “Rather, God established the reality of the church, of humanity pardoned in Jesus Christ—not religion, but revelation, not religious community, but church. This is what the reality of Jesus Christ means.”

In addition, in claiming it as revelation, he obviously is claiming as much importance for the church as for scripture. In fact, that is one of his contextual arguments. He faults Ernst Troeltsch, a German theologian/philosopher who was also a sociologist, for placing the Word over the church body.

But Troeltsch still thought it necessary to maintain that what matters in the Protestant concept of the church is not the church as community, but solely the word—that is, precisely the objective work of the Spirit. He maintained that where the word is, there is the church, even if there is no one to hear it. This is a complete misconception of the Protestant tenet of the importance of the word, which is still to be discussed.

The argument that Christ takes form in the presence of the church continues further in *Ethics*. In *Ethics* we read, “Ethics as formation is possible only on the basis of the form of Jesus

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58 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 141.
60 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67. Regarding this concept, Clifford Green explains it as, “This Christology and ecclesiology, therefore, is concerned with the rehabilitation and renovation of genuine humanity for all people.” Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 53.
Christ present in Christ's church. The church is the place where Jesus Christ’s taking form is proclaimed and where it happens.”66 This corresponds very closely to what he began in Sanctorum Communio when he wrote, “Christ did not only make the church possible, but rather realized it for eternity.”67

This argument is not so strange to Protestant theology. Protestantism has always understood Christ’s presence within the church. Modern theologians, such as Martien Brinkman, agree to this principle. Brinkman writes that “…no ecclesiology and certainly not a Reformed ecclesiology could deny Christ’s salvific presence in the church.”68 Brinkman also argues, in the same vein as Bonhoeffer, that it is Christ and not the voluntary attendance by his followers that defines the church.69 However, what makes Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the church unique is that it goes one step further than just Christ’s presence.

For Bonhoeffer Christ and the church are inseparable. He wrote, “there is no relation to Christ in which the relation to the church is not necessarily established as well.”70 He also wrote, “‘to be in Christ’ is synonymous with ‘to be in the church-community’.”71 Therefore, when dealing with humans and their relationship to Christ, what he learned about the church would enter into his theologizing. Bonhoeffer never confused the church body as Christ—therefore reverting back to the voluntary idea—but rather, Christ as the church that the believers must align with.

After revelation we need to understand that Bonhoeffer understood the church as “God’s new will and purpose for humanity.”72 Bonhoeffer writes about the “humanity-in-Adam”73 and “the new humanity in the new Adam.”74 What he means by this is that humanity-in-Adam was a “collective person” that became individually isolated through sin, but yet united as one whole through joint participation in sin.75 Green writes that this isolation is the actual definition of sin for Bonhoeffer and that “If this is the nature of sin, its consequence is to ‘break’ and fragment the primal community of people with God and with one another.”76 Only through Christ’s representation on the cross can this sinful Adam be reconciled to God. Christ’s work relieves the isolation of the collective person and simultaneously releases the person from the joint bondage of sin. Bonhoeffer writes,

In Christ this tension between isolation from, and bondage to, each other is abolished in reality. The cord between God and human beings that was cut by the first Adam is tied anew by God, by revealing God’s own love in Christ, by no longer approaching us in demand and summons, purely as You, but instead by giving God’s own self as an I, opening God’s own heart. The church is founded on the revelation of God’s heart.77

Bonhoeffer, then, does not see society or the world outside of the church. The church is the new social order that God wills. What Bonhoeffer is arguing is that through Christ there is

66 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 102.
69 Brinkman, “The Church as Sacrament.”
70 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 127, Bonhoeffer’s italics.
71 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 140.
72 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 141.
73 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 121.
74 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 138.
75 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 121.
76 Green, Theology of Sociality, 50.
77 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 145, Bonhoeffer’s italics.
no longer a redeemed world versus an unredeemed world. The entire world is redeemed, and the church is the witness to that redemption. Therefore, all people, structures, and events are already within Christ, and they must only come to know this reality through the church’s witness.

This point is the point that makes understanding the importance of the church for Bonhoeffer such an emergent need. Bonhoeffer did not understand the world as divided into sections of the redeemed and the unredeemed, only those who know that they are redeemed and those who do not know. The church was reality created through Christ’s death and resurrection, and it is her job to inform others of this reality—in other words, the central message of Christianity.

These findings will clarify the following section when we discuss Bonhoeffer’s resistance to the Third Reich. His resistance was a result of interference by the Nazis in the churches of Germany. Within the researcher’s context, Bonhoeffer is often respected as a result of an understanding that he resisted the Third Reich in defense of the Jewish population. In order to gain a clearer understanding of Bonhoeffer’s motivation—a necessity for the purpose of this study—we will examine the two ideas of Bonhoeffer’s resistance in the following section. Was Bonhoeffer in *status confessionis*, or was he socially involved in victim advocacy?

To decide this, we will first visit the subject that is most readily brought to mind when speaking of Hitler and the Third Reich, i.e., the Jewish Question.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jewish Question*

Most people understand the governance of the Third Reich through the Holocaust. Thousands of books, plays, and documentaries highlight Hitler’s systematic torture, abuse, and murder of Jews and other vulnerable social groups during the Third Reich. It became the defining incident for millions of people around the world. Survivors, war veterans, and even children of survivors commemorate the events that occurred during the Third Reich’s attempt to ‘solve’ the Jewish question. Removed through time from the actual meaning, ‘the Jewish question’ is seen as only the Holocaust. Indeed, the Holocaust was an awful, torturous event that causes one to turn their eyes because of the sheer horror of it. But the Jewish question had many more implications than what we see looking backwards in history.

Perhaps defining the Jewish question would be a fruitful activity. In modern culture the phrase sounds strange and even a little quaint. But in Hitler's reign it was a very serious situation that had disastrous consequences.

Many mistakenly believe that the Jewish question was simply a religious or ‘race’ problem. Indeed, Bonhoeffer approached the situation from a religious perspective. However, in German society, the Jewish problem was a problem of economics rather than only religion. Jews were considered prosperous and the controllers of the world's finances. The

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78 “Today we are merely paying this people what it deserves. When the German nation was, thanks to the inflation instigated and carried through by Jews, deprived of the entire savings which it had accumulated in years of honest work, when the rest of the world took away the German nation’s foreign investments, when we were divested of the whole of our colonial possessions, these philanthropic considerations evidently carried little noticeable weight with democratic statesmen,” and “Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of
stereotype was that all Jews were rich, and that their tribal mentality brought destruction to non-Jews through usury.

This was a dangerous position for Jewish citizens in economically challenged post-war Germany. Through Hitler’s rhetoric they became the scapegoats for the economic conditions caused by reparations imposed on Germany and the worldwide depression. The constant isolation of the Jews as the root of the problems in Germany of the 1930s soon became accepted by the general German population, and the mainstream even embraced Hitler’s propaganda. As John A. Moses, in his account of the German political culture in the 1930s, writes, “One of the great tragedies of German history is that the opposition to these disastrous policies from German’s themselves was notoriously weak.” Twenty years after the end of the war, when writing a preface to Emmi Bonhoeffer’s—Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s sister-in-law and wife of Klaus—account of the Auschwitz trials, Helmut Gollwitzer says of his own people:

Among the reasons against the trials, as quoted by Emmi Bonhoeffer, the most weighty seems to me the one least often stated: punishment asked for the murderer of a taxi driver is not something which threatens us ourselves; compared to him, we are the innocent, the just. But with the atrocities of the Hitler regime, with the gruesome murder of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Russians, Communists, etc., we are in some way linked. Most of us have at one time or another seen some promise in Hitler’s plans; have perhaps ourselves looked down upon the groups he set out to destroy; have looked on or turned away when the atrocities began; have kept the knowledge and the thought of them out of our mind; have, in failing to protest or to help, profited by the fact that we ourselves were not among the persecuted groups; and many of us, if not actively taking part, have had relatives or friends in the service of the Hitler movement, which has now come to be so horribly unmasked.

In fact, Bethge describes the relationship even among Christians and young theologians with the Third Reich:
At the end of 1930 Christliche Welt reported of one university that ‘almost all theology students are National Socialists…and some 90 percent of the Protestant theology candidates appear at the college wearing the National Socialists party badge.’ Even from the preacher’s seminaries, the newspaper continues, there were complaints: ‘Of the candidates of divine learning…more than half are followers of Hitler.’

If we understand the Third Reich based only on the Jewish question as a ‘race’ question, then we easily confuse the study we are performing. When Bonhoeffer talked about the Jewish Question, it was for a different concern. We will see that he did recognize the Jewish Question, but for a much different reason than ‘race’ or victimology. He interacted with his government in order to preserve his church, and that included aspects of the Jewish Question. The Third Reich handled many of the issues that guided it in a manner that opposed Christian teachings—most of all, the overriding Führer principle. Bonhoeffer opposed this even before he knew that Jews were being transported to concentration camps, and there was a very good reason why a young theologian would resist that principle.

To begin with we must define what the Führer principle entailed. In short form it “denote(s) the unquestionable authority of the man at the movement’s head.” Even before the churches considered this principle (April 3-4, 1933), on February 1, 1933, Dietrich gave a radio address titled “The Leader and the Individual in the Younger Generation.” In this address he warned against the totalitarianism that could come when the leader, after being given all authority, would “pass over into the image of the misleader.” His address was so completely against the feelings of the time that his lecture was cut off before the end.

If the Führer principle was only effective in governmental internal policies, it is unlikely that Bonhoeffer would have resisted. As a Lutheran, Bonhoeffer was aware of the Lutheran importance of obedience to government—even if he was unaware of Luther’s direct text: “Therefore, you should esteem the sword of governmental authority as highly as the estate of marriage, or husbandry, or any other calling which God has instituted,” and “For those who punish evil and protect the good are God’s servants and workmen.”

But the Führer principle did not remain in internal governmental policies, it was totalitarian.

On January 30, 1933, Hitler assumed leadership of the German government and on February 1, 1933, he “promised to place Christianity—‘the basis of our whole morality’—under his ‘firm protection.’” The prestige that a connection with Hitler promised them excited undiscerning Christians. The idea that the church was going to be involved in renewal was heady. They truly believed the myth that the troubles in society were caused by Jews, and they also believed that the Reich could help the church regain its influence. For Bonhoeffer, though, the promise of Reich leadership was not comforting. How could Bonhoeffer—the one who believed the church was “Christ existing as church-community” —interpret this any other way than that Hitler chose to place himself over

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86 Bonhoeffer made his leadership speech denouncing the Führer principle on February 1, 1933; Jewish deportations did not begin until October 1941.
89 Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 66.
90 Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy F. Lull, ed. 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 442, italics mine.
94 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 121.
Christ? His concern about the *Führer* principle was not lessened during the Reich conference of German Christians during April of that year. At that conference, the slogans were listed as “Gleichschaltung (the alignment of all sectors with Nazi goals), the *Führer* principle, the Reich church, and racial conformity.” At that point, racial conformity was not clearly outlined, but already Bonhoeffer saw that these goals threatened the church. Bethge published a letter that Bonhoeffer wrote on April 14—shortly after the conference. In that letter he describes that the “German Christians” would probably withdraw and build a unified German church that was Lutheran and Reformed. Bonhoeffer did not find this so great a threat as it provided—in his mind—a chance to “once again rescue the church…”

What happened instead was that the Third Reich assumed the existing church. In June the standing president of the Evangelical Church Federation resigned. What followed was a takeover of the church under ‘legal’ means that resulted in Nazi supporters being placed as the governance of the church federation. What Bonhoeffer feared began to come true.

Bonhoeffer had already begun his fight for the church when this occurred. When it is said that Bonhoeffer fought for his church, it is in two areas. First, he fought for her sovereignty and, second, for her proclamation. The first was an external fight directed at the Third Reich, but the second was an internal battle directed at the inertia of his church.

As early as April of 1933, Bonhoeffer began to write his response to the Aryan clause—even though it was not formally introduced until September of that year. In April it had been one of the goals of the Reich conference, but a decision about its implementation was not made. Bonhoeffer immediately realized what having an Aryan church meant. It was an attack on Christ’s redemption of humanity and an attack on justification by faith—a basic Reformation doctrine. It is ironic—and displays the arrogance of the Third Reich—that they would attempt to implement the Aryan clause in Luther’s Germany. Justification by faith alone was the pillar of Luther’s doctrine, and the one tenant that all his other doctrine orbited. No other personality traits, works, or race overruled the fact that when a human took on the righteousness of Christ he/she was justified before God. And once that human became part of the priesthood of believers, he/she was in equal standing with all others. To refuse this based on Jewish descent invalidated the position of the believer within the priesthood, which in turn invalidated his/her justification. The same would hold true for any reference to Aryan descent.

Not only did the Aryan clause attack justification, it opposed Galatians 3:28. Audaciously, it reimplemented the very problem that Luther fought the pope to free Christians from. If justification was based on a person’s descent, then it was no longer through faith; rather, through human abilities (or lack thereof.) If any tradition was alarmed by this reversal, it was Lutheranism. *Sola Fide* was the answer to the works righteousness that Luther struggled with in Catholicism and spent the majority of his time refuting. A theologian as adept as Bonhoeffer was able to quickly calculate the end result of the Aryan clause.

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95 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 270.
97 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 270.
Finally, the Aryan clause attacked baptism and the position that baptism signified. Bonhoeffer believed that baptism incorporated the believer into the church body. In *Sanctorum Communio* he writes,

> Baptism is thus, on the one hand, God’s effective act in the gift of grace by which the child is incorporated into the church-community of Christ; on the other hand, however, it also implies the mandate that the child remain within the Christian community. Thus the church-community as the community of saints carries its children like a mother, as its most sacred treasure.99

What the Aryan clause threatened to do was to rip the children of the church out of their mother’s hand—an appalling thought. To change the position of the baptized member of the church meant that the Nazi regime, not Christ, had prior claim over believers.

By Bonhoeffer’s actions in the same month as the Aryan clause was discussed at the Reich Conference of German Christians we can see how important this theological point was to Bonhoeffer. Bethge gives an account of Bonhoeffer being asked to conduct the funeral service of Gerhard Leibholz’s (Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law) father at this time. Bonhoeffer, after consulting with his general superintendent, declined. Bethge attributes this to the fact that Leibholz’s father was not baptized.100 We see that Bonhoeffer refused, at that time,101 to bury an unbaptized Jew, but one must question whether Bonhoeff er would refuse to conduct the service if that same Jewish individual was a baptized member of his church. Therefore, we can note that it was strictly one’s position in the church that made the difference for Bonhoeffer—and that his focus was on the health of the church.

Additionally, the hostility shown by this clause (and other anti-Jewish laws) presented a further obstacle for the Jewish believer. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther strongly exhorts Christians to partake of communion. For Luther, communion was a sacrament that delivered grace and kept the heart of believers soft.102 The persecution of Jews made it dangerous (even impossible) for them to come to church to receive the sacrament. Following Luther’s thought, this was a sinful prohibition since they could not partake of the “precious antidote against the poison which they have in them.”103

Bonhoeffer understood this as early as the clause was introduced. In April 1933 he wrote an answer to this question where he declared the church sovereign over ‘auxiliary issues.’ Bonhoeffer pointed out that the state did not have “the right or the power to decide the issue”104 nor was heredity recognizable in the church. The point of the church was that “Jew and German stand together under the Word of God.”105 In other words, the church trumped the race card. The church was its own entity, given by God to proclaim his Word,

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99 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 241, here Bonhoeffer is discussing infant baptism, but the implications apply also to adults who are baptized.


101 In fairness to Bonhoeffer we must point out that he did apologize to his brother-in-law in November for his behavior in April. He wrote, “I am tormented by the thought...that I didn’t do as you asked me as a matter of course. To be frank, I can’t think what made me behave as I did. How could I have been so much afraid at the time? It must have seemed equally incomprehensible to all of you, and yet you said nothing. But it preys on my mind...because it’s the kind of thing one can never make up for. So all I can do is to ask you to forgive my weakness then. I know now for certain that I ought to have behaved differently...” Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted in Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 275-276.


103 Luther, *Large Catechism*, 4.


and only that was recognizable in the church. Around this same time, Bonhoeffer wrote his famous article for the issue *Vormarsch* that described the responsibility the church had for victims of the state—including active resistance to the state, not alignment.

What we see in this article is that Bonhoeffer was not dealing with the treatment of the Jews from a societal sense, but rather from the direction of the church. He did not call for active resistance or victim assistance on a general level, but his writing was a plea to his own church to respond to a potentially unjust government. This was the second battle and the battle that Bonhoeffer fought the hardest.

He began to address his church’s inertia by writing articles and holding discussion groups.106 Bonhoeffer accepted his own findings in *Sanctorum Communio* so thoroughly that it was through the church community that he hoped to work. Bethge points out that Bonhoeffer hoped for a sort of church council that would address the demands being placed on the church.107 The overwhelming election of “German Christians” to key positions within the church demolished this expectation in July 1933.

At this point, Bonhoeffer began to work with other theologians on a confession—the Bethel Confession. Bonhoeffer, in a letter to his grandmother, outlined what was really at stake. He wrote, “the question really is: Germanism or Christianity? The sooner the conflict comes out into the open, the better. Nothing is more dangerous than concealing this.”108 Unfortunately, once this confession was completed and distributed for acceptance it began to be compromised. In the end, Bonhoeffer “refused to work on the final edition,” and he was completely dissatisfied with the revised copy—registering his wish that it would not be published.109

The work that Bonhoeffer did for the church for the next six years is comprehensive and requires an explanation of over 300 pages in Bethge’s biography. It is not our purpose here to outline each activity that Bonhoeffer did for the church; it is enough that he remained interested in the church’s resistance to the goals of *Gleichschaltung*. During this time Bonhoeffer remained opposed to the ‘official’ church that the Reich approved. He became a member of the Confessing Church—those clergy members who called the Reich church to repentance. The first synod of the Confessing Church met in Barmen on May 28, 1934 and drew up the famous Barmen Confession that proclaimed “the teachings of the German Christians” as “heretical” and condemned them.110 During these years he also led an unapproved, illegal seminary named *Finkenwalde* that was closed down by the Nazis, and he also performed many ecumenical activities. Bonhoeffer continuously worked to free the church from the control of the “German Christians.”

It was a crisis combined with his ecumenical activities that led Bonhoeffer to the final stage that we wish to examine in the remainder of this chapter. Bonhoeffer finally gave up his hope that both the official church and the Confessing Church would fight the Third Reich. At this point he became not only a religious resister, but also a political resister. It was his political resistance that finally led to his death. It is also his political resistance that causes confusion about Bonhoeffer’s final motivation. In the next chapter we will then consider the fourth and final mandate, that of government.

106 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 273. The article in the *Vormarsch* began as an outline for discussion among a group called the ‘Jacobi circle.’
108 Bonhoeffer in *A Testament to Freedom*, 419.
Bonhoeffer’s life changed dramatically around 1939. During this time, he changed from a theologian/pastor who was fervently fighting the Third Reich for the existence of the true church to a theologian/political resister fighting in an underground resistance. Disappointment even with the Confessing Church changed Bonhoeffer.

It was at this time that he realized that his hope for the church to resist the Führer would not become reality. His focus changed from attempting to bring unity to the church to a private battle that he began to wage without the church.

Bonhoeffer remained a theologian until the end, although his theology transformed. Disappointed with the condition of the church and the overwhelming power of the Reich, he began a fight in 1939 that was much deeper than the governing of the church. He began the fight against the destroyer of the true church.

Bonhoeffer fought hard to preserve the purity of the German church. Popular opinion opposed him. In many situations, his co-workers in the Confessing Church disagreed with his radical demands. Bonhoeffer was not afraid to push the limits to protect the church, but his naïve hope that the situation could change disappeared. In 1933, he envisioned a church free from the meddling “German Christians.” In 1939, he realized that the church would never be free until Hitler’s death.

The change in Bonhoeffer was profound, but not quickly noticed by those surrounding him. His meditative nature did not lend itself to sharing the progression in his theological thought. As a Lutheran, he separated the state government from the church. In 1933, he wrote, “Without doubt, the Church of the Reformation has no right to address the state directly in its specifically political actions.”111 In 1939, he discarded the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms and he was actively resisting that very state.

It was neither a quick nor an easy transition for him. Through the years, Bonhoeffer came to the conclusion that the only hope for the church—or for Germany—would be the removal of Hitler.112 But that decision came after much soul searching and fatigue.

The fatigue was a result of a required loyalty oath that Hitler’s government forced pastors within Germany to proclaim. The oath read: “I swear that I will be faithful and obedient to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German Reich and people, that I will conscientiously observe the laws and carry out the duties of my office, so help me God.”113 Bonhoeffer naturally opposed the taking of the oath, but the synod of the Confessing Church vacillated. When most of the pastors took the oath, Bonhoeffer’s disappointment was immense.

In addition to the oath, the number of confessing pastors that were killed as soldiers in the fighting discouraged Bonhoeffer. Because of their illegal status, they were not exempted from military service as legal pastors were. Bonhoeffer received report after report of deaths of co-pastors and students. At this time, Bethge describes Bonhoeffer’s emotional reaction. “It was during this difficult year that Bonhoeffer began to distance himself from the rearguard actions of the Confessing Church’s defeated remnants.”114

113 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 600.
He decided it was time to withdraw from the battle. His lack of inspiration led him to pursue a position within the United States. His friends, realizing he was in great danger in Germany, negotiated a teaching invitation at Union Theological Seminary. Reinhold Niebuhr extended the invitation and Bonhoeffer accepted. He arrived in America in June.

Immediately Bonhoeffer regretted his decision. He wrestled until June 15th, at which time he wrote, “The whole burden of self-reproach overwhelms one.” After much agony, Bonhoeffer declined the position and returned to Germany. He was a pastor, a theologian, and a leader of the Confessing Church. His whole life centered on the existence and health of the church. He realized that he could not expect to lead the church after the war if he deserted her during the war. His motivation still came from his concern for his church.

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany as a different man. His actions were no longer singular. He reacted differently than one would expect from a Lutheran pastor – he entered political resistance. How could his focus change so drastically? Bethge explains the change in Bonhoeffer’s mindset.

At the beginning of 1939 Bonhoeffer the theologian and Christian was entering fully into his contemporary world, his place, and his time – into a world his bourgeois class had helped to bring about rather than prevent. He accepted the burden of that collective responsibility, and began to identify himself with those who were prepared to acknowledge their guilt and to begin shaping something new for the future – instead of merely protesting on ideological grounds, as the church had done up to that point. In 1939 the theologian and Christian became a man for his times.

While this is true, the change can be found even in the sermon of 1933. He gave three points that the church could follow: (1) to question the state about its actions, (2) to help any victims of the state, and (3) to “put a spoke in the wheel” of the state action. For Bonhoeffer the remedies were progressive, and he did the first two for many years. It is the third that he attempted beginning in 1939.

This third alternative experienced a subtle alteration in Bonhoeffer’s mind. In 1933, he believed that the spoke occurred in consultation with the rest of the church. In 1939, it appeared that the church capitulated to the pressure of the Reich and Bonhoeffer moved forward without them and attempted to place the “spoke in the wheel” with another group.

He was in a different position than any other theologian in Germany—or the world. His prestigious family included Hans von Dohnanyi. Von Dohnanyi was a family friend and married Bonhoeffer’s sister, Christine. An extremely capable lawyer, he rose to an appointment in the Abwehr (the Reich’s military intelligence). Von Dohnanyi saw firsthand the military crimes that Hitler committed. He began to chronicle these crimes, both through written accounts and film. His purpose was to document the atrocities in hope that the military would overthrow Hitler. Von Dohnanyi knew that evidence would be necessary if a charge of treason could be avoided for those members involved in deposing Hitler.

Bonhoeffer often heard about Hitler’s secret actions—particularly those against the Jews. His belief that Hitler was the Antichrist grew until he joined the conspiracy. The

116 Bethge, Bonhoeffer, 677.
117 Villa-Vicencio, Christ and Caesar, 108.
118 Villa-Vicencio, Christ and Caesar, 108.
119 These secret chronicles were hidden at an Abwehr branch in Zossen and were discovered in September 1944. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Life in Pictures, Renate Bethge and Christian Gremmels, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 150.
120 See, Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 341-344.
conspiracy began with the hope that Hitler could be overthrown and tried in court for his crimes. Many times plans for this failed. The conspiracy evolved into a plan to assassinate Hitler.

That Bonhoeffer, the author of *Discipleship* and one who seriously considered pacifism, was part of a murder conspiracy is amazing. He was portrayed by Von Dohnanyi to the Reich as an employee of the *Abwehr*, who was using his ecumenical contacts to gather information for the Third Reich. In fact, he used his contacts to gather information for the conspiracy and to spread the word that there were Germans in resistance to Hitler within the German borders. He was able to deliver information to his friend in England, Bishop George Bell, about potential actions against Hitler that Bell could relay to the British parliament.

One other activity that Bonhoeffer participated in may be the reason why he is romanticized—at least in the United States. While he was in the conspiracy, a decision was made to save Jewish friends of the conspirators. Named ‘Operation 7,’ the group worked to move the Jews into Switzerland. It was a successful operation, but the results were disastrous for the conspirators. Money was used from the *Abwehr* funds in order to send them to Switzerland. This was the irregularity that Von Dohnanyi’s enemies used to arrest him. On April 5, 1943, both Von Dohnanyi and Bonhoeffer were arrested. They were imprisoned for two years until the Reich found Von Dohnanyi’s file documenting Hitler’s crimes. On April 9, 1945, Von Dohnanyi was murdered at Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp and, on the same day, Bonhoeffer was murdered at Flossenburg Concentration Camp—both by direct order of Hitler.

How did a little known theologian become an active participant in a conspiracy to kill his nation’s leader within ten years? Particularly, a theologian who seriously considered pacifism as a viable alternative? We see that the circumstances he found himself in—belonging to the Bonhoeffer family, being a resident of Berlin, being included in ecumenical work—were an important part of the development, but also his thinking gave him the moral center he needed to act decisively.

Bonhoeffer grew to understand that the actions of the Reich were not from an innocent regime acting too harshly to restore law and order. With the occurrence of *Kristallnacht*—the night when S.S. squadrons destroyed Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses, he made a startling quotation in his Bible. Bethge tells about this viewpoint. “In the Bible that Bonhoeffer used for prayer and meditation he underlined the verse in Psalm 74, ‘they burned all the meeting places of God in the land,’ and wrote beside it ‘9.11.38.’” As the terror in his country increased, Bonhoeffer’s contemplation brought a different understanding than that of his early theology.

Perhaps this is also noticed in his pacifism. Bethge argues that Bonhoeffer was never an actual pacifist. Bonhoeffer had strong leanings in that area though. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes about the beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

He addresses the passage by describing how peacemakers overcome evil.

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126 Matt. 5:9, NIV
They renounce all self-assertion, and quietly suffer in the face of hatred and wrong. In so doing they overcome evil with good, and establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate. But nowhere will that peace be more manifest than where they meet the wicked in peace and are ready to suffer at their hands.\textsuperscript{127}

To compare Bonhoeffer’s inclusion and actions in the conspiracy with his previous evaluation of peacemaking, one would need to conclude that Bonhoeffer did not take his own interpretation of Matthew seriously. But a quick comparison to his analysis of obedience in the same book would prove that conclusion false. Obviously, his mindset changed over the years.

Right before his arrest, Bonhoeffer was working on his unfinished book, \textit{Ethics}. In it he wrestles with his beliefs and how to live them in a twisted society that opposed the true gospel. His commitment to obedience had not changed, but his naive simplicity disappeared. Bonhoeffer accepted that in order to live righteously, he might not always stand before God guiltless.\textsuperscript{128} The young man who examined non-violent resistance succumbed to the fact that sometimes we are called in the opposite direction as our life matures.

Bonhoeffer struggled to live responsibly in an unjust society and to remain true to his call from God. In this society things were never what they seemed. That which man called good was in opposition to the Word of God, and that which man called evil was precisely what was required from God.

\textit{Conclusion}

This chapter was written with two goals in mind. First, it was meant to introduce the reader to the subject of our dissertation if they have only a general knowledge of Bonhoeffer. Second, it was to consider a bit of his history in order to find what things were most important to him.

Since a person never exists in a vacuum, we began with his most intimate connections—his family. We learned that Bonhoeffer came from a prestigious family that was both socially and academically well-connected. These were both factors in the character development of Bonhoeffer. We found that there were standards and expectations that came from his close-knit but very proper family that determined his personality and character. His family also meant that Bonhoeffer became involved in resistance activities and could do so for an extended period of time without raising suspicion. This was not normal for a theologian in general society. However, it was also his family connections that brought Bonhoeffer’s arrest.

By following his life chronologically, we discovered how unusual, and therefore more important, his decision to become a theologian was. Even though his family had minimal contact with the church, Bonhoeffer decided at a relatively young age to study the science that influenced the church.

This was the surprise that was discovered in this chapter. While it is not unusual for one’s childhood upbringing to form character development that leads to endurance, what is surprising is the importance of the church for Bonhoeffer’s endurance. The most surprising outcome was what we found while considering \textit{Sanctorum Communio}. Bonhoeffer’s view on...

the collective person was a development so substantial that it never left his theology. And we found that he anchored his sociology in his theology so that when the Third Reich mentality began he was uniquely prepared to understand the dangers and eventual results of its ideology.

As a result, we saw that Bonhoeffer began early in the Third Reich to resist. Not against political aspects of the *Führer* principle but precisely when that principle endangered the church. For many years, Bonhoeffer struggled with and against his fellow churchmen for the health and honesty of the German churches—only to finally fail. Then we saw the later and last stage of his activities—the political resister.

However, the desire for his resistance was not later or last. His heart was still turned to the church and her survival. But Bonhoeffer realized that he would not be able to reform the church from within and therefore decided to fight from outside the community. In the end, it was this move that ultimately cost Bonhoeffer his life.

As pertains to Bonhoeffer’s endurance, we discovered two important aspects from our work in this chapter. First, his familial and social conditioning formed a strong and unique character in Bonhoeffer that could be critical and withstand societal pressure and control. His family also provided the sharpening stone for his intellectual development.

Second, the church was the social institution that drove all of Bonhoeffer’s theology and thought. Not as a social institution, but because Bonhoeffer understood the church as Christ existing as church community. Since there was nothing more primary than Christ, his chosen revelation was primary for Bonhoeffer.

These findings will be enlarged in chapter five when we consider Bonhoeffer’s endurance. Now that we examined his motivation and historical situation we will proceed to ask Bonhoeffer our proposed questions and will observe if he has opinion regarding our questions, and then, what his opinions are.
During his time as a lecturer at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer exegeted Genesis 1-4:1. This lecture series, through the urging of various students in his class, was published as the manuscript, *Creation and Fall*. Within this manuscript, Bonhoeffer began to develop his theology regarding good and evil that he later refined and further explained in *Ethics*.

Since this work is seminal to Bonhoeffer’s later theology, we will walk through his argument in order to understand his line of theology regarding evil. When we finish we will shortly consider what *Discipleship* says about evil and then what he argues in both works will be compared with *Ethics* in order to compare his earlier and later theology. Some referral may also be made back to what we previously learned about *Sanctorum Communio* in the second chapter of this dissertation. This will be performed in order to obtain a picture of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of evil (1932-early 1933) before Hitler’s inauguration as chancellor, what he thought about evil during the time Hitler first came into power, and his view of evil after living through at least seven years of the Third Reich. In this manner, we will be able to see if his theology changed, and how his consideration of evil impacted his actions and endurance.

The Introduction

In the very introduction of his work, Bonhoeffer gives us a glimpse into an important aspect of his consideration of evil, even though he is not at the point to wrestle with the actual concept. He does not begin in the introduction with evil or even creation, but how one must now consider the world. He addresses the state of the world from an interesting perspective if one considers our second chapter. The observer of the world and the perspective that Bonhoeffer discusses is the perspective of ‘the church.’ Even though he exegetes Genesis, his first and primary argument is the importance of the church’s view.

Bonhoeffer considers the world as “the old world” in the introduction. This carries forth the argument that we saw from *Sanctorum Communio*. The world is old because it “has already been judged” and is already declared dead. Just as he argued in *Sanctorum Communio*, the world has been renewed and reconciled within Christ, and this forms the ‘new’ world in opposition to what is the old world.

With this Bonhoeffer addresses the separation of the church from the old world. “The church cannot please the old world because the church speaks of the end of the world as though this has already happened, as though the world has already been judged.”

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129 Wolf Krötke notes that “...in his day he was charged, like Luther, that he raped the Old Testament by reading it as a book of Christ.” Wolf Krötke, “Bonhoeffer and Luther,” in Frick, *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation*, 59.


131 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 21.

In this section, however, Bonhoeffer gives us a slight, surprising view into the church. He shows us a bit of disappointment that he already has with the church in 1933. He says that the church has people within it who think as the old dead world thinks. He writes that the church “is not surprised that again and again there appear within it people who think as the old world does.”

This has dire results that should raise the church to indignation because “these children of the world that has passed away wish to claim the church, the view, as belonging to them. They want the new, and they only know the old. And in that way they deny Christ, the Lord.”

These few sentences in this introduction give us a glimpse into how Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the church began to change. It also tells us, though, how Bonhoeffer saw the things of the old world—evil included. All old-world problems should be seen through the eyes of the church and in a new, eschatological manner. He explains that “the church of Christ witnesses to the end of all things.”

For Bonhoeffer, the world is “declared dead” through the newness of Christ. He argues further that through the Holy Scripture the church “lives from the end” and that the whole of scripture is meant to be read “as the book of the end, of the new [vom Neuen], of Christ.” For Bonhoeffer, the “goal” of the church is to know “that Christ is the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.”

This argument means that the things of the old world are now dead and all things must be viewed from the newness of Christ. In other words, all things have been reconciled to God. We find later in his Ethics that he understands that the things of the old world are not the ultimate but rather the penultimate; however, he still believes that all things have been redeemed by Christ. Even the ‘evil’ that we experience now must be considered as overcome by Christ.

This is a telling argument from Bonhoeffer because it also clearly shows his understanding of the hope that he has that in the end there is Christ. Initially, he lays out his argument of his own understanding of the purpose of life, and the purpose of the church—that it is to look forward to the end that will be Christ.

This is a continuation of the importance of the church that Bonhoeffer approached in Sanctorum Communio. As we saw in that work, the church was Christ existing as church-community, and now we see that the purpose of the church is to proclaim Christ as the end of all that is the world and that the world is already redeemed.

For those who only know the later Bonhoeffer, this idea of considering the world as dead might be a surprise since Bonhoeffer argued in his letters to his family and friends, as well as parts of Ethics, for a religion of reality that faced the need of living in the current world. However, this theology is not very different from his later work. He is not speaking as though the world will be destroyed ‘in the last days,’ but that the world is already dead because it has been judged by Christ. That is reality. The world we live in today is the world that Christ gave us after his redemption of it. This is what Bonhoeffer wants us to consider.

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133 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 21.
134 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 21-22.
135 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 21.
136 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 21.
137 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 22.
138 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 22.
even in the creation story. Christ is the new, and therefore one can only speak of the world in
the light of the new, i.e., the Christ—“it views the creation from Christ…”139

Now the reader is ready to proceed with the appropriate perspective. Understanding
that Christ is the beginning of all things, he titles the first chapter as just that—“The
Beginning.”

The Beginning

The reason that Creation and Fall has been chosen is because in it Bonhoeffer deals with the
beginning of all things. Since an important question dealt with by most scholars when
considering evil is the genesis of evil, it makes sense to understand what Bonhoeffer thought
was the beginning of evil.

In this first chapter, Bonhoeffer does not disappoint. While not considering evil as his
argumentation point, he tells us what he thinks about the beginning of everything—evil
included.

He begins the chapter by arguing that the moment “where the beginning begins, there
our thinking stops; there it comes to an end.”140 Not because scripture does not answer all
questions—he considers that question a few pages later when he does initially confront evil—
but because of a failure of the human mind. The beginning cannot be grasped by the human
mind “because [the beginning is the infinite, and because we can conceive of the infinite only
as what is endless] and so what has no beginning.”141

Bonhoeffer also says that thinking is circular for “fallen humankind.”142 Therefore,
human thinking can never really grasp the beginning and every answer only “produce(s) yet
another why.”143 He continues to say that this circular thought causes thought to become an
object in itself because thought takes this circular questioning as the infinite, and that is its
destruction

One can see that the question of where evil comes from or why evil exists falls also
into this category, and we can see a bit of what Bonhoeffer would say if he followed his own
argumentation. It is impossible for the human mind—due to its own circular thought
process—to answer this problem.

Next he examines a philosophical question and occurrence in order to highlight
further the problem of the question. “The Hegelian question how we are to make a beginning
in philosophy can therefore be answered only by the bold and violent action of enthroning
reason in the place of God.”144 Of course, theologians can understand that this is idolatry, but
Bonhoeffer takes it one step further and says that “critical philosophy is but a systematic
despair of its own beginning, indeed of any beginning.”145 Even the aloof scientific
approach can only lead to despair over the lack of knowing and causes “critical philosophy to
proudly renounce what it lacks the power to attain, or else lapses into a resignation that leads

139 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 22.
140 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 25.
141 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 25-26.
142 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 26.
143 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 26.
144 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 27.
145 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 27.
to its complete destruction; either alternative stems from the same human hatred of the unknown beginning.”

It is being in the middle that Bonhoeffer thinks gives humans the most problems. Being in the middle and “knowing neither the end nor the beginning” causes humanity to know it is “totally deprived of its own self-determination.” This weakness and uncertainty is intolerable and the human “hate(s) the beginning and rises(s) up in pride against it.”

Here Bonhoeffer uses the word evil, not in an abstract sense, but as attached to an entity—the evil one. He writes that there are only two possibilities to speak about the beginning—either the one who is the beginning or the one who lies and claims to be the beginning. It is the second that Bonhoeffer names “the evil one.” “The speaker may be the one who has been a liar from the beginning, the evil one, for whom the beginning is the lie and the lie is the beginning, who human beings believe because the evil one deceives them with lies.”

Bonhoeffer does not say why the ‘evil one’ would wish to lie; only that he does. He claims for himself the status of being the beginning and is willing to share this status with those he wishes to deceive. “And as one who lies, the evil one will say: I am the beginning, and you, O humankind, are the beginning. You were with me from the beginning. I have made you what you are, and with me your end is done away [aufgehoben].”

We see here that Bonhoeffer believes there is an evil entity that can influence humanity and whose very existence is that he “has been a liar from the beginning.”

It is interesting to note that Bonhoeffer places the evil one at this dramatic moment of creation. He does not enter into the argument of where this evil one comes from or why; he is just there but he does not tell the truth about the beginning.

Bonhoeffer then juxtaposes this evil one to God—“the one who has been the truth from the beginning, and the way and the life, the one who was in the beginning, the very God, Christ, the Holy Spirit.”

In Job-like fashion Bonhoeffer then begins arguing with the author of Genesis. He seems to ask the author, “How do you know this?” “Aren’t you just as bad as the evil one making up stories because of your anxiety?”

He uses this approach to turn the argument back on the reader as well. He points out that we, the readers of the scripture, have the exact same problem. “And are we not all that person—we who out of the faintheartedness of our own lives, with their lack of a beginning and an end, cry out to a god who is but our own ego?” Any person who dares to speak about the beginning, whether talking about the beginning of evil or the beginning of any other event, shows their anxiety from living in the middle—even the writer of Genesis.

At this point Bonhoeffer begins to discuss what it means to be in the middle and learning about the beginning from another’s words. We will look at what Bonhoeffer argues in this section because it applies to evil as well since the one question theologians are often called upon to answer is where evil comes from.

147 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 28.
149 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 28.
154 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 29.
155 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 29.
Evil in Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall, Discipleship, and Ethics*

Of course, Bonhoeffer does not address that one question. Instead, he describes the difficulties that humans have from living in the middle. First, he points out that the reason we know anything at all about the beginning is because God chose to reveal the beginning in a book. “God alone tells us that God is in the beginning; God testifies of God by no other means than through this word, which as the word of a book, the word of a pious human being, is wholly a word that comes from the middle and not from the beginning.”156 Bonhoeffer apparently accepts that the Bible is a revelation from God, even if a “pious human being” was the channel that God used to reveal his Word. So we know the truthful beginning only because God chose to tell us as the actual source of that beginning.

Bonhoeffer then claims the creation as the beginning. “In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Not that first God was and then God created, but that in the beginning God created.”157 This very fact brings even more questions for the person who is stuck in the middle. Was it then the beginning of all things, or only the beginning of the earth? This question could be important to the question of evil because one can always then ask if evil entered into God’s creation as an interloper—similar to the idea of the mythological gods who endeavor to destroy another god’s work from jealousy or rivalry. This question can be asked because of Bonhoeffer’s very own earlier treatment of the ‘evil one’ who suddenly appears in order to lead God’s creation into the lie that they are also a beginning.

In Bonhoeffer’s argument, he finalizes this question. To answer the question of how evil came to be in the world is impossible without lying to ourselves because we can only know of what God tells us in scripture. He writes, “we do not know of this beginning by stepping out of the middle and becoming a beginning ourselves. Because we could accomplish that only by means of a lie, we would then certainly not be in the beginning but only in the middle that is disguised by a lie.”158

In his following argument Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that the questions about the creation and the beginning of the earth that are not already answered by God are for us “godless questions.”159 Bonhoeffer says that we can only know God as the creator of this world. “This is because for us God as the beginning is no other than the one who in the beginning created the world and created us, and because we can know nothing at all of this God except as the Creator of our world.”160 This is the reason why all other questions are “godless questions” and are now “disposed of.”161 It is because “no question can go back behind the creating God, because one cannot go back behind the beginning.”162

This is a pivotal point in Bonhoeffer’s theology when dealing with evil. Theologically, Bonhoeffer never developed a theology regarding evil. He did, in fact, develop his theology in *Ethics* based on resisting the temptation to define evil (and good along with it), and now we see why. The very question of why evil exists (if it does exist) and where it came from was godless meanderings for Bonhoeffer. The only thing that can be known is not how evil came to be, or where evil came from, or even the dark question of whether God created evil, but rather, to know God as the “merciful Creator.”163

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156 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 30.
158 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 31.
159 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 31.
161 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 31.
162 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 31-32.
However, this discovery does not hinder Bonhoeffer from further theologizing. Bonhoeffer then moves into an argument that is traditional in Christianity, but has implications for following Bonhoeffer’s thoughts about evil. Bonhoeffer then begins to argue that the earth was created from nothing. He is quite adamant in this argument.

This nothingness is therefore not a primal possibility or a ground of God; it ‘is’ absolutely ‘nothing’. It happens instead in God’s action itself, and it happens always as what has already been negated, as the nothing that is no longer happening but has always already happened. We call it the obedient nothing, the nothing that waits on God, the nothing whose glory and whose existence [Bestand] are neither in itself nor in its nothingness but only in God’s action. Thus God needed no link between God and the creation; even the nothing constitutes no such ‘between’. On the contrary God affirms the nothing only to the extent that God has already overcome it. This is what people of a bygone time tried to express with their somewhat clumsy description of the nothing as the nihil negativum (as distinct from the nihil privatum, which was understood as primal being). The nothing poses no reason for anxiety to the first creation. Instead, it is itself an eternal song of praise to the Creator who created the world out of nothing.\textsuperscript{164}

Bonhoeffer is very clear in this passage that before the earth was created there was nothing. Can we assume that all that the earth contains came as a result of God’s creation? Bonhoeffer assumes so because he says, “this means nothing else than that it exists wholly by God’s freedom.”\textsuperscript{165}

Within the argument Bonhoeffer makes an astonishing statement about the nihil negativum. Bonhoeffer at this point compares the creation of the world and its existence as a sign of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. He says that we can see the act of God’s creation in the fact that Christ was resurrected. “The fact that Christ was dead did not provide the possibility of his resurrection but its impossibility; it was nothing itself, it was the nihil negativum.”\textsuperscript{166}

Bonhoeffer describes the nihil negativum as something outside of God as well as God’s creation.

Were it possible to intensify the nihil negativum even more, we would have to say here, in connection with the resurrection, that with the death of Christ on the Cross the nihil negativum broke its way into God’s own being.—O great desolation! God, yes God, is dead. —Yet the one who is the beginning lives, destroys the nothing, and in his resurrection creates the new creation. By his resurrection we know about the creation.\textsuperscript{167}

What we see here is that the nihil negativum is able to break into God’s reality, and this is what Bonhoeffer describes as death. It is not a creation of God, but an event that breaks in and which God is able to overcome. Opposed to God and his creation is the nihil negativum, the nothing, or as Bonhoeffer later describes “a bottomless abyss.”\textsuperscript{168}

Bonhoeffer progresses on in his description of creation to the moment that God considers the world he made. He says that “God looks at God’s work and is pleased with it, because it is good.”\textsuperscript{169} God loves and approves of what he created and therefore he “wills to uphold and preserve it.”\textsuperscript{170} Here we see what Bonhoeffer considers as the opposing force

\textsuperscript{164} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 34.  
\textsuperscript{165} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 34.  
\textsuperscript{166} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 35.  
\textsuperscript{167} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 35.  
\textsuperscript{168} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 40.  
\textsuperscript{169} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 45.  
\textsuperscript{170} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 45.
when he says that it is this desire that God has for his creation that “keeps the world from falling back into nothingness [Nichts], from complete destruction [Vernichtung].”\(^{171}\)

We see here that Bonhoeffer sees evil as similar to the nothing.

That God’s work is good in no way means that the world is the best of all conceivable worlds; what it means is that the world lives wholly before God, that it lives from God and toward God and that God is its Lord. What is meant here is a goodness that has not yet been distinguished as such over against evil, a goodness that consists in being under the dominion of God.\(^{172}\)

We also see that Bonhoeffer even believes that God considers the fallen world still as his creation and accepts the reality that it fell, but still it is his.

The concept of a creation continua also ignores the reality of the fallen world, which is the creation upheld, not created ever anew. To say that God upholds the created world is a judgment that accepts the present moment in its reality as from God. It means that the world, which was ‘once’ wrested from nothingness, is upheld in its being.\(^{173}\)

At this point Bonhoeffer considers creation, but not in a manner that would add any theological insight into his consideration of evil. He expands on the biblical story and explains the significance of the creation act. When we return to his argumentation that impacts the topic of evil, we find Bonhoeffer exegeting Genesis 2: 8-17. Titled The Center of the Earth, we now enter the garden and encounter the two trees—“one the tree of life and the other the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”\(^{174}\)

Bonhoeffer designated this section as the center of the earth because it was his claim that the tree of life was at the center of the earth. “The life that comes from God is at the center; that is to say, God who gives life, is at the center.”\(^{175}\) This is the pure state of humanity—“Adam’s life comes from the center which is not Adam but God…”\(^{176}\) This is still the moment that “Adam has life”\(^{177}\) and is blissfully unaware of any other possibility.

Here Bonhoeffer approaches the theme that he grappled with regarding the sociality of the church in Sanctorum Communio and enlarges in Ethics—unity with God. The base of the importance of his later theology finds itself here.

He writes,

Adam has life, however, in a particular way. In the first place, Adam really possesses it and is not merely possessed by it. In the second place, Adam has life in the unity of unbroken obedience to the Creator—has life just because Adam lives from the center of life, and is oriented toward the center of life, without placing Adam’s own life at the center. The distinctive characteristic of Adam’s life is utterly unbroken and unified obedience, that is, Adam’s innocence and ignorance of disobedience.\(^{178}\)

In each of his books after Creation and Fall, we see Bonhoeffer pleading for the return of this innocent unity that resulted from knowing only God. In Discipleship, it is the immediate

\(^{171}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 45.

\(^{172}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 45-46, italics mine.

\(^{173}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 47.

\(^{174}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 81.

\(^{175}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 83.

\(^{176}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 84.

\(^{177}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 84.

\(^{178}\) Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 84.
response to the person of Christ that shows one is in unity.\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4. Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, eds. trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 57-58.} In Ethics, it is “the child of God” who “alone” has “discern[ed] the will of God...”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 322.} Even in his consideration of Christian community, unity becomes the driving principle, and he quotes Psalms 133:1 as the first sentence of Life Together—“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5. English ed. Geffrey B. Kelly. Trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 27.} Later we learn that this unity only occurs when the believer gathers around Jesus Christ.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 31.} These are all outworkings of this unity that Adam was created to have with his creator in the beginning. And here we also see that evil enters in as the real danger to this unity, this pure possession of life.

Bonhoeffer then deals with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Bonhoeffer points out that Adam is free to partake from life—the tree of life—freely and abundantly. But there is a boundary.

Also in the center is the other tree—the tree that will bring death by crossing the boundary. Once Adam wants to become so wise that he eats in order to find what good and evil is, he will lose the free life given to him. Bonhoeffer points out something that is often taken for granted when discussing the creation story—how would Adam even know what God was prohibiting? “How is Adam to grasp what death is, living as Adam does in unbroken obedience to the Creator? Can any of this mean anything else than empty words to Adam?”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 85.} Is Adam just simply set up to be the tragic figure in some divine tragedy being told to “do this” and “not to do that” while having no point of reference to do either?

Bonhoeffer says this is our question. “It is we who ask: How can Adam, who does not know about good or evil, who is innocent and ignorant, understand the word of God that addresses Adam as a prohibition?”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 85.}

Bonhoeffer points out that there are two purposes here—the prohibitions are lessons for Adam. The first is to teach him that God created him as a free creature. Here we learn something about Bonhoeffer’s perception of humanity. He writes that humans are different than the rest of the created world. Their humanity was not a mistake that God made; rather, God created humans to be human. There is no need to attempt to shake off the state that God created us in. God even dared to build within us that one characteristic that frightens very religious people—freedom.

The life that God gave to humankind is not simply part of the makeup [eine Beschaffenheit], a qualitas, of humankind; instead it is something given to humankind only in terms of its whole human existence. Human beings have life from God and before God. They receive it; they receive it, however, not as animals but as human beings. They possess it in their obedience, in their innocence, in their ignorance; that is, they possess it in their freedom.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 84, italics mine.}

Bonhoeffer writes that “Adam understands this.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 85.}

The second lesson for Adam is that as a human being he has boundaries.
The prohibition means nothing other than this: Adam you are who you are because of me, your Creator; so now be what you are. You are a free creature, so now be that. You are free, so be free; you are a creature, so be a creature. And this ‘-so be…’ is not a second thing besides the first but something always given already in and along with the first and guaranteed by the first. It is about being human—about the human existence that Adam receives from God at any given time—that Adam is addressed.\textsuperscript{187}

Again we see Bonhoeffer affirming Adam’s humanity. It is not being human that is the problem; the problem arises when Adam attempts to be more than human.

Fighting against or attempting to test the limits of being human is the sin of the tree of knowledge. It is the sin of wanting to overcome the condition of humanity rather than recognizing and honoring the limitation of God as the center. Bonhoeffer writes that “knowledge of the limit or constraint on the margin is always accompanied by the possibility of failing to know any internal limit.”\textsuperscript{188}

Bonhoeffer reiterates that the boundary that humans must really know is “the tree of life, that is, the very God who gives life.”\textsuperscript{189} Being “orientated” to this center makes it “an expression of Adam’s creatureliness and freedom.”\textsuperscript{190}

Now we learn something about Adam and evil. We also see something about Bonhoeffer’s understanding of evil. Bonhoeffer believed that evil already existed because he writes,

Thus Adam cannot know evil, cannot conceive it, and cannot know or conceive death either. But Adam knows the limit of human beings because Adam knows God. Adam does not know the boundary as something that can be transgressed; otherwise Adam would know about evil.\textsuperscript{191}

Bonhoeffer does not write that evil would begin if Adam transgressed the boundaries, but that Adam would know about it. Just as Adam did not create good; he was only able to recognize it.

Here we also learn from Bonhoeffer that the trees were now seen not as a mean trick meant to tempt Adam, but rather as a mercy. God knew all. He also knew the destruction that would come to Adam if Adam breached the limits because “only the Creator knows what the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is up to this point; Adam does not yet know it.”\textsuperscript{192} He continues, “Adam knows neither what good nor what evil is and lives in the strictest sense beyond good and evil; that is, Adam lives out of the life that comes from God, before whom a life lived in good, just like a life lived in evil, would mean an unthinkable falling away.”\textsuperscript{193}

Now that Bonhoeffer has done away with the sometimes popular notion that evil exists by the work of humanity, he begins to explain the conditions of good and evil. How Bonhoeffer explains this hints that evil already exists and that the Creator knows it, but Adam does not. “Only the Creator knows what the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is up to this point; Adam does not yet know it.”\textsuperscript{194} He explains that good and evil go back beyond “even the moral split,”\textsuperscript{195} again hinting at a situation outside of the fall. Here Bonhoeffer

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 85.
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    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 86.
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 87, italics mine.
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 87.
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 87.
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 87-88.
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 87.
    \item Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, 88.
\end{enumerate}
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addresses *tob* and *ra*. Because this idea is so essential to understanding Bonhoeffer’s view of evil, we will quote it here extensively.

Good and evil, *tob* and *ra*, thus have a much wider meaning here than good and evil in our terminology. The words *tob* and *ra* speak of an ultimate split (*Zwiespalt*) in the world of humankind in general that goes back behind even the moral split, so that *tob* means also something like “pleasurable” (*lustvoll*) and *ra* “painful” (*leidvol*) (Hans Schmidt). *Tob* and *ra* are concepts that express what is in every respect the deepest divide (*Entzweigung*) in human life. The essential point about them is that they appear as a pair, that in being split apart [in ihrer Zwiespaltigkeit] they belong together. There is no *tob*, nothing that is pleasurable/good/beautiful, without its being always already immersed in *ra*, in that which is painful/evil/base/false (*Unechte*). And what is painful/evil—in this wide sense—does not occur without a glimmer of desire for pleasure (*Lust*), which is what makes pain so completely pain. That which is good, in the sense of *tob*, is for us always only something that has been torn from evil, that has passed through evil, that has been conceived, carried, and borne by evil. The luster of the pleasurable/good is its origin in evil, in its overcoming of evil, to be sure, but in the same way that a child overcomes the mother’s womb, that is, in such a way that the good is enhanced (*geadelt*) by the greatness of the evil from which it has torn itself.196

With this Bonhoeffer reminds us that God has bound the two forever together in the symbol of the one tree. While humankind is able to juxtapose the two concepts against each other, God sees them as a split of a whole that belongs together. This is a mystery that Bonhoeffer was never really willing to attempt to explain beyond their implication for humankind. However this explanation of *tob* and *ra* forms his basis of understanding good and evil. Bonhoeffer never really sees them as separated again throughout his theology.

What he does do throughout his theology is what he does in the following paragraphs. Here he explains that eating from the tree of knowledge means that one will immediately die. “The tree of knowledge is the *tree of death*.”197 Bonhoeffer destroys the idea that one can pursue good since good brings evil with it.

He continues that the problem with knowing good and evil is that the human now “knows immediately about death.”198 Previously, the human only knew God and therefore only knew life. Now the knowledge of evil brings with it the knowledge that “pleasure is transient and will end”199 while good brings the knowledge that “the evil dies.”200 This is a problem that did not trouble the human before Adam and Eve ate from the tree.

However, the worst part of this situation is that humans have to live before God but are no longer able to do that. The grace earlier given “as grace coming from the center and boundary of one’s own existence”201 is now “a commandment that stands in one’s way and with a flaming sword denies one any way of retreat.”202 In this we see that for Bonhoeffer true life is the innocent life before God that lives without the knowledge of good and evil, but only in complete unity with God and with God as the center.

He juxtaposes this simple life with the terrible judgment that comes when the human leaves God as the center and partakes of the tree of good and evil. Now the human must live “not as a gift but as a commandment.”203 The punishment is that the human does not receive

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196 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 88-89.
197 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 89.
198 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.
199 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.
200 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.
201 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.
202 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.
203 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.
life and the ability to live that life freely and in joy, but must live according to its own means and without the grace of God. The burden of *tob* and *ra* is that the human lives “out of its own resources; it is alone.”\(^{204}\) Even worse is that the human, in obedience to judgment, lives a living death. This is the sentence of good and evil—“Humankind now lives only out of its own resources, by its knowledge of good and evil, and thus is dead.”\(^{205}\)

It is here that Bonhoeffer begins to discuss his argument that God created the human to be human, and one should not attempt to overcome their humanity. Through Adam’s deed of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the world has now become a “split-apart world.”\(^{206}\) After having destroyed the unity with God, Adam has no recourse to reconnect the broken parts. Adam knows only death at this point, and that “the secret of humankind’s limit, of the life of the human being, is in God’s keeping.”\(^{207}\)

Bonhoeffer continues that Adam’s problem is now our problem as well. There is no way to “transport us to this fairyland beyond *tob* and *ra*.”\(^{208}\) The original sin also sentenced us to the torn-apart condition of knowing only our own good and evil in contradiction to unity with God—“because we do not exist in a state of unity, our thinking is torn apart as well.”\(^{209}\)

At this point, we come to the conclusion of the chapter that introduced us to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in opposition to the tree of life. Bonhoeffer defined the inability to define either good or evil. The moment we believe that we can define good, evil is immediately included in the definition. This comes from the binding of the two ethics together by God himself. Bonhoeffer, however, gave us a hint of how to remedy this situation. The remedy is unity with and knowing God alone. Human solutions and human thinking only lead us further into death; we must give ourselves completely to God and allow him to be the only judge.

In the next chapter, Bonhoeffer delves deeper into the problem of disunity. We learn that the real danger of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil brings what Bonhoeffer sees as evil—the breech with God.

In the beginning of this section Bonhoeffer includes the other actors in the fall—the woman and the serpent. Bonhoeffer explains the woman as God’s gift to help Adam “in bearing the limit imposed upon him.”\(^{210}\) This is an important point because when we come to the section, “The Pious Question,” it is this helper—the one meant to help Adam bear his limits—who encourages Adam to violate his limits. Bonhoeffer attributes this to the situation that “the prohibition that Adam has heard and obeyed as grace becomes the law that provokes wrath in human beings and in God.”\(^{211}\) Even the creature that God created, the serpent, “becomes an instrument of evil.”\(^{212}\)

Bonhoeffer comes closer to answering the question of evil than previously. His thoughts on this situation are so bold that we will quote them extensively:

How does this come about? To this question the Bible gives no answer, or at any rate no unequivocal or direct answer, but only a peculiarly indirect one. Simply to blame the devil as God’s enemy for bringing all this about would be to vulgarize and distort the biblical account completely.

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\(^{204}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 91.
\(^{205}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 91.
\(^{206}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 91.
\(^{207}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 92.
\(^{208}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 92.
\(^{209}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 92.
\(^{210}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 98.
\(^{211}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 103.
\(^{212}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 104.
This is just what the Bible, for very definite reasons, does not say. Likewise to blame the freedom of human beings to do good or evil as something that human beings use only in the wrong way would be to misinterpret the context completely. The characteristic and essential thing about the biblical narrative by contrast is precisely that the whole course of events takes place in the world God has created and that no diabolic ex machina are set in motion to make this incomprehensible event understandable or to dramatize it.213

Bonhoeffer appears to say that evil did not come from outside creation but that it was already built into the creation. This is not a misinterpretation or a careless mistake made by a theologian who was too much in a hurry to make his point. We know this because he says it again on the next page:

The guilt is mine alone. I have committed evil in the midst of the original state of creation. The complete incomprehensibility of this act is expressed in Genesis 3 by the fact that an evil force does not suddenly and manifestly break its way into creation from somewhere or other; instead this evil is completely veiled in the world of creation, and it takes place in creation through humankind. If an account of the fall of Lucifer had preceded this, as Catholic theology and as Luther too would have it, then Adam, as the first human being to fall victim to this Lucifer, would in principle be exonerated. But it is precisely in accord with the completely down-to-earth nature of the biblical account that what prepares the way for the fall and the fall itself take place in the midst of what has been created, and in this way the fall's complete inexcusability is expressed as plainly as possible.214

Bonhoeffer believes evil already existed in creation, but that is not his point. Guilt does not come because evil was available; guilt came because humans chose to disobey. “The Bible does not seek to impart information about the origin of evil but to witness to its character as guilt and as the unending burden that humankind bears.”215

This is the point that Bonhoeffer labors to make in the following pages. The problem is not why God allows evil—the problem is why humanity chose to live in disunity with God. He reframes the question and says, “It will therefore never be possible simply to blame the devil who has led one astray; instead this same devil will always be precisely in the place where I, as God’s creature in God’s world, ought to have been living and did not wish to live.”216

This introduces Bonhoeffer’s understanding of humanity to us as well. Here Bonhoeffer does not present a weak victim who is overcome by a powerful being. Instead, Bonhoeffer presents one who is strong-willed and rational. In fact, it is this rationality that is the problem. The serpent did not overpower the will of the human and make him sin. It was through suggestion. Bonhoeffer says that the serpent turned the eyes of the human to its own ability and being. “It does not dispute this word, but opens the eyes of the human being to a depth of which the human being has until now been unaware, a depth from which one would be in a position to establish or to dispute whether a word is God’s word or not.”217

This is Bonhoeffer’s understanding of humanity. Humanity is not evil in choosing actions; humanity does evil by desiring to be “sicut-deus.”218 Whenever humanity chooses to be like God, evil appears. He clarifies this in a way that he later continues in Ethics, “Where evil shows itself in its godlessness, it is altogether powerless; at that point it is just a

213 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 104.
214 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 105.
215 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 105.
216 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 105.
217 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 106.
218 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 111.
bogeyman [Kinderschreken], something we have no need to be afraid of.”219 Seldom does an evil person choose to live completely in opposition to God. Instead, they normally choose to replace God’s word with their own. Bonhoeffer describes this as “the pious question.”220 It is the question that delicately questions the clear word of God. He says this is the only way for the Christian to stumble—“one must actually approach them with God, one must show them a better, a prouder, God than they seem to have, if they are to fall.”221

This attack means humans “have withdrawn from being addressed by God”222 and now address God instead. Bonhoeffer defines this as going behind God’s word.223 At first Eve defies this and holds to the commandments of God in truth,224 but this does not stop the serpent. His suggestive attack on Eve appears to be a theological discourse. Bonhoeffer says that “the conversation…is not common worship, a common calling upon God, but a speaking about God, about God in a way that passes over, and reaches beyond, God.”225

This assault works. Adam is now faced with the situation to judge for himself what God’s word means. Bald evil or ‘to living like hell’ does not seduce him. Instead, piety seduces Adam.

How can Adam understand the serpent’s sicut-deus-promise? At any rate not as the diabolical promise of death and of rebellion against the Creator. As one who is altogether ignorant of the possibility of evil he can understand the promise in no other way than as the possibility of being more pious, more obedient, than he is in his imago-dei-structure. Sicut deus—for Adam that can only be a new possibility within the given possibility-of-being-a-creature-in-the-imago-dei. It can only mean a new, deeper kind of creaturely being. That is how he is bound to understand the serpent.226

God created humans as his creatures who are bound to him in relation and who receive their life from God as the center. Humans falter when they desire to become more than human. It is the desire to be sicut deus that leads to evil.

This gives us another perception of evil than is commonly understood. The word ‘evil’ is often used for horrific or sly acts that cause immeasurable harm. Bonhoeffer offers a more earthy definition. For him, evil is the human’s strife to go beyond humanity. It is not base actions that cause one to be evil, but the refusal to be human.

This is what Bonhoeffer says occurred in the fall. Adam lost his humanity.

Humankind is now sicut deus. It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator, it has itself become creator, inasmuch as it creates its own life. Thereby its creatureliness is eliminated, destroyed. Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness. Adam is sicut deus, and this “is” is meant with complete seriousness—not that Adam feels this, but that Adam is this. Losing the limit Adam has lost creatureliness. Adam as limitless or boundless [Der grenzenlose Adam] can no longer be addressed with regard to Adam’s creatureliness.227

219 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 107.
220 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 107.
221 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 107.
222 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 108.
223 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 110.
224 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 110.
225 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 111.
226 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 113.
227 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 115.
The real tragedy of the fall for Bonhoeffer was that humanity exchanged its positioning. In its search to become more than it was created, humanity became the enemy of its creator. “...the fall really makes the creature—humankind-in-the-imago-dei—into a creator-sicut-deus.”

Bonhoeffer again addresses the desire for piety as the enemy to humanity. Humanity was not content with knowing God from God’s own self-definition. It desired to have a deeper, self-defined knowledge outside of the word of God. “Indeed this piety was supposed to consist in humankind’s going back behind the given word of God to procure its own knowledge of God.”

This desire was a result of humanity placing itself in the center of their existence in place of God. “Thus for their knowledge of God human beings renounce the word of God that approaches them again and again out of the inviolable center and boundary of life; they renounce the life that comes from this word and grab it for themselves. They themselves stand in the center.” Here we see living with God as the center is an important principle for Bonhoeffer. It was the denial of God as the center that allowed evil. Where evil came from was not important for Bonhoeffer. In fact, he closes his chapter, “The Fall,” with this very point. Even to ask that question is to recreate the fall.

The question why there is evil is not a theological question, for it presupposes that it is possible to go back behind the existence that is laid upon us as sinners. If we could answer the question why, then we would not be sinners. We could blame something else. So the ‘question why’ can never be answered except by the statement ‘that’ which burdens humankind so completely.

The theological question is not a question about the origin of evil but one about the actual overcoming of evil on the cross; it seeks the real forgiveness of guilt and the reconciliation of the fallen world.

Bonhoeffer continues at this point to explain the results of knowing good and evil. We see the result of knowing good and evil for the human. “Adam, as one who knows toh and ra and has fallen from unity into dividedness, can no longer stand before the Creator.” The rest of Creation and Fall describes this disunity.

Since Bonhoeffer continues by treating the results of disunity rather than directly describing evil or its origin/occurrence, we will now leave Creation and Fall and briefly consider Discipleship. Before we do that, we will recap the theology that we have discovered.

**Lessons from Creation and Fall**

We gleaned an understanding of Bonhoeffer’s view of evil from Creation and Fall. In the beginning of this chapter, we posed the question to Bonhoeffer about the origin of evil—where did it come from? Here we received a rebuke from Bonhoeffer. We learned that he believed that humans cannot know their origin because humans live ‘in the middle’ and cannot know the beginning. This causes them to rebel in pride against that which they cannot
know. He even alludes to Satan as the one who tries to explain the beginning without knowing the beginning.

Bonhoeffer argues that there is only one who knows the beginning and only one way for us to learn about it. That, of course, is the creation story in Genesis. Bonhoeffer introduces a very important argument here. Anything outside of the creation story is purely conjecture. This is important for his theology and for evil because it means there is no room for influence from any other scientific field. Psychology or social services cannot play a part in determining the origins of relationships or ethics—including evil. We simply must understand that we have only one source—the account by God.

When we understand that we cannot know evil outside of God’s account—and knowing that account is that God created all—we then move to the obvious question—if evil exists, did God create it?

Bonhoeffer does not answer this directly. We can understand why because he would need to do what he just rejected—reach beyond God’s revelation to find that answer. However, he does form an interesting argument and at the same time indirectly offers a glimpse into his own view of evil. He compares creation to Christ’s resurrection. What existed before the world was created was the same as the state Christ was in upon his death. Both, to Bonhoeffer, were the nihil negativum. “The fact that Christ was dead did not provide the possibility of his resurrection but its impossibility; it was nothing itself, it was the nihil negativum.”

He goes on to say that Christ “Who is the beginning lives, destroys the nothing, and in his resurrection creates the new creation.” This argument leads us to the argument that that which is without God is the nihil negativum—including evil. We can then say from Bonhoeffer’s argument that there are two states—either life in God or nothingness. That would mean if evil is the absence of God that evil is nothingness.

Bonhoeffer seems to support this argument further. What follows is his movement into the creation story. At this point he compares the two trees found in the center of the earth. The one—which is life from God—is opposed to its neighbor—the knowledge of good and evil.

Bonhoeffer gives a rather extensive description of the interconnectedness of good and evil in his explanation of tob and ra. This is an important point in Bonhoeffer’s consideration of evil. Good can never be present without the accompanying evil—and vice versa. It is not only knowing evil that causes one to die, but eating from the tree of the knowledge of both good and evil that causes one to die.

However, as Bonhoeffer then points out, it is not a literal death but a death suffered as separation from the one who is life. Knowing good and evil means that humanity no longer receives life as a grace from the center of life, but now they make themselves the center and are cut off from life.

Bonhoeffer defines the responsibility that humans have for this situation. Here we learn that Bonhoeffer does think that somehow evil is involved in creation, but he does not say how. Instead, he places the emphasis on the guilt of humankind. Even if evil was present in creation—which it must be, since evil always accompanies good, and creation was deemed good by God—it does not excuse humanity. The moment that humanity learned of its boundaries, it chose to transgress them. The responsibility is fully humankind’s.

We observe Bonhoeffer’s view of humanity in this explanation. Bonhoeffer knew humankind’s propensity to attempt to exceed their limitations and lays the charge at their

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233 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 35.
234 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 35.
Evil in Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall, Discipleship, and Ethics*

feet. Humanity is guilty of wanting to be God instead of God’s creature. And the way that it does this is by wanting to know the things God forbade. Humanity wants to know (and judge) good and evil; it wants to know (and judge) more about God than God reveals.

This is how Bonhoeffer leaves us. In *Creation and Fall* he exegeted the revelation given by God and warned us about the dangers of attempting to go beyond that revelation. He explained that human—not God—is responsible for the disunity that exists between God and humanity. Finally, when concluding his treatment regarding evil, Bonhoeffer clearly states that the theological question is not why there is evil—that is a question in error. It is as Peter Frick observed in his article on “Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer”: “…the knowledge of good and evil is the result of the fall of humanity; only as a sinner is the human being preoccupied with this distinction.”

Instead, the real question and the point that human beings should be preoccupied with is, for Bonhoeffer, how the disunity that resulted from the fall was overcome (he also addressed this topic in *Sanctorum Communio*).

*Creation and Fall* is a crucial foundation to understand Bonhoeffer’s resistance and theology during the Third Reich. We will see in the first paragraph of *Ethics* that he applies his theological findings from *Creation and Fall* when he writes,

> Those who wish even to focus on the problem of a Christian ethic are faced with an outrageous demand—from the outset they must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: “How can I be good?” and “How can I do something good?” Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God?

At this point, we continue with our discussion about evil in Bonhoeffer’s theology by considering his work, *Discipleship*. We will not revisit the idea of good vs. evil since we have already learned that for Bonhoeffer the two are a non-divisible pair.

_Evil in Discipleship_

*Discipleship* is the book that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote shortly after Hitler came to power. The editor’s of the edition indicate that Bonhoeffer completed it in 1935 and 1936, and it was published in 1937. *Discipleship* is the book that Bonhoeffer wrote for the church during the initial, difficult time of the Third Reich. We will briefly review the term ‘evil’ within *Discipleship* to see if we encounter similar theology in this work to *Creation and Fall* or if we see new theology once Hitler’s regime came to power.

The first important time that we see Bonhoeffer treating evil is when he considers the Sermon on the Mount. He writes:

> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Who is pure in heart? Only those who have completely given their hearts to Jesus, so that he alone rules in them. Only those who do not stain their hearts with their own evil, but also not with their own good. A pure heart is the simple hear of a child, who does not know about good and evil, the heart of Adam before the fall, the heart in which the will of Jesus rules instead of one’s own conscience. Those who renounce their own good and evil, their own heart, who are contrite and depend solely on Jesus, have purity of heart through the word of Jesus. Purity of heart here stands in contrast to all external purity, which includes even

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235 Peter Frick, “Friedrich Nietzsche’s Aphorisms and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology,” in Frick, *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation*, 194.

236 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 47.
purity of a well-meaning state of mind. A pure heart is pure of good and evil; it belongs entirely and undivided to Christ; it looks only to him, who goes on ahead.237

Here we see the same argument as what we learned in *Creation and Fall*. Bonhoeffer rejects knowing good and evil, and he argues for unity with God—“Their hearts are fully absorbed in seeing God.”238

This shows us that Bonhoeffer continued with his same understanding from *Creation and Fall*—in order to be unified with God, one must reject knowing good and evil.

The next time that we see Bonhoeffer discussing evil, he exeges Matthew 5: 38-42. These are the verses regarding resisting an evildoer within the Sermon on the Mount, and is the reason that Bonhoeffer is often thought of as a pacifist.

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.239

In the beginning of the explanation following the scripture quote, he explains how evil was handled in the Old Testament. He writes:

The Old Testament law puts the claim to rights, or justice, under the divine protection of retribution. Nothing evil may happen without it being retaliated. Its concern is to construct a just community, to overcome and identify evil, and to eradicate evil from the community of God’s people. That is the purpose of justice, which is enforced by retribution.240

Then he says that Jesus fulfilled this law and now the “community of the faithful”241 is no longer bound to the rules that the nation of Israel was. Retribution is different for the disciples. “For the community of disciples, which makes no national or legal claims for itself, retribution means patiently bearing the blow, so that evil is not added to evil. That is the only way community can be established and preserved.”242

He does what is so common for Bonhoeffer to do when discussing evil—the next paragraph returns to unity with God in the form of Jesus.

Here it has become clear that the followers of Jesus who experience injustice do not cling to their own rights as if they were possessions to be defended at all costs. Instead, they are completely free of such possessions and are bound to Jesus Christ alone. Indeed, in giving witness to their sole allegiance to Jesus, they create the only solid foundation for community and place sinners into the hands of Jesus.243

However, what is surprising is that in the next paragraphs Bonhoeffer does what he has rejected in *Creation and Fall* and in the previous section that we considered from *Discipleship*—he endorses recognizing, knowing, and naming evil.

238 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 108.
240 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 132.
242 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 132.
243 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 133.
Bonhoeffer assumes that we should be able to recognize evil because he indicates that by recognizing it one can refuse to resist it.

The overcoming of others now occurs by allowing their evil to run its course. The evil does not find what it is seeking, namely, resistance and, therewith, new evil which will inflame it even more. Evil will become powerless when it finds no opposing object, no resistance, but, instead, is willingly borne and suffered. Evil meets an opponent for which it is not a match. Of course, this happens only when the last remnant of resistance is removed, when the urge to retaliate evil with evil is completely renounced. Then evil cannot achieve its goal of creating more evil; it remains alone.244

In the following paragraphs he discusses knowing evil and giving testimony to it. “The humiliating blow, the violent deed, and the act of exploitation all remain evil. Disciples are to know this and to give witness to it just as Jesus did, because otherwise the evil person will not be engaged and overcome.”245

Bonhoeffer seems to clearly contradict his own theology of not knowing good and evil and now to say that the followers of Christ are not only to know what acts are evil, but then to give witness to the occurrence of evil. In this sentence he advocates that the disciple judge the actor as “the evil person” which also contradicts what we learned from Creation and Fall. In Creation and Fall Bonhoeffer claimed that once the human judged another he or she was in rebellion to God. But in this section Bonhoeffer recommends naming the evildoer as evil.

One has to admit that there is not a simple explanation for this change in his approach. Was it just inconsistency? Were there specific reasons to interrupt his main line of argument? Without speculation it is impossible to give a clear resolution.

Nearly forty pages later in Discipleship, Bonhoeffer returns to the necessity of not judging because it harms unity between the disciple and Jesus.

Thus Jesus must make clear that such misunderstandings seriously endanger discipleship. Disciples are not to judge. If they do judge, then they themselves fall under God’s judgment. They themselves will perish by the sword with which they judge others. The gap which divides them from others, as the just from the unjust, even divides them from Jesus.246

He also says in this section the opposite of what he previously said about giving witness to the deeds of an evildoer.

Disciples can encounter other people only as those to whom Jesus himself comes. Jesus’ struggle for the other person, his call, his love, his grace, his judgment are all that matters. Thus the disciples do not stand in a position from which the other person is attacked. Instead, in the truthfulness of Jesus’ love they approach the other person with an unconditional offer of community.247

And a bit further he claims:

If the disciples judge, then they are erecting standards to measure good and evil. But Jesus Christ is not a standard by which I can measure others. It is he who judges me and reveals what according to my own judgment is good to be thoroughly evil. This prohibits me from applying what is good or evil, I affirm the evil in other persons, because they, too, judge according to good and evil. But they do not know that what they consider good is evil. Instead, they justify themselves in it. If I judge

244 Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 133.
245 Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 134, italics mine.
246 Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 170.
247 Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 170.
Evil in Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall, Discipleship, and Ethics*

their evil, that will affirm their good, which is never the goodness of Jesus Christ. They are withdrawn from Christ’s judgment and subjected to human judgment. But I myself invoke God’s judgment on myself, because I am no longer living out of the grace of Jesus Christ, but out of a knowledge of good and evil. I become subject to that judgment which I think valid. For all persons, God is a person’s God in the way the person believes God to be.248

Bonhoeffer explains why he claims this—the disciple “live(s) completely out of the power of communion with Jesus Christ.”249 Again we see Bonhoeffer rejecting the idea that one can name good and evil and remain in unity with God.

So we see in *Discipleship* incongruency within the volume itself when it comes to knowing and naming evil. Of course, since Bonhoeffer exegeted scripture systematically, it was necessary that he deal with this passage. However, he could have focused on the love of God for the actor in an unjust situation and the necessity of remaining fixed upon God and God’s will when one is suffering.

But he did choose to judge the evildoer. What this dichotomy highlights is the struggle of the young Bonhoeffer in his theology. We see the tension of being human and seeing the apparent need to address the evil around him conflicting with the theology he discovered in his research. There is no easy explanation that will explain away the short diversion that we found in *Discipleship*, and especially not if we compare it to the theology that we saw in *Creation and Fall* which was quite congruent.

However, Bonhoeffer himself was not unaware of some of the problems that he introduced in *Discipleship*. Although we will consider his letters in the fifth chapter, it is necessary here to insert what Bonhoeffer said about *Discipleship* while he was in prison. Here we see that Bonhoeffer disagrees with some aspects of his own work. The letter that we will quote is also interesting because in his prison letter Bonhoeffer speaks about a young French pastor directly before he discusses *Discipleship*. According to Bethge, that would be Jean Lasserre. Lasserre was the person who stimulated Bonhoeffer to think about pacifism, and the passage where we see the issue of dichotomy happens to be Bonhoeffer’s famous pacifistic section. More than likely, Bonhoeffer was then considering what he wrote in relationship to pacifism on pages 131-137 where the naming and recognition of evil occurs.

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it’s quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn’t realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote.250

What Bonhoeffer means by this is the idea that living a holy life in place of a life of reality was dangerous. The next paragraph shows that he returns to his argument for reality and living in the world God created rather than attempting to be holy. He writes:

I discovered later, and I’m still discovering right up to this moment, that is it only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon and attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences

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248 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 171.
and perplexities. In doing so we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia: and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer. 45!)

Perhaps this explains why it appears that Bonhoeffer was incongruent. It is because he himself says he was incongruent. He was attempting to escape to a place of holiness against the reality of the world. Here in his letter he admits that and offers the remedy—being completely unified with God in the reality of the world God created.

What will be important is now to examine Bonhoeffer’s theology in Ethics to see what direction his theology takes in that volume. Will Bonhoeffer’s short section regarding the necessity of naming evil that we find in Discipleship occur again in Ethics or is it an unusual occurrence that falls outside of Bonhoeffer’s treatment of evil in his other works?

**Evil in Bonhoeffer’s Ethics**

In Ethics we find that Bonhoeffer deals with evil in a different manner than in Creation and Fall and Discipleship. He does not attempt to discover the reason for evil or even the impact of evil. This comes as a surprise to those who are only familiar with post-holocaust theology. If ever a historical time period was considered evil, it was during the Third Reich—the time frame that Bonhoeffer wrote Ethics. We know from the historical account that Bonhoeffer was aware of Hitler’s war crimes, so Bonhoeffer did not avoid writing about evil actions from ignorance.

What we learn from the avoidance of actual, static, ethical descriptions is that Bonhoeffer saw evil as a state—being separated from God—rather than an ethic—doing something wrong. His argument founded in Creation and Fall was that the problem of the state of humanity was not so much what they did, but how they were positioned.

This is sometimes a confusing circumstance for novice Bonhoeffer readers who are used to a more descriptive ethics manual. The title Ethics causes this type of reader to expect an ethical manuscript that discusses how to deal with contextual issues in a Christian manner. However, Bonhoeffer’s ethics are much more substantive. He does not offer a manual for guidance in the face of tyranny; instead, he offers the foundation for a general method of living christianly in face of any difficult situation. As we attempt to discover exactly what he said about the problem of evil, this aspect of his book will be more apparent.

**Evil in “Christ, Reality, and Good”**

When we first see Bonhoeffer use the word ‘evil’ in Ethics, he rejects realm theology because it interferes with the concept of the world as reconciled to Christ. “From this perspective, thinking in realms must be rejected.”252 He returns to the argument he offered in Sanctorum Communio. Bonhoeffer declares that upon Christ’s resurrection there is no longer “the ‘evil’ world fallen under the power of the devil” that is “erected against the church, that is, against the kingdom of Christ [Reich Christi].”253 He rejects the idea that the devil owns the world,
but argues instead that the devil must, in the end—even though “willing evil”—“must ever again do good.”

This is an interesting statement by Bonhoeffer. Even those things in the world that we consider evil must somehow serve Christ. This opinion, held by a resister to the situation around him, stretches the mind beyond its limit. How can one say that the holocaust served Christ in the end? However, it is more congruent to the understanding of Christ as redeemer than two realm theology and exhibits that Bonhoeffer had great faith. One living in the knowledge and conditions of Bonhoeffer’s era would need immense faith to believe that the occurrences of the Third Reich “must serve Christ.”

Bonhoeffer formulated this argument for a different reason, however. He did not want his fellow Christians to give up the world to Hitler because they considered the world already evil and hopeless.

The world is not divided between Christ and the devil; it is completely the world of Christ, whether it recognizes this or not. As this reality in Christ it is to be addressed, and thus the false reality that it imagines itself to have, in itself or in the devil, is to be destroyed. The dark, evil world may not be surrendered to the devil, but [must] be claimed for the one who won it by coming in the flesh, by the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ gives up nothing that has been won, but holds it fast in his hands. Because of Christ it will not do to partition the world into a demonized and a Christian world. Every static distinction between one domain [Bereich] as belonging to the devil and another as belonging to Christ denies the reader that God has reconciled the whole world with himself in Christ.

He continues to promote the leadership of the church within the world—precisely with the message of reconciliation. “Still, it is the task and the essence of the church-community to proclaim precisely to this world its reconciliation with God, and to disclose to it the reality of the love of God, against which the world so blindly rages.”

Since we know Bonhoeffer’s history and his struggle to motivate the Confessing Church into a more active resistance, we can understand why Bonhoeffer chose this argument. He needed the church to become involved with what was happening in society rather than leaving the world to its own ‘realm.’ This returns to his argument in *Sanctorum Communio* that it is the church’s responsibility to proclaim to the world that it is already reconciled to Christ. We can only imagine what may have occurred if the churches agreed with Bonhoeffer and chose to actively resist. Since they did not, what we take from this section is the knowledge that Bonhoeffer was not discussing evil from its origins; but rather, the state that the world finds itself. For Bonhoeffer the state of the world was not evil but reconciled to Christ and therefore redeemed.

The next time we see Bonhoeffer mentioning evil, we again see him talking about the state of evil. “It is worse to be evil than to do evil.” Now he carries his work from *Creation and Fall* further. There we learned that evil is separation from God and that the desire to know good and evil is the sin that brought death. Here we see it applied.

It is precisely the ethicist that misses evil. It is because they are busy judging actions rather than recognizing “what is real.” This is because disunity can appear as ethically correct. “That evil appears in the form of light, of beneficience, of faithfulness, of renewal,

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that it appears in the form of historical necessity, of social justice, is for the commonsense observer a clear confirmation of its profound evilness.\textsuperscript{260}

For the next couple of pages Bonhoeffer introduces us to various ethical types—none of which can effectively address evil. These types—“reason, ethical fanaticism, conscience, duty, free responsibility, and quiet virtue”\textsuperscript{261}—are “rusty weapons.”\textsuperscript{262} They all attempt in various ways to handle evil, but they miss the mark because they attempt to deal with misdeeds rather than the spiritual position that allows evil.

The “bright steel” that will replace the “rusty weapons” in the struggle against evil is simplicity, which “keeps in sight only the single truth of God.”\textsuperscript{263} We again see the state of unity with God being the remedy to evil.

Not fettered by principles but bound by love for God, this person is liberated from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision, and is no longer beset by them. This person belongs to God and to God’s will alone. The single-minded person does not also cast glances at the world while standing next to God and therefore is able, free and unconstrained, to see the reality of the world.\textsuperscript{264}

Only singular unity with God—so that one knows the will of God—is the answer to evil. This unity is the only hope when faced by evil because only unity is large enough to handle evil. “But the abyss of the love of God embraces even the most abysmal godlessness of the world.”\textsuperscript{265}

We see that Bonhoeffer has left the topic of evil, but it has brought him to the argument we found in \textit{Creation and Fall}. God only wishes for his creation that it will learn to be human. “While we exert ourselves to grow beyond our humanity, to leave the human behind us, God becomes human; and we must recognize that God wills that we be human, real human beings.”\textsuperscript{266}

Bonhoeffer rejects once again that humans should define good and evil and instead returns to the argument formulated in \textit{Creation and Fall} that the goal of the human is to be God’s creature. In fact, God does not want his creatures to try and perfect themselves by judging their actions as good and evil. He writes, “God does not seek the most perfect human being with whom to be united, but takes on human nature as it is.”\textsuperscript{267} This is the argument that he formulated in his exegesis of Genesis, and we see that even eight years later (according to the timetable included with \textit{Ethics}) and during the Nazi dictatorship that Bonhoeffer is still offering this argument as a solution to his context. We see that it is a deeply ingrained theological belief for Bonhoeffer and formed the basis of his thinking regarding humanity.

However, since our goal is now to discover Bonhoeffer’s use of the word evil and its context, we will continue on to the following use to glean what further understanding he has of the term.

\textit{Successful Evil?}

\textsuperscript{260} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 77.
\textsuperscript{261} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 80.
\textsuperscript{262} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 81.
\textsuperscript{263} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 81.
\textsuperscript{264} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 83.
\textsuperscript{265} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 84.
\textsuperscript{266} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 85.
A short use of the word ‘evil’ occurs a few pages later in *Ethics*. As Bonhoeffer continues in his explanation of what it means to be truly human, he comes to the matter of success. Success can be an enemy to being God’s creature. “The figure of the judged and crucified one remains alien, and at best pitiable, to a world where success is the measure and justification of all things. The world wants to be, and must be, overcome by success.”

The problem with success, Bonhoeffer argues, is that it can “justif(y) injustice done.” Bonhoeffer identifies three different attitudes to success that can cause problems—that which idolizes success, that which claims only the good are successful, and that which claims “all success is evil.”

When he first uses the word ‘evil’ is in the second situation. In opposition to those who idolize success and therefore ignore any wrongdoing and for those who claim that only good is successful, Bonhoeffer says, “either historical facts must be falsified in order to demonstrate the unsuccessfulness of evil, which will lead quickly again to the reverse proposition that success is the good, or optimism collapses in the face of the facts and ends by denouncing all historical success.”

His next sentence, “the eternal lament of those who accuse history is that all success is evil.” These are the individuals who, because they never reach success, find all success evil.

He quickly dismisses all three attitudes with the argument that the problem applicable to all three is that “without intending it, one makes success—albeit negatively—the measure of everything, even here.”

Now we see Bonhoeffer return to his recurring theme. Why can success not be the measure of all things? Because it is “a denial of judgment.” Whether successful or unsuccessful, God is only concerned that humans accept his judgment. Not simply for judgment’s sake, but because through the cross of Christ “humanity take(s) on its true form.” Bonhoeffer then declares, “Ecce homo—behold the human being, accepted by God, judged by God, awakened by God to a new life—see the Risen One!” Again, when speaking of evil Bonhoeffer immediately moves back into the unity with God as the remedy. The argument remains the same in this section.

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In his chapter, “Heritage and Decay,” Bonhoeffer uses the word ‘evil’ twice. The first is when he describes the difference between secularization in the United States and Europe. He writes, “In contrast to the declaration des droits de l’homme, it is genuinely significant that American historians can say that the federal Constitution was written by men who knew about original sin and about evil in the human heart.” However, this is a passing

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The real focus of this section is the godless state of the West due to its alienation from God. So here Bonhoeffer is again addressing disunity with God.

Interestingly, we find that Bonhoeffer has revived his nihil negativum argument from *Creation and Fall*. “Having lost its unity that was created by the form of Jesus Christ, the West is confronted by nothingness [Nichts].”278 This nothingness is not renewal such as the end of one culture and the beginning of a new; but rather, “it is a creative nothingness that blows its anti-God breath into all that exists, creat(ing) the illusion of waking it to new life, and at the same time suck(ing) out its true essence.”279

Bonhoeffer exhibits that he realizes the severity of his times. He finds the answer for the harshness and tyranny in his perception that the world is attempting to slide back into nothingness. For him this means that the normal experience of humanity—remembering the lessons of the past and applying them to the future—has disappeared. Instead, one is left with only the moment, and it is not an attractive moment. “There remains only the present moment rescued from nothingness and the desire to grasp the next moment.”280 He ties this to the breakdown of Western society. If people are always escaping the nothing then they have no future and nothing to cause them to build their future. He makes a very damning statement about how he considers his surrounding culture when he says, “There is no personal destiny and therefore no personal dignity.”281

The only two answers that Bonhoeffer can imagine would change the present situation is a “miracle of a new awakening of faith” and “the restrainer.”282 The restrainer is a “ordering power” of “great physical strength” whose goal is to stand “in the way of those who would throw themselves into the abyss.”283 Bonhoeffer does not imagine this restrainer as similar to what is taught in many evangelical churches. He is very clear it is not the Holy Spirit that he is talking about because he says “The ‘restrainer’ [der Aufhaltende] itself is not God and is not without guilt, but God uses it to protect the world from disintegration.”284 Instead, Bonhoeffer sees the restrainer as a two part force. The first part of the force should not surprise us by now, but the second is amazing when we consider Bonhoeffer’s context. The first section of the force is the church—“The place where God’s miracle is proclaimed…”285 The second, however, is the government. The reason that this is so amazing is that Bonhoeffer still trusted in the government even while his current government brought the West to the brink of nothingness. However, he still believes that the two come together in order to “set limits to evil.”286

At the end of the chapter Bonhoeffer argues that the answer to this slide is to “witness to the miracle of God in Jesus Christ ‘yesterday today, and forever’ (Heb. 13:8).”287 We see with this a juxtaposition of evil in the form of nothingness to the presence of Christ, just as we saw in *Creation and Fall*. With this we again see that for Bonhoeffer the answer to evil is not action, but a state of being. He grants that the church must proclaim, but it is not the proclamation that receives the focus but the result of the proclamation—unity with Christ.

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The Church’s Evil

With the understanding from the previous section, it is no surprise that the next section—“Guilt, Justification, Renewal”—deals extensively with the church. Since we will discuss this chapter of Ethics in detail in chapter three when we consider Bonhoeffer’s view of justice, we will be brief now. We will only look at the short section where evil is mentioned.

Since Bonhoeffer considers the church as part of the restraining power, it is natural that he lays guilt at the base of the church. He begins by what we have previously noted. While Bonhoeffer acknowledges actions, his primary concern is the state of the fallen. “The guilt we must acknowledge is not the occasional mistake or going astray, not the breaking of an abstract law, but falling away from Christ, from the form of the One who would take form in us and lead us to our own true form.”

Because the church is the form of those called by Christ—where Christ exists as church-community—this is naturally where the guilt must be confessed. “The church is where Jesus makes his form real in the midst of the world. Therefore only the church can be the place of personal and corporate rebirth and renewal.” However, it is not that those who have sinned shall run to the church, but that the church, in a reflection of Christ’s total redeeming work on the Cross, takes on the guilt of the world that has again fallen away. “With this confession the whole guilt of the world falls on the church, on Christians, and because here it is confessed and not denied, the possibility of forgiveness is opened.”

After this, Bonhoeffer uses the actual word ‘evil.’ It is interesting to note what surrounds the word. Bonhoeffer again dismisses the “moralist”—the one who would try to determine good and evil.

Though this is completely incomprehensible to the moralist, there is no search here for the actual guilty person, no demand for the just expiation as punishment for the evil and reward for the good. Evildoers are not branded by their evil (in the apocalyptic sense of Rev. 22[:11], “Let the evildoer still do evil”), for there are people here who take all—really all—guilt upon themselves, not in some heroic self-sacrificing decision, but simply overwhelmed by their very own guilt toward Christ. In that moment they can no longer think about retributive justice for the “chief sinners” but only about the forgiveness of their own great guilt.

We see Bonhoeffer once again reject a religious evaluation of an action as proper or improper with a judgment of what person is good or evil. Evil is much too large for this type of moralizing. Instead, Bonhoeffer returns to the community and the guilt of the community. “These many individuals are joined together in the collective I [Gesamtich] of the church. The church confesses and acknowledges its guilt in and through them.”

We will leave the confession of guilt and its outcome for the following chapter. What we take with us now is that Bonhoeffer saw evil not as an individual, moralistic ethic, but as a collective condition that only the church could accept and remedy.

Radical Evil

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288 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 135.
289 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 135.
290 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 136.
291 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 136.
292 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 137.
As we travel through *Ethics*, we see Bonhoeffer next discussing the problem of evil in the chapter, “Ultimate and Penultimate Things.” Right before he uses the word ‘evil,’ he discusses the problem of making the penultimate and the ultimate mutually exclusive rather than taking them as a whole and both as part of God’s plan. For some the only solution is to absolutize the ultimate or the penultimate and to place the two in conflict.

The radical solution approaches things from the end of all things, from God the judge and redeemer; the compromise solution approaches things from the creator and preserver. One absolutizes the end, the other absolutizes what exists. Thus creation and redemption, time and eternity, fall into an insoluble conflict; the very unity of God is itself dissolved, and faith in God is shattered.293

It scarcely needs to be said that the problem is once again an issue of unity. The problem is that disunity occurs and faith in God is the victim.

Bonhoeffer rejects the idea of Christianity being able to be pure at this moment. This idea rejects reality. “Neither the idea of a pure Christianity as such nor the idea of the human being as such is serious, but only God’s reality and human reality as they have become one in Jesus Christ.”294 Likewise, the struggle for a pure human being is also only ideology. What is truly reality is “the God-man Jesus Christ.”295

Bonhoeffer goes further with this argument by seeing the problem with the radical as that of hatred. “Radicalism always arises from a conscious or unconscious hatred of what exists.”296 A Christian form of radicalism does not escape the hatred. “Christian radicalism, whether it would flee the world or improve it, comes from the hatred of creation. The radical cannot forgive God for having created what is.”297

This returns to the larger theme that Bonhoeffer always returns to—disunity and rejection of redemption. This is the real problem with Christians when they become radicalized—they fall outside of God’s plan. “When evil becomes powerful in the world, it simultaneously injects the Christian with the poison of radicalism. Reconciliation with the world as it is, which is given to the Christian by Christ, is then called betrayal and a denial of Christ.”298 This effect snowballs. The radicalized Christians forget their calling to love their neighbors and instead isolate in order to form a pious community in opposition to the plans of God. “The open church of Jesus Christ, which serves the world to the end, becomes a kind of supposed ur-Christian ideal church-community that in turn mistakenly confuses the realization of a Christian idea with the reality of the living Jesus Christ.”299 The result is disastrous and brings about the very situation that the radical Christian attempted to avoid. “Thus a world that has become evil succeeds in making Christians evil also.”300

The Christian who has a “spirit of compromise”301 also does not escape Bonhoeffer’s criticism. Compromise hates the opposite of what radicalism hates. It hates the ultimate. So while radicalism strives to gain the ultimate, compromise strives to avoid it. Bonhoeffer says that for the Christian who sides with compromise “freedom from the world, which is Christ’s

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299 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 156.
300 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 156.
301 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 156.
gift to Christians, and renunciation of the world (1 John 2:17) are accused of being unnatural and opposed to creation, an estrangement from, or even hostility toward, the world and humanity.”

With this we see a theme within his theme. The radical and the compromised Christian shows us the ease of rejecting unity once a comparison enters the picture. However, appealing to the one over the other makes the Christian “opposed to Christ; for the concepts that are here set up against each other are one in Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer continues in this chapter to address the reality of the penultimate and ultimate, and its meaning for humanity. However, because the following part of this chapter will be better addressed in the following dissertation chapter on justice, we will leave this chapter on penultimate and ultimate. What we have learned from this section on evil is that Bonhoeffer has again come to the theme of the importance of unity with God and the reality of God. He highlights that it is not ethics, i.e. moralistic behaviors, as the moralist sees them that is the real problem, but the separation from Christ. What we see in this section of this chapter is what many Christians see as a goal—radical commitment to the ultimate—brings its own downfall—separation from the Lord of the ultimate. What Bonhoeffer continues to display to us throughout *Ethics* is that a true Christian ethic has nothing to do with concrete actions; but rather, with a concrete state—unity with Christ. So, at the end of this chapter we see that—as Bonhoeffer said in *Creation and Fall*—even that which people call good brings accompanying evil.

“History and Good 1 & 2”

The chapter “History and Good” has two versions that the editors included in the English version of the Bonhoeffer Series. According to the editors, Bonhoeffer wrote the version labeled one first and much of it is incorporated into the second version. Since Bonhoeffer edited the first chapter himself, we will use the second version here in order to eliminate the repetition that would occur if we reviewed both.

In the very first paragraph Bonhoeffer returns to the state of being the created creature—a human—such as we saw in *Creation and Fall*. What Bonhoeffer did in *Creation and Fall* is the same that we see here. When he deals with good and evil he describes what it means to be human. For Bonhoeffer good and evil only had one solution. We must remember who we are. This is what he returns us to in the first sentence. “The question about the good always finds us already in an irreversible situation: we are living.”

The reason that this is so important for Bonhoeffer is that he opposes a religious approach to life that offers a static moral ethic to difficult situations. He writes, “we are not concerned about what would be good if we were not living, that is, under some imaginary circumstances.” And then he expands, “Our question is not what is good as such, but what is good given life as it actually is, and what is good for us who are living.”

Bonhoeffer is very clear that an ethic cannot be static; it is always relative. He writes,
The question about the good is asked and decided in the midst of a situation of our life that is both determined in a particular way and yet still incomplete, unique and yet already in transition; it happens in the midst of our living bonds to people, things, institutions, and powers, that is, in the midst of our historical existence. The question about the good can no longer be separated from the question of life, of history.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 247.}

The reason that Bonhoeffer rejects this religious manner is that it is unrealistic. His criticism is that “ethical thought is still largely dominated by the abstract notion of an isolated individual who, wielding an absolute criterion of what is good in and of itself, chooses continually and exclusively between this clearly recognized good and an evil recognized with equal clarity.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 247.} We see that Bonhoeffer is not in agreement with Kant’s proposition of an universal law. Instead, he finds that the idea that an “absolute criterion” of good and evil “misses precisely the specifically ethical problem.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 247.} That problem is the idea that one can always choose the right answer to an ethical problem—“divorced from their historical situation and their historical bonds”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 247.}—and that causes the actor to become irrelevant. They cannot respond to their historical situation because they are caught in an unreal moral concept that does not relate to real life.

If we realize that Bonhoeffer wrote this in 1942—just one year before his arrest and during his time of resistance, we can see the poignancy in his argument. Because Hitler has been vilified and shown for his atrocities, it is easy to forget that for the resisters their decision was not as black and white. At the moment Bonhoeffer resisted, his act was treason against his own country. For Hitler to fail meant Germany would fail. At first glance Bonhoeffer’s cooperation in an assassination plot appeared to be an attack on his fellow Germans and certainly was in opposition to the public opinion of many people.

We can see his struggle with the idea of a static ethic. It would have paralyzed him, and the ethic would cause him to do the inhumane—turn from the truth he knew to an ethical stand that appeared to make him guiltless at the moment and which would make him guiltier in the end. What he knew privately and what he discovered in his earlier theology forced his dissension and forced him to choose a relevant response over a static principle.

Further, static ethics reverse the work of Christ that Bonhoeffer so carefully describes in \textit{Sanctorum Communio}. It replaces grace with law. “The absolute criterion of what is good and of itself—provided that such a concept can even be conceived without contradiction—turns what is good into a dead law, a Moloch, to whom all life and freedom are sacrificed.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 247.} Static ethics ignore the relationship with Christ that the \textit{sanctorum communio} enjoys and which forces it to live in relationship with Christ. Instead, static ethics reestablish the \textit{sanctorum peccatorum} which must live under the law.

However, Bonhoeffer still insists that humanity has an active part to play in an ethical decision. Otherwise, “human understanding itself is excluded from the decision.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 247.} This demand—to exclude human understanding—has dire consequences. Bonhoeffer says one of two situations occur—both of which we can see were historically contextual for Bonhoeffer.

We will quote extensively here in order to understand Bonhoeffer’s concern:

\begin{center}
\textit{Sanctorum Communio} 56
\end{center}
The first defines what is good exclusively as one’s own adherence to principles without any regard for the other person, and thus leads to a complete privatization of life. Depending on how radical these principles are, the lifestyle connected with that approach can range from a retreat into the private sphere of bourgeois existence to withdrawing to a monastery. In the second alternative, the abstract understanding of the ethical leads to religious enthusiasm [Schwärmerei]. Again depending on the underlying principles, the resulting lifestyle encompasses the great political fanatics and ideologues and ultimately even the crazy, pushy life reformers of every possible shade.313

We can see from what Bonhoeffer wrote that he encompasses his own fellow nationals who retreated into private piety during the Third Reich, and he even attributes a static morality to the “political fanatics and ideologues.”

Bonhoeffer realized that the only answer to this ideology was recognition of the truth and fact of real humanity. He writes that this is failure. “…We mean the specific failure (which is already a failure even in the disguise of temporary triumph) that is ultimately caused by the fact that here no genuine encounter with life, with actual people, has taken place.”314

Bonhoeffer now leaves the topic of good and evil and enters into a treatment of life and what it means to be human. He also deals once again with unity with God. This is the same progression he makes in Creation and Fall, and this shows us that whenever Bonhoeffer thinks about good and evil he immediately sees the solution as twofold: accepting our humanity and desiring unity with God.

For many pages Bonhoeffer expands his thinking within these two areas. However, since we have already thoroughly covered these topics in both chapter two of this dissertation as well as the beginnings of this chapter, and because they are topics outside of our theme of evil, we will now move to the following section were Bonhoeffer again discusses evil.

“God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World”

That occurrence happens to also be the first sentence of the following chapter. “The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection.”315 This sounds vaguely familiar to the first sentence of the first copy of “History and Good”—

All that has been said thus far implies that we have abandoned the abstract notion, largely dominant in ethical thought, or an isolated individual who has available an absolute criterion by which to choose continually and exclusively between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil.316

In “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World” Bonhoeffer says it even clearer, “The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge.”317

Bonhoeffer explains with an argument that we have heard before. “For Christian ethics, the mere possibility of knowing about good and evil is already a falling away from the origin [Urprung].”318 A few sentences later we hear yet another repeat of a former argument, “Knowledge about good and evil points to the prior disunion and estrangement [Entzweiung]
Christian Tietz has eloquently described her understanding of the occurrence: “...we can follow that sin starts with the wish to gain an autonomous knowledge about God. Through this wish man steps out of the unbroken unity with God. In that the immediate obedience to God ends.”

The next paragraphs also sound like a repetition of Creation and Fall. He describes again that in their disunity from God people consider themselves as the origin. “Eritis sicut deus. ‘The human being [Mensch] has become like one of us, and knows what good and evil are,’ says God (Gen. 3:22).” Bonhoeffer continues with the same account as what he described in Creation and Fall; however, in this account he adds a bit more. In Creation and Fall he writes that asking the origin of evil is a non-theological question because it goes beyond the beginning. Now Bonhoeffer is still careful, but he adds just a bit of further explanation. “Even Holy Scripture speaks only with the utmost reservation about God’s knowing about good and evil. It is the first hint of the secret here of predestination, the secret of an eternal disunion that has its origin in the eternal One, the secret of an eternal choice and election by the One in whom there is no darkness but only light.” Bonhoeffer has now said what he only hinted at in Creation and Fall—that evil has come into creation from outside. Here he calls it an eternal disunion. But that is as far as we get with Bonhoeffer. In Bonhoeffer fashion, he turns back to deal with the humanity of humans again.

However, now he introduces a topic that is new for Bonhoeffer—shame. Because this is a new topic and because Bonhoeffer attaches it to the discussion regarding evil we will look at it more closely.

Bonhoeffer says that shame occurs when “human beings recognize themselves in their disunion from God and one another.” Bonhoeffer introduces a concept that is commonly accepted in psychological literature and probably harkens back to his father. Shame for Bonhoeffer comes when one realizes “something that is missing.” Of course, for Bonhoeffer the missing something is unity with God. Bonhoeffer proceeds from the cause of shame to its effects. Not only do humans have to cover themselves from the gaze of God, but “must now just endure themselves and live a hidden life as the estranged and divided beings they are.”

We also see in this section a glimpse into Bonhoeffer’s own being. Bonhoeffer wrote this section in late 1942, and if compared to his former sociology in Sanctorum Communio, it shows a slight shift in his thinking. Before Bonhoeffer believed that action must be taken in community and for Bonhoeffer that meant the church. But here Bonhoeffer speaks about secrecy and disunity. “Finally, human beings also preserve an ultimate concealment with respect to themselves, they protect their own secret from themselves, by refusing, for example, to become consciously aware of everything that is germinating within them.” This section comes in a paragraph were Bonhoeffer is describing the fact that human beings live “between concealment and disclosure, between hiding and revealing themselves.

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319 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 300.
321 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 301.
322 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 301-302.
323 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 303.
324 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 303.
325 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 304.
326 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 305.
between solitude and community.”

It was a part of the penultimate. Bonhoeffer says that shame is “the memory of disunion from the Creator.”

Only through allowing oneself to endure “an act of ultimate shaming, namely, inevitable exposure before God” can one be healed of shame. This is because one is “put to shame through the forgiveness of sin, which means through the restoration of community with God and human beings.”

Shame is different than conscious, however. He writes, “Shame reminds human beings of their disunion with God and one another; conscience is the sign of human beings’ disunion within themselves.”

However, Bonhoeffer does not see this as positive. Even though the human may feel comforted by their conscience it may be a false comfort. “Conscience identifies what is allowed with what is good, and no longer registers that even what is allowed the human being is in disunion with the origin.”

What conscience does is to support the fruit of the fall that we saw in *Creation and Fall*. The bearer of the conscience is no longer concerned with their relationship to God, or even other people, but only themselves. It is “a relationship of human beings with themselves that is disconnected from their relationship to God and others, however, only comes about through their becoming, in their state of disunion, equal to God.”

He says it even clearer in the following paragraph. “This reversal is the claim of human beings who have become like God in knowing good and evil. Human beings have become the origin of good and evil.”

The effect of being the origin of good and evil cause the human to ultimately be the judge of God. “This good, which consists in the unity of human beings with themselves, is now considered the origin of all good. It is God’s good, it is the good for the neighbor. Bearing the knowledge of good and evil within themselves, human beings have now become the judge of God and others, just as they are their own judge.”

While most people think that the knowledge of good and evil (and avoiding the evil) brings them closer to God—or perhaps more pure in some manner, Bonhoeffer points out that it does the opposite.

Knowing now means establishing the relation to oneself, recognizing oneself in everything and everything in oneself. Now, for human beings in disunion from God, everything splits apart—is and ought, life and law, knowing and doing, idea and reality, reason and instinct, duty and inclination, intention and benefit, necessity and freedom, the hard-won and the ingenious, the universal and the concrete, the individual and the collective; and even truth, justice, beauty, and love conflict with one another just as do desire and aversion, happiness and sorrow—one could continue this list at length.

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327 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 305.
Evil in Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall, Discipleship, and Ethics*

and the course of human history adds items continually. All of these disunions are variations of the state of disunion that is intrinsic to the knowledge of good and evil.337

Bonhoeffer gives us a biblical example of this conscience that he did not supply to us in *Creation and Fall*. He treats the presence of the Pharisee. He first describes them. “Pharisees are not an accidental historical phenomenon of Jesus’ time, but human beings for whom nothing by the knowledge of good and evil come to be important for their entire lives.”338

The piety of the Pharisees is unquestionable. Bonhoeffer admits that to our human eyes they are “admirable to the highest degree.”339 They are very serious in their behavior and their faith. “For Pharisees, every moment of life turns into a situation of conflict in which they have to choose between good and evil.”340 However, their seriousness does not demolish their ability to relate to their fellow humans as is often pictured. Bonhoeffer sees them as more realistic. “Life in all its variety is certainly taken into account. One does not demand the impossible. Special circumstances and crises receive special consideration. The seriousness of the knowledge of good and evil does not rule out leniency and mercy. Rather, such lenience is an expression of that seriousness.”341

We see now disunity and unity highlighted. Without the account of Jesus and the Pharisees we may never truly see what the problem really is. Bonhoeffer describes it: “Just as the Pharisees have no choice but to confront Jesus with situations of conflict, so Jesus has no choice but to refuse to accept such a situation.”342 Disunity encounters unity, and the results are obvious. Bonhoeffer says that “the Pharisees and Jesus speak on completely different planes. That is why they speak so curiously past each other, and why Jesus’ answers do not appear to be answers at all, but his own attacks against the Pharisees, which in fact they are.”343

The Pharisees are us. They confront Jesus with “the questions with which we too always confront Jesus; questions with which we call on him for a decision in cases of conflict; questions, in other words, with which we draw Jesus into our questions, conflicts and disunity, and demand that he provide a resolution.”344

Instead, Bonhoeffer says that Jesus responds from a completely different direction. Bonhoeffer says that “he refuses to be bound by human alternatives”345 and instead “speaks out of a total freedom that is not even bound by the law of logical alternatives.”346

Jesus has another message—“Jesus calls this one option the will of God.”347 Bonhoeffer says that Jesus is not tied to the will of the Pharisees to judge everything as good or evil, but instead only “acts out of the will of God.”348

Bonhoeffer recites Jesus’ teaching from Matthew—“‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.’ (Matt.7:1)” and then writes:

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This is not the admonition to caution and leniency in judging other human beings, as was also known among the Pharisees. Rather, it is a stab in the heart of those who know good and evil. It is the word of the one who speaks out of unity with God, and who came not to judge but to save (John 3:17). For human beings in the state of disunion, the good consists in a judging whose final criterion is human beings themselves. Knowing about good and evil, human beings are essentially judges. As judges they are like God, but with the difference that each judgment they pass falls on themselves. By attacking people as judges, Jesus demands a turn-around of their entire nature; precisely in the fullest realization of their good, he exposes them as godless, as sinners.349

Bonhoeffer again states that knowing good and evil does the opposite of what it intends—it “deepens the disunity.”350 Because it is an action that springs from disunity, the further result is the only result that can occur in that situation. The judgment that occurs from knowing good and evil “is itself the apostasy from God.”351 Bonhoeffer goes further: “That is why it is evil, and why it also produces evil fruit in the human heart.”352

Since we know Bonhoeffer’s continual return to unity, it is not surprising to hear him defining disunity with God as evil. What is unique to Bonhoeffer theology is his rejection of this form of holiness.

He says that “as those who no longer know good and evil but only Christ as origin and reconciliation, human beings will know all things.”353 His focus—and what he believes is the message of the gospel—is “redeeming and reconciling”354 rather than judging and separating.

Bonhoeffer moves on to explain that the one who is now free from condemning others is free for immediate obedience. The judgment of action is left for God to determine and the one who is now free can immediately respond in obedience.

Of course, history tells us that Bonhoeffer is talking as much to himself as his reader. Most people caught up in judgment would call attempted assassination ‘evil.’ If the attempt had been successful, Bonhoeffer and his fellow resisters would have been legally prosecuted. So, how could Bonhoeffer even consider doing such a thing? Only as one convinced that he must follow God’s will and leave the sentence of guilty or not guilty in the hands of God—regardless of what others may determine.

Now that Bonhoeffer abolished the idea of being able to know good and evil, he again enters into singular unity with God and how this is accomplished. This is Bonhoeffer’s normative behavior whenever discussing evil. Therefore, we will end our consideration of this chapter with the observation that once again when discussing good and evil Bonhoeffer always returns to unity. Therefore, it is safe to now point out that Bonhoeffer considered disunity with God rather than actions as evil. In that case, the solution is obviously unity with God rather than societal remedies, and now we can understand why the church was the focus for Bonhoeffer. It is the church’s mandate to proclaim God and his redemption to the world in order to bring unity between God and his creatures.

“Church and World I”

349 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 313-314.
350 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 315.
351 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 315.
352 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 315.
353 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 316.
354 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 317.
In this chapter there is one reference to evil—“Whenever it has taken its stand on scripture, the church has again and again reflected on the relation of Jesus Christ to the wicked and to evil.”  

Unfortunately, shortly after this sentence the discussion ends. Bonhoeffer begins to discuss what it means for ‘good’ people—that is, not the sinful, such as tax collectors and prostitutes—to come to Christ. He reflects that this is a topic that the church has not addressed. He says that the church has changed the topic. “Here the justification of goodness has been replaced by a justification of wickedness; instead of idealizing the bourgeois, one now enjoyed realizing the un-bourgeois, the disorderly, the chaotic, anarchic, and catastrophic.”

This is a tantalizing topic for this study. However what Bonhoeffer would say has been lost to us since this is where the chapter ends.

Conclusion

With this we conclude our examination of evil in Bonhoeffer’s works. When we finished *Creation and Fall*, we reviewed what we learned from that material. When we asked the question of what Bonhoeffer thought about evil, we learned that Bonhoeffer was not willing to define evil or to define where evil comes from. This, we learned, was because Bonhoeffer considered knowing good and evil as Adam’s first sin and that which brought disunity between Adam and God.

In *Creation and Fall*, we also saw that Bonhoeffer firmly placed the responsibility for this disunity at the feet of humanity. The reason why humanity fell was because they did not wish to accept their place as creature and instead desired to be more than their creator.

As we moved into *Ethics* we find that Bonhoeffer continues these themes, but that he does not discuss the origins of evil but rather the state of being disunified. In *Ethics* he started from the beginning and reargued what he introduced in *Sanctorum Communio*—that the work Christ did on the Cross meant the whole world was now reconciled to God.

This was an important argument for Bonhoeffer and the reason the church—even during the time of writing *Ethics*—was so important for him. If only the church would proclaim the position of the world and its reconciliation to God, then the world could end its “blind rage” against God. And if the world would understand it was accepted, then there would be no need for a *Führer* to right a problematic world.

Bonhoeffer, therefore, constantly refers to unity with God throughout *Ethics*. In nearly every chapter, Bonhoeffer returns to the theme of unity in some form. So much so that it becomes repetitive. But in the repetition, we learn what was most important to Bonhoeffer. It gives us insight into the theologian and what was his concern during the difficult years he resisted the Third Reich.

Since Bonhoeffer’s concern is so prevalent that it overwhelms one with its presence, we will continue the analysis of what we have learned about unity in the chapter regarding endurance. There we will further explore the findings of this chapter and discuss their value for Bonhoeffer’s endurance.

To examine what justice meant for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we will look closely at his work, *Ethics*. *Ethics* is an incomplete work that Bonhoeffer wrote while vigorously resisting the Third Reich. According to Bethge, Bonhoeffer began work on *Ethics* in September 1940 and continued until he was arrested on April 5, 1943. *Ethics* was not printed until 1949 when Bethge gathered the materials and formed them into a manuscript. Therefore, *Ethics* is not a polished topical work, but one written at various times with various topics. Some chapters are not completed. In the English edition of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, the chapters are placed in the chronological order that they were written.

Even though Bonhoeffer did not publish *Ethics* himself, he indicated that it was meant for publication. While writing to Eberhard Bethge on December 15, 1943, Bonhoeffer writes, “I sometimes feel as if my life were more or less over, and as all I had to do now were to finish my *Ethics*.” Through this we know that even in imprisonment Bonhoeffer had publication plans for this work.

The time of the writing means that *Ethics* is the most mature of Bonhoeffer’s theological work. It also means that Bonhoeffer wrote a large part of it not only during the battle for the church, but also while he was an insider in the Abwehr resistance. This provides us with a perspective of justice from someone who truly knew what occurred in secret throughout the Reich.

If we understand the fractured presentation of *Ethics*, we will first glean an oversight of the problem we encounter when speaking about Bonhoeffer and justice, and then we will chronologically walk through the text to gather Bonhoeffer’s theology from each pertinent chapter. After that is complete, we will then consider what Bonhoeffer has to say about the individual’s personal responsibility and justice.

*Important Topics in Ethics*

It was said in chapter two of this dissertation that the two questions we asked Bonhoeffer—“what is evil?” and “what is justice?”—had surprising answers. We saw in chapter three that the author of a book called *Ethics* did not have a static, defined definition of evil. This is surprising because one would expect an ethicist to have standardized guidelines to deal with possible social conflicts. Instead, Bonhoeffer’s answer—in short form—was that evil was disunity with God.

The same surprising answer occurs in his approach to justice. Because, at least in the author’s context, much ado is made over Bonhoeffer’s involvement in saving the Jews, one would expect that he would designate how Jews could be treated justly, standards of governmental behavior, and manners of compensation—all pieces of current justice study. Instead, Bonhoeffer turns to personal responsibility.

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357 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 44.
A point could be made that this occurs because Bonhoeffer needs to be cautious in what he wrote. Green refers to this problem in the “Editors Introduction” to *Ethics*. He writes,

> The *Ethics* contains numerous allusions to the specific historical context in which Bonhoeffer wrote. But in many cases these allusions are oblique, because of the danger of writing direct attacks on the regime.\(^{358}\)

History supports Green in his argument. However, if we look at our findings in chapter three regarding Bonhoeffer’s method of ethics, the answer seems to be that Bonhoeffer believed differently about justice than what is currently understood and not that he was careful because the regime would read his work.

The difference between Bonhoeffer and current justice theology is that in order to be able to speak about justice, one must be able to distinguish a clear standard of wrong. While those of us who worked in justice programs can admit that it is seldom a circumstance of one guilty perpetrator versus one innocent victim, normally a reasonable assessment of wrongdoing can be made. However, Bonhoeffer left those assessments behind him.

He wrote in the initial version of the chapter “History and Good,”

> All that has been said thus far implies that we have abandoned the abstract notion, largely dominant in ethical thought, of an isolated individual who has available an absolute criterion by which to choose continually and exclusively between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil.\(^{359}\)

This is a signal to us that Bonhoeffer is not able to be neatly placed into a justice category. This sounds similar to the rejection of good and evil that we learned in chapter three of this dissertation, but Bonhoeffer does not leave us with only the same rejection. In addition, he introduces the concept of personal responsibility.

If we view *Ethics* in hindsight, this is an understandable progression. Bonhoeffer did not grapple with the fact that the Third Reich must be stopped. That was so apparent that any aware person in his situation would immediately recognize it. What Bonhoeffer most certainly needed to work out at this time was his involvement in stopping and holding accountable the Third Reich.

As Bonhoeffer writes, we can see that he struggled about what to do with competing ethical claims. What does one do when participating in the murder of Hitler would violate the sixth commandment while not participating means millions other will be slaughtered? It is little wonder that Bonhoeffer wrote about responsibility as well as justice.

It is the same reason that Bonhoeffer introduces another famous topic in Bonhoeffer studies: reality. Bonhoeffer was forced to face a reality that few other modern theologians have faced. What action does one take against a murdering tyrant if one has the opportunity to do so?

Historically, this is another interesting part of Bonhoeffer’s theology. We often hear that people did not stop Hitler because they did not know what was occurring at the camps. Bonhoeffer knew and it still created a dilemma for him. Through this Bonhoeffer learned what it meant to deal with reality when making ethical decisions.

With these points in mind, we will first look at the material where Bonhoeffer writes about justice. Within justice, as well as personal responsibility, reality is a corresponding


topic that must be understood. Additionally, we must remember that even Bonhoeffer had contextual forces with which to contend.

*Justice in “Christ, Reality, and Good”*

When we considered what Bonhoeffer thought evil was, we learned that he did not focus so very much on evil. Instead, he repeatedly attempted to draw our attention to the goodness and unity of God. Now that we turn to consider what justice means for Bonhoeffer, we find he does the same thing. In the first chapter that Bonhoeffer wrote for *Ethics*, “Christ, Reality, and Good,” we find after a brief introduction that Bonhoeffer immediately moves to God as the center of his argument.

He begins by arguing that the goal of “ethical reflection” is “that I be good, and that the world—by my action—becomes good.” Even though he does not begin by using the word *justice*, he has in his mind actions that are meant to better the world.

He neither immediately embraces nor immediately rejects this concept of making the world good; but rather, changes the argument. In answer to the ethicist’s idealism, Bonhoeffer argues: “Of ultimate importance, then, is not that I become good, or that the condition of the world be improved by my efforts, but that the reality of God show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality.”

Bonhoeffer lies three arguments down. First, that there is a reality in the world that is not always recognized by the ethicist; second, the only true ethical action is action that reflects this reality; and third, that the only true focus and reality of every human being should be God as revealed in Jesus Christ. He summarizes this by writing, “To participate in the indivisible whole of God’s reality is the meaning of the Christian question about the good.”

Since the concept of reality is the keystone of Bonhoeffer’s argument, it is very important to understand. Therefore, we will attempt to understand what Bonhoeffer meant when he wrote about reality.

*Reality*

First Bonhoeffer describes where reality lies, and then he continues to give us a description of reality. Reality lies in God. It is supreme to every thing that exists. “Christian ethics speaks otherwise of the reality that is the origin of the good. It means thereby the reality of God as the ultimate reality beyond and in all that exists.” Bonhoeffer also argues that the reality of God encompasses all reality. “It means also the reality of the existing world that is real only through the reality of God.” Bonhoeffer then describes how reality enters into the world. “In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of the world.”

Here Bonhoeffer makes a claim that we notice sounds vaguely familiar. “The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are

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enclosed in this name. In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17)\textsuperscript{366} The reason that this argument sounds familiar is that we considered it in chapter two of this dissertation. This is the same argument that Bonhoeffer argued in his doctoral dissertation, \textit{Sanctorum Communio}.\textsuperscript{367}

The reality that he writes about is the reality that there is no longer a world that is separated from God and needs to be made good over against a utopia. The reality is, “But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{368} This has implications. Christ already reconciled the world into the reality of God, which means that if one is going to experience and participate with God then they must also experience and participate in the world. “What matters is participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.”\textsuperscript{369} This claim by Bonhoeffer is basic, and his thought about justice can only be understood if we understand his concept of reality. Bonhoeffer will return to it repeatedly throughout his discussion and so this knowledge of his argument influences our understanding about all that he writes about justice.

Understanding this vital argument, we will track the word justice throughout \textit{Ethics}.

\textit{Return to Justice}

The first instance where we find Bonhoeffer discussing and using the word \textit{justice} is in the chapter titled “Christ, Reality, and Good.” This is an interesting point to find Bonhoeffer introducing justice because he just repudiated the idea of thinking in terms of realms, and he just introduced the idea of the four mandates.

In rejecting the idea of realm thinking, Bonhoeffer argues that the whole world is now Christ’s and that realm thinking is not only an error, but denies the work of Christ. “Every static distinction between one domain [Bereich] as belonging to the devil and another as belonging to Christ denies the reality that God has reconciled the whole world with himself in Christ.”\textsuperscript{370}

Here Bonhoeffer fights an idea that is often present in Christian justice ideology—the idea that the kingdom of God can be created in opposition to the world. Bonhoeffer writes about this circumstance himself. Speaking of the enthusiasts of the Reformation, he writes,

\begin{quote}
Among the enthusiasts the church community of the elect sets out to struggle against the enmity of the world in order to build the kingdom of God on earth. In all of this the concern of Christ becomes a partial, provincial affair within the whole of reality. One reckons with realities outside the reality of Christ. It follows that there is separate access to these realities, apart from Christ. However important one may take reality in Christ to be, it always remains a partial reality alongside others.\textsuperscript{371}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{366} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 54.  \\
\textsuperscript{367} “For faith, the reconciliation and justification of the world are established in reality in the revelation in Christ, though faith is possible only within the actualized church.” Bonhoeffer, \textit{Sanctorum Communio}, 144, italics mine.  \\
\textsuperscript{368} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 55.  \\
\textsuperscript{369} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 55.  \\
\textsuperscript{370} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 66.  \\
\textsuperscript{371} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 56-57.
\end{flushright}
Bonhoeffer’s dissent with realm or sphere theology is twofold. First, it violates the reality of a world justified and brought into communion with God—a theme Bonhoeffer began in his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*.

In the old humanity the whole of humanity falls anew, so to speak, with every person who sins; in Christ, however, humanity has been brought once and for all—this is essential to real vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]—into community with God. 372

Second, it carries a very real danger of creating a fanaticism that makes an enemy of the world that God chose to redeem and results in very unchristian behavior.

A Christian law that condemns the law of the world is established here, and is led, unreconciled, into battle against the world that God has reconciled to himself. As every legalism flows into lawlessness, every nominism into antinomianism, every perfectionism into libertinism, so here as well. A world existing on its own, withdrawn from the law of Christ, falls prey to the severing of all bonds and to arbitrariness. A Christianity that withdraws from the world falls prey to unnaturalness, irrationality, triumphalism, and arbitrariness. 373

Bonhoeffer proposes the four mandates in place of realm theology. The four mandates are work, marriage, government, and church. The four mandates are unified and are demanded of every person.

In the world God wills work, marriage, government, and church, and God wills all these, each in its own way, through Christ, toward Christ, and in Christ. God has placed human being under all these mandates, not only each individual under one or the other, but all people under all four. There can be no retreat, therefore, from a “worldly” into a “spiritual” realm. 374

Bonhoeffer continues to say that these mandates exist simply because they are commanded by God.

Only as God’s mandates are they divine, not in their actual givenness in this or that concrete form. Not because there is work, marriage, government, or church is it commanded by God, but because it is commanded by God, therefore it is. Only insofar as its being is subjected—consciously or unconsciously—to the divine task is it a divine mandate. 375

Therefore, they are protected by the fact that they are divine commandments rather than social structures. Because they are divine, they are outside humankind’s choice and must be accepted. They deserve special attention. “The existing marriage, government, etc., always has a relative advantage over what does not exist.” 376 Not only do they have the right to exist, but also “specific faults do not give the right to abolish or destroy what exists.” 377

At this point Bonhoeffer marries responsibility to justice. Within each of the mandates there is responsibility. Sometimes it is personal responsibility. For example, in work each person is called to do their daily tasks and from that “a reflection of the heavenly world emerges that reminds those who know Jesus Christ of that world.” 378

376 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 70.
Other times responsibility is systemic. This is where justice enters into Bonhoeffer’s argument. Justice belongs to the mandate of government. “Government protects what is created by establishing justice in acknowledgement of the divine mandates and by enforcing this justice with the power of the sword.”\(^{379}\) In this manner, government is not separated from the other mandates, but becomes the protector of them.

We can see one reason why Bonhoeffer opposes realm thinking, and why he carefully ensures that government is the protector rather than the creator of the mandates. His government threatened the mandates of God.

If we remember that part of the Nuremberg Laws prohibited marriage between Aryans and non-Aryans,\(^{380}\) we can see that the *Führer* principle was overriding God’s control and sanction of marriage. Further, the Nuremberg Laws also caused many non-Aryans to be expelled from their profession due to governmental action.\(^{381}\) Here again, we see the actions of the Third Reich damaging the mandate given by God regarding work.

Bonhoeffer was resistant to the all-encompassing idea of government that attempted to mimic the Creator.

The divine mandate of government already presupposes the mandates of work and marriage. In the world that it rules, government finds already existing two mandates which God the Creator exercises creative power upon which the government must rely. Government itself cannot produce life or values. It is not creative. Government maintains what is created in the order it was given to the creation by God’s commission.\(^{382}\)

So, we see Bonhoeffer repudiate the *Führer* principle at the same time he promotes justice. He rejects the alignment of all things under the *Führer* by declaring at least marriage and work under God’s “creative power” and says the opposite of the *Führer* principle. Instead of marriage and work relying on the government, the government must rely upon God and recognize his rule over that aspect of life.

In this we see that, in this instance, justice for Bonhoeffer was not a creative force for an ideal world, but rather a maintaining force. The use of justice is a governmental tool used to protect what already exists in God’s creation.

What Bonhoeffer then argues with the fourth mandate encapsulates all other three mandates and influences the notion of justice as well.

The last mandate as the church mandate is “the commission of allowing the reality of Jesus Christ to become real in proclamation, church order, and Christian life—in short, its concern is the eternal salvation of the whole world.”\(^{383}\) He continues to say, “the mandate of the church embraces all people as they live within all the other mandates.”\(^{384}\)

What Bonhoeffer subtly points out is that even the mandate of government must follow the reality of Christ—even while performing justice. Reality ensures that they have no other choice. His message to his government was:

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\(^{379}\) Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 72.

\(^{380}\) “Marriages between Jews and nationals of German or kindred blood are forbidden. Marriages concluded in defiance of this law are void, even if, for the purpose of evading this law, they are concluded abroad.” *Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor*, Section 1. Obtained at [www.mtsu.edu/~baustin/nurmlaw3.html](http://www.mtsu.edu/~baustin/nurmlaw3.html) on November 4, 2007.


\(^{382}\) Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 72.

\(^{383}\) Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 73.

\(^{384}\) Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 73.
Every division into separate realms [Räume] is forbidden here. Human beings as whole persons stand before the whole earthly and eternal reality that God in Jesus Christ has prepared for them. Only in full response to the whole of this offer and claim can the human person fulfill this reality. This is the witness the church has to give to the world, that all other mandates are not there to divide people and to tear them apart but to deal with them as whole people before God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer—that reality in all its manifold aspects is ultimately one in God who became human, Jesus Christ.385

Bonhoeffer ties all mandates into Jesus Christ. Now the Führer is not the reconciler and protector of society, but Jesus Christ is. Even the Führer must submit to the rule of Christ. This is much different from two realms thinking wherein government had the right to rule according to secular needs and the church had the right to rule according to spiritual needs. According to Bonhoeffer, that was an unreal proposition and a distortion of Luther’s two-realm theology.386

As we leave this initial reference to justice, we find that for Bonhoeffer justice is a function of the government to safeguard the mandates created by God and the reality of Jesus Christ. If we compare this to the next references in Ethics to justice, we see striking differences.

**Justice in “Ethics as Formation”**

The next occurrence of the word justice comes in the following chapter, “Ethics as Formation.” Initially, the reference to justice is surprising—not because it is different from commonly used contexts, as we noted before, but because it appears to be the same.

That evil appears in the form of light, of beneficence, of faithfulness, of renewal, that it appears in the form of historical necessity, of social justice, is for the commonsense observer a clear confirmation of its profound evilness.387

One must wonder if Bonhoeffer—who just spent a whole chapter repudiating the concept of being able to know “‘How can I be good’ and ‘How can I do something good?’”388—really wrote this section. It does not help the confusion to find that one of the most famous Bonhoeffer quotes occurs shortly before the long quote included above: “It is worse to be evil than to do evil.”389 One must ask if Bonhoeffer changed his theology so quick after writing “Christ, Reality, and Good.”

This is where we find the necessity of understanding Bonhoeffer’s theology as a whole and within context. If we do not know what Bonhoeffer wrote in Creation and Fall, this chapter in Ethics can be understood as a support of static ethics after all. Without understanding that Bonhoeffer understood disunity with God as evil and without understanding that Bonhoeffer saw good and evil as almost epic in dimension,390 one may be tempted to place this argument back into theoretical ethics.

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385 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 73.
386 For an explanation of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Luther’s original meaning of two realms, see “Christ, Reality, and Good” in Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 58-60.
387 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 77, italics mine.
388 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 47.
389 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 77.
390 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 88-89.
It is the surprise of the material that says we must look closer at what Bonhoeffer writes. Is he contradicting himself or is there something else that is easily missed? It is our argument that he enters another arena and the seeming contradiction tells us something about his perception and understanding.

If we reread his apparently historical introduction to the chapter, it is easy for us to read with hindsight and agree with his evaluation with little thought. However, careful reading gives us a clue that we miss if this section is read too lightly. Here Bonhoeffer begins by using dramatic language to describe his context.

Today we have villains and saints again, in full public view. The gray on gray of a sultry, rainy day has turned into the black cloud and bright lightning flash of a thunderstorm. The contours are sharply drawn. Reality is laid bare. Shakespeare’s characters are among us. The villain and the saint have little or nothing to do with ethical programs. They arise from primeval depths, and with their appearance tear open the demonic and divine abyss [Abgrund] out of which they come, allowing us brief glimpses into their suspected secrets.391

This language is not the language of common society, but the language of tragedy. The very situation he writes about is not the good and evil of the common human, but is “demonic” and “divine.” It is characters from Shakespeare that are grotesque in design.

Again, hindsight tells us that he is discussing the Third Reich—if not Hitler himself. In 1940 Bonhoeffer grasped the danger of Hitler and describes it as “reality filled with concrete, ethical problems such as we have never had before in the history of the West.”392 Bethge says that Bonhoeffer wrote this chapter shortly after his “first momentous meetings with Colonel Oster at the Abwehr.”393 This gives us another key to what Bonhoeffer is referring.

Bonhoeffer may also give us an explanation of why the actions of the Third Reich continue to grip the West, even over 60 years later. It has to do with justice as well. When Bonhoeffer says that it is better to do evil than to be evil, he is not talking about simply being the sort of person that is not careful to do one’s ethical responsibility. He is talking about evil that has come from the “primeval depths.” However, the problem is how this very severe evil appears. He says that it appears in a positive light, even to the point of appearing as “social justice.” This is a danger. That is the meaning of “the lie is better than truth in the mouth of a liar, as hatred is better than acts of neighborly love by a misanthrope.”394 When evil is recognizable and labeled as evil, then it is understood. Even if society is willing to accept it as a “necessary evil” the true nature of the situation is recognized. When evil parades as something beautiful and is unrecognizable, it is then tragedy.

However, in Bonhoeffer fashion, he returns to reject ethical responses—even in the face of such evil. He writes in the paragraphs following this definition of supreme evil about the ethical human who attempts to handle the situation, and how useless their ethics are. He begins with the “reasonable people,”395 who he says will even fail to recognize the evil in their midst. They attempt to be fair to both sides. Those who ethically follow “the safe way of duty,”396 will in the end even serve the devil. And so, Bonhoeffer describes several types of ethical individuals and their failure in the face of this evil.

391 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 76-77.
392 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 76.
394 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 77.
395 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 78.
396 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 79.
The ethical person that is important to this chapter is the person of “ethical fanaticism.” The reason that this person is important is because it is this person that is connected to justice. With the arrival of the fanaticist, we see that “the lofty goals of truth or justice” can be misdirected. The ethical fanatic is one who has “principles,” but their fanaticism makes them “lose sight of the whole evil.” In fact, Bonhoeffer describes this person as the “bull that charges the red cape instead of the one holding it.” Bonhoeffer rejects the “lofty goals” because they cannot set evil right and end up losing to a “more clever opponent.” He even goes so far as to say that the ethical fanatic is “bankrupt.”

Here we catch a glimmer of Bonhoeffer’s view of justice. He obviously respects it as a concept because he defines it as a “lofty goal.” However, he does not see it as the necessary primary motive because he points out that even the person with this goal is barren. Bonhoeffer is not rejecting justice but—knowing Bonhoeffer—we can understand that it is the reliance on principles rather than God’s will that causes him to consider the fanatic as impotent. We see this theme resumed quickly in the same chapter, and the problem of the ethical fanatic is further clarified.

After explaining the ethical dilemma’s faced by those who charge at problems with an ethical solution, Bonhoeffer compares them to a literary character that he is fond of, Don Quixote—the slightly senile soldier with useless weapons who rides into a battle that does not exist in reality. In comparing Quixote to ethicists, he says that former generations fought great social problems with ethical principles, but that the old principles “are not sufficient for the present struggle.” Not only are they insufficient, but they detract from true sufficiency. There needs to be a new type of person that emerges, and who can pick up weapons of “bright steel.”

In this we learn something further about Bonhoeffer and the principle of justice. He includes justice with all the other principles and, at least in Bonhoeffer’s context, it needs to be recognized as the weapon of a former generation that must be replaced with a newer, brighter weapon.

Bonhoeffer proposes the weapon of simplicity to replace the old principles. Here we find the theme that is present and central in all of Bonhoeffer theology—unity with God is the answer. He claims that that the only person who can stand in the midst of the societal problems that his generation encountered is the simple person. Then he defines the simple person: “A person is simple who in the confusion, the distortion, and the inversion of all concepts keeps in sight only the single truth of God.”

Now we see why he began with a critique of ethical persons. It is their principles that cause them not only ethical dilemmas, but also a divided heart. In contrast to the previous ethical person, Bonhoeffer describes the simple person as follows:

This person has an undivided heart, and is not a double-psyche, a person of two souls (James 1[:8]). Because of knowing and having God, this person clings to the commandments, the judgment, and the mercy of God that proceed anew each day from the mouth of God. Not fettered by principles
but bound by love for God, this person is liberated from the problems and conflicts of ethical
decision, and is no longer beset by them.  

Bonhoeffer returns to the theme of reconciliation. This is how the simple person becomes
wise, and how they are effective.

At this we must pause to grasp how very central the theme of Christ’s reconciliation
of the world is to Bonhoeffer. We see this theme visited again in the second chapter of Ethics
as it was in the first. Perhaps if Bonhoeffer lived longer he would have reformulated the
subjects to include this theme in one section. In its rough presentation, though, we see how
important it was for Bonhoeffer. It was a theme he began in Sanctorum Communio (as we
saw in the last section) and included again in Ethics. Christ’s reconciliation of the world is a
theme that Bonhoeffer obviously found key in dealing with his own society’s problems.

Perhaps it was also because Bonhoeffer attempted to gain reality in the midst of a
very unreal situation. A bit further he writes,

Wise people know the limited receptivity of reality for principles, because they know that reality is
not built on principles, but rests on the living, creating God. So they also know that reality can be
helped neither by the purest principles nor with the best will, but only by the living God.

Bonhoeffer struggled with what the Reich meant to his country, and it appears that he
struggled with his role in it as well. We see in this chapter that he accepted not only the
situation, but his apparent helplessness in the face of Hitler’s actions. He begins by saying,
“The world will be overcome not by destruction but by reconciliation.”

This powerful statement gives us perspective into Bonhoeffer’s approach to his
reality. It will be a key point when we examine what he believed about personal
responsibility because it shows us that Bonhoeffer sees that only God can deal with the Third
Reich. In fact, right behind this sentence he dismisses most of human ability. “Not ideals or
programs, not conscience, duty, responsibility, or virtue, but only the consummate love of
God can meet and overcome reality.”

It is a certain part of reconciliation that appears to be the answer to the tyranny of the
Third Reich. It is the act of judgment of humanity by God.

Bonhoeffer has a rather positive view of the judgment of humanity by God. Instead
of focusing on the worthlessness of humans, for Bonhoeffer God’s judgment means that
“God becomes human, a real human being.” Within Bonhoeffer’s theology there is the
recognition that something is wrong and, obviously, humans have fallen. Yet, he focuses
on the positive aspect rather than the negative.

Bonhoeffer focuses on the fact that judgment and reconciliation do not create a super,
purified human; but rather, “real human beings.” God’s judgment and reconciliation did
not set up pietistic standards for a superhuman; rather, God “takes on human nature as it
is.”

406 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 81, italics mine.
407 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 81.
408 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 82-83.
409 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 83.
410 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 84.
411 See Creation and Fall, 91.
412 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 84.
413 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 85.
Bonhoeffer then allows us to see why this is so very important. In the Third Reich the idolized human caused reactions that only an honest judgment and reconciliation could combat. Just as some pietistic streams of Christianity set up standards that expect to produce ‘holy’ Christians (understood in opposition to ‘carnal’ Christians), the ungodliness of the Third Reich set up standards of the perfect human—although in a more humanistic manner.

Historically, we understand what Bonhoeffer is now writing against. He disagrees with the notion of a true Aryan race that is blemish free. He disagrees with the extermination of developmentally disabled people. But he does this by pointing out that this ideal opposes God’s plan. He writes against the superhuman.

This is, however, also a sincerely intended love for humanity that amounts to the same thing as contempt for humanity. It rests on evaluating human beings according to their dormant values—the health, reasonableness, and goodness deep beneath the surface. (This love for humanity grows mostly in peaceful times. But also in times of great crisis these values can on occasion shine forth and become the basis for a hard-won and honest love for humanity.) With forced tolerance, evil is reinterpreted as good, meanness is overlooked, and the reprehensible is excused. For various reasons one shies away from a clear No, and finally agrees to everything. One loves a self-made picture of human beings that has little similarity to reality, and one ends up despising the real human being whom God has loved and whose being God has taken on.

Through this, we see an idea of Bonhoeffer’s basis for justice. Justice does not come from creating an ideal, or even by restoring a person, but from accepting God’s judgment upon us. Bonhoeffer writes that “only as judged by God can humans live before God; only the crucified being is at peace with God.” This is in contrast to a principle of success that is often embraced as the ideal. For humanity, success is the ultimate goal. Humanity judges actions according to their level of success. He writes, “The world wants to be, and must be, overcome by success. Deeds, not ideas or intentions, are decisive. Success alone justifies injustice done. Guilt is scarred over, or cicatrized, by success.” If successful, the wrongs that are committed receive no condemnation.

This is a danger that Bonhoeffer will not deal with because either by arguing against the idea or for it, “without intending it, one makes success—albeit negatively—the measure of everything.” Success in restoring justice falls into the same pit of every other principle, the principle rather than God is the focus and at that juncture the principle turns against unity with God.

Being judged by God means something else. “Over against the successful, God sanctifies pain, lowness, failure, poverty, loneliness, and despair in the cross of Christ.” It is injustice that sanctifies humans, not justice. Not because of any principle of humbleness, but simply because “it is made holy by the love of God, who take it all and bears it as judgment.” Only the acceptance of God’s judgment allows human to be human. “Only in the cross of Christ, and that means as judged, does humanity take on its true form.”

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414 See, Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 92-93.
415 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 87.
416 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 88.
417 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 88.
418 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 88.
419 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 90.
420 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 90.
421 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 90.
422 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 91.
We can now see why Bonhoeffer repeatedly returned to reconciliation as the answer to tyranny in his context. The judgment of God is the greatest equalizer known to humankind. Every person must “die before God because of sin.” This means that there are no superior or inferior humans—even though their skill levels may vary—because their judgment positions them on the same level as every other human. Now, “the human being should and may be human. All super-humanity [Übermenschentum], all efforts to outgrow one’s nature as human, all struggle to be heroic or a demigod, all fall away from a person here, because they are untrue.”

This has implications for justice that may not be very comfortable in our current context. Bonhoeffer considers suffering as God’s justice pronounced on humanity.

Human beings die daily the death of sinners. They bear humbly the scars and the wounds that sin inflicts on body and soul. They cannot lift themselves above other people or establish themselves as models because they recognize themselves as the greatest of all sinners. One can forgive the sins of others, never one’s own. Human beings bear all suffering laid upon them, knowing that it serves them to die to their own will, and to let the justice of God prevail over them. Only by acknowledging that God is in the right over them and against them are they right before God. “In suffering does the master impress his all-sufficient image on the heart and on the spirit.”

The reason that this may not be so comfortable for contemporary Christians is the foothold that restorative justice claims within the Christian community through the works of well-known Christians such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu (South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission), Chuck Colson (Prison Fellowship, Justice Fellowship), and Howard Zehr (Mennonite Central Committee). Bonhoeffer is also seen as a champion for social justice.

The obvious question must be asked, though. If Bonhoeffer believed that suffering was not only God’s justice but also God’s way of impressing his image on the sufferer, why should Christians work to elevate suffering? One must also ask why Bonhoeffer resisted the Third Reich. If suffering is a tool used by God then the Third Reich was only an additional tool used by God.

Because Bonhoeffer follows with 10-11 paragraphs about Christian formation following this statement, we realize that Bonhoeffer was serious about his statement. While the formation he mostly discusses is the formation of Christ in the church, he does point out that “what happened to Christ happened to humanity”—including suffering.

This does not correspond to Bonhoeffer’s actions then. Therefore, we now see why evaluating Bonhoeffer only on his political activity is misleading. From his actions it cannot be denied that Bonhoeffer resisted the Third Reich. From his words it cannot be denied that Bonhoeffer thought suffering was God’s justice on judged humans. This is a tension that must be recognized. Fortunately, Bonhoeffer completed enough of his work that he gave us the answer. We find that answer in the section, “Ultimate and Penultimate Things.” It is further revealed as we consider personal responsibility in the second half of this chapter. At this point, it is important to see the problem that appears between the two stances and to gain a faceted view of Bonhoeffer’s deliberation of his contextual problems.

We see from this chapter that Bonhoeffer’s thinking about his current political, social, and spiritual context was complex. Just when it appears he rejects evil as an ethical problem,
he begins the next chapter by discussing the evil engulfing his world. When he talks about suffering as God’s justice, we find he secretly works to end suffering. These two points alone tell us that Bonhoeffer was a nuanced theologian—and they tell us something about his actions as well. We can see that Bonhoeffer attempted to practice what he argued in *Creation and Fall*. He attempted to live unified with God and to live by God’s will rather than by principles. That is why we see the tension. If Bonhoeffer ascribed to one principle, his actions would have fallen into line with his theology. Instead, we see exactly what his theology should produce—tensions based on his contextual situation.

Now we continue through *Ethics* to discover Bonhoeffer’s further treatment of justice. The next chapter where justice is mentioned is “Guilt, Justification, Renewal.”

“Guilt, Justification, Renewal”

Here Bonhoeffer again addresses the idea of unity with Christ and says that guilt is not the actual actions of individuals, but has a deeper source. “The guilt we must acknowledge is not the occasional mistake or going astray, not the breaking of an abstract law, but falling away from Christ, from the form of the One who would take form in us and lead us to our own true form.”

Again we see the theme of unity with Christ, and so it is not surprising, understanding Bonhoeffer’s belief that the church was the visible sign of Christ in the world, that Bonhoeffer lays the guilt for much of his society’s problems at the doorstep of the church. He writes, “The church is today the community of people who, grasped by the power of Christ’s grace, acknowledge, confess, and take upon themselves not only their personal sins, but also the Western world’s falling away from Jesus Christ as guilt toward Jesus Christ.”

Because he sees the injustice around him as a falling away from Christ rather than a sociological failure, and because he finds the church responsible for taking the form of Christ in the world, the events occurring around him are now the responsibility of his own religious community. And further, he says that the church must confess this sin “without a sidelong glance at the others who are also guilty.”

This has implications for the idea that the kingdom of God can be built in opposition to the world. Bonhoeffer says that the church can only confess her own sins and not seek to change and punish other sinners.

Though this is completely incomprehensible to the moralist, there is no search here for the actual guilty person, no demand for the just expiation as punishment for the evil and reward for the good. Evildoers are not branded by their evil (in the apocalyptic sense of Rev. 22[:11], “Let the evildoer still do evil”), for there are people here who take all—really all—guilt upon themselves, not in some heroic self-sacrificing decision, but simply overwhelmed by their very own guilt toward Christ. In that moment they can no longer think about retributive justice for the “chief sinners” but only about the forgiveness of their own great guilt.

We see that the idea of the Christian community bringing justice to the world is then a futile attempt because she should not consider the guilt of others, but confess her own great guilt.

But Bonhoeffer does say in the following pages that the guilt of the church is implicated in the current injustice of the society. He says that the events of the Third Reich occurred because the church lost its true calling. In a series of paragraphs, Bonhoeffer looks at the societal occurrences and sees the roots of those wrongs in the failure of the church.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 137-141.} For example, the reason that the Third Reich was able to murder weaker citizens was because the church,\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 138.}
\begin{quote}
...has often withheld the compassion that it owes to the despised and rejected. The church was mute when it should have cried out, because the blood of the innocent cried out to heaven. The church did not find the right word in the right way at the right time. It did not resist to the death the falling away from faith and is guilty of the godlessness of the masses.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 141.}
\end{quote}
He finishes these paragraphs with the idea that the current problem in societal injustice is that the church “has not so proclaimed the righteousness of God that all human justice must see there its own source and essence.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 141.} Had the church maintained her calling, then “the loving care of God” would be “so credible that all human economic activity would be guided by it in its task.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 141.} He makes it even clearer by bluntly saying, “It is guilty of the government’s falling away from Christ.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 141.}

Now Bonhoeffer moves fully into discussing justice. He believed that the hope of the West and its deliverance from decay could only come through the church. “The renewal of the West lies completely in God’s renewal of the church, which leads it into community with the resurrected and living Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 142.} Through confession by the church, and the resulting forgiveness by God due to this confession, then justice prevails.

This justice is different than the idea of justice that restores the victim to previctimization status. Bonhoeffer wrote, “In faith the church experiences the forgiveness of all its sins and a new beginning by grace; for the nations there is only a scarring over of guilt in the return to order, justice, and peace and in granting freedom to the church to proclaim Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 142.} Only the church has the ability to begin as new. The nations and societies must always live with injustice as a scar—albeit a scar that is a beginning point.

In the idea of restorative justice, the offending party makes restitution to the victim. Bonhoeffer says this is not possible on a national level.

Here the claim to full atonement by the guilty for past injustice is renounced; here it is recognized that what is past can never be restored by human power, that the wheel of history can no longer be rolled back. Not all wounds that were made can be healed; but it is critical that no further wounds be inflicted.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 144.}

In fact, this idea of the perpetrator restoring the victim is dangerous when discussing it on a societal level. He says, “In human hands it only causes new disaster.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 144-143.} Recognition of the scar is what is necessary for justice to be able to be developed. The guilty must be ‘convict(ed) of their guilt’ but any retaliation only brings further injustice.
Of course, knowing the history of Germany, one understands that Bonhoeffer is analyzing the reparation demands of the winning forces from WWI. Bonhoeffer recognized that the severe economic punishments provided fertile ground for Hitler’s propaganda regarding the Jews and economic hardship led to the Second World War. This is an example of demanded restitution that has brought further injustice.

As he closes this chapter, Bonhoeffer says that in order for the nations to live in justice, they must give “space among the nations to the church of Jesus Christ, the origin of all forgiveness, justification, and renewal.” We see that he again returns to the mandate that government and justice do not belong to the government alone, but they are always answerable to God. In this case, the church as the presence of Christ on earth is the source of justice that governments cannot do without.

“Ultimate and Penultimate Things”

We now come to the chapter that Bonhoeffer may be most famous for. This is a chapter that is key to understanding Bonhoeffer’s worldview. In it, he escapes the dichotomy of viewing the world as good and evil, and instead gives his understanding of the situation of the world before the return of Christ. We will consider what this means for justice.

What Bonhoeffer means by ultimate is the moment of justification. “We said at the beginning that the event of justification of a sinner is something ultimate.” The penultimate, on the other hand, is everything before that event. “There is nothing greater than a life that is justified before God. Because it involves a complete break with everything penultimate, with all that has gone before….” Key to this coupling is the understanding that penultimate remains, even after the ultimate has occurred. “The penultimate remains in existence, even though it is completely superseded by the ultimate and is no longer in force.” While the penultimate no longer has power over us that does not mean that the ultimate is there to create the utopia that Bonhoeffer earlier rejected. In fact, the penultimate must remain in order to serve the ultimate. “For the sake of the ultimate we must speak of the penultimate.”

The question he asks then is whether it is possible to live constantly in the ultimate or does the Christian accept moments of penultimate as well? This is when we begin to see Bonhoeffer introduce necessary arguments regarding ultimate, penultimate, and justice. First, he returns to the radical solution. This view is that “Christ is the destroyer and enemy of everything penultimate, and everything penultimate is the enemy of Christ.” Within this view is assumed justice for the world:

Everything penultimate in human behavior is sin and denial. Faced with the coming end there is for Christians only the ultimate word and ultimate behavior. What will happen to the world as a result is no longer important; the Christian has no responsibility for that. The world must burn in any case. Let the whole order of the world break down under the word of Christ; here it is a matter of all

440 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 145.
441 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 149.
442 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 149.
443 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 151.
444 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 151.
445 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 153.
or nothing. The ultimate word of God, which is a word of grace, becomes here the icy hardness of
the law that crushes and despises all resistance (cf. the figure of Ibsen’s Brand). 446

In this argument, if penultimate exists then it justly deserves annihilation in order to give
place to the ultimate.

The second manner is the compromising manner. This is the idea that the world is
something to be endured until we finally reach the ultimate. But it does not claim a
destruction of the penultimate; instead, “the ultimate stays completely beyond daily life and
in the ends serves only as the eternal justification of all that exists, as a metaphysical
cleansing of the indictment that burden all existence.” 447 Bonhoeffer does not enter into the
problem with this compromising position, although an observer could see that this idea
violates his previous argument regarding the four mandates because it would necessarily
separate the ‘holy’ from the ‘carnal.’

Instead, he argues that the problem with choosing for ultimate or for penultimate
returns the person to the original problem of disunity.

The radical solution approaches things from the end of all things, from God the judge and redeemer;
the compromise solution approaches things from what exists. Thus creation and redemption, time
and eternity, fall into an insoluble conflict; the very unity of God is itself dissolved, and faith in God
is shattered. 448

This is the state that Bonhoeffer fought in Sanctorum Communio, Creation and Fall, and the
beginning of Ethics. Bonhoeffer’s most repeated argument is unity with God—not only for
the church, but personally as well. Anything that causes a split or disunity must be avoided.

He argues this principle for the ultimate and penultimate things of the world as well. Returning to the idea we saw in Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer reiterates the
comprehensiveness of reality—“In Christ the reality of God encounters the reality of the
world and allows us to take part in this real encounter. It is an encounter beyond all
radicalism and all compromise. Christian life is participation in Christ’s encounter with the
world.” 449

What this chapter means for justice has to do with the reason for justice. Since we
learned earlier that Bonhoeffer believed suffering was God’s justice on mankind, the question
is why there should be justice at all. He answers that question in this chapter.

Bonhoeffer said that there are “two things (that) are addressed as penultimate: being human [Menschsein] and being good [Gutsein].” 450 What he argues for the first is that being
human is a required, penultimate condition for the ultimate—justification through faith. It is
necessary for a person to be human in order to need justification through Christ. “Still, it is
the case that being human precedes being justified, and seen from the perspective of the
ultimate must precede it.” 451

With this Bonhoeffer argues against the radical idea that penultimate—or humanity—
must be destroyed. “Arbitrary destruction of the penultimate seriously harms the
ultimate.” 452 Not only should it not be destroyed, but it must be recognized as that which is

446 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 153.
447 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 154.
448 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 154.
449 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 159.
450 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 159.
451 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 160.
452 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 160.
left after the ultimate, “At the same time it is everything that follows the ultimate, in order again to precede it.” 453

From knowing the historical facts we can see that Bonhoeffer is not arguing for a repetitive justification, but he argues against the Third Reich’s process of creating superhumans. With what follows we see a very strong argument for the penultimate as a way to the ultimate—justification. This causes the reader to remember that Bonhoeffer’s own faith community aligned with Hitler, and one must wonder if this section was a rebuke to the Christian church.

In what follows Bonhoeffer says that the real danger is that in attempting to destroy the penultimate, the actor actually destroys the path that Christ would use to bring each person into justifying faith. The purpose of the penultimate “is this: preparing the way for the word.” 454 He points to a problem that the ‘German Christians’ 455 were causing by agreeing with Hitler’s social agenda. “When for example, a human life is deprived of the conditions that are part of being human, the justification of such a life by grace and faith is at least seriously hindered, if not made impossible.” 456 Later he says, “There is a depth of human bondage, of human poverty, and of human ignorance that hinders the gracious coming of Christ.” 457

This is the difficulty with a radical’s mentality of destroying the penultimate in favor of perfection. They stand in the way of God’s work. “We can make it hard for ourselves and others to come to faith. It is hard for those thrust into extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness to believe in God’s justice and goodness.” 458 For Christians this is an especially damning position because Bonhoeffer predicts, “Christ comes, to be sure, clearing the way for this coming, whether one is ready for it or not. No one can hinder Christ’s coming, but we can oppose that coming in grace.” 459

Here is the condemnation of the ‘German Christian.’ In aligning themselves with the destruction of the imperfect human, they opposed the grace of God.

Now we see Bonhoeffer address the importance of justice, “…the justice and grace of God is especially close to the very people who are deprived of rights, humiliated, and exploited…..” 460 Here those who are Christians are responsible to ensure that justice is delivered because they understand that justice is not about making sure the person is happy or whole as a result of material goods or well-being, but that the person is able to know Christ.

None of this excludes the task of preparing the way. It is, instead, a commission of immeasurable responsibility given to all who know about the coming of Jesus Christ. The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom. 461

453 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 159.
454 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 161.
455 For the purpose of this dissertation, the term ‘German Christians’ indicates those Christians in Germany who aligned with the Führer principle and the Aryan Clause within the German churches. This should not be mistaken to include all Christians who were German.
456 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 160.
457 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 161.
458 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 162.
459 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 162, italics mine.
460 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 163.
461 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 163, italics mine.
He says shortly after this that “to bring bread to the hungry is preparing the way for the coming of grace,” and following that idea one could further expand it and say ‘to bring justice to the deprived is preparing the way for the coming of grace.’

Through this we see that justice was an important issue for Bonhoeffer because of his overriding argument. Justice was not an important matter because of a humanistic idea that people deserve justice because of their own goodness, or vice versa—did not deserve justice because they were evil. This would have violated his whole argument for unity. Instead, through this section we see that Bonhoeffer valued justice because justice was part of the path to unity with Christ for every person. Justice was not valuable in order to restore a human to their humanity; justice was valuable in preparing a human for the encounter with Christ. “Nevertheless, everything depends on this action being a spiritual reality, since what is finally at stake is not the reform of worldly conditions but the coming of Christ.”

At this point Bonhoeffer finishes this chapter by writing about his favorite theme—the church—and ties that into the idea of preparing the way. But what we see in this chapter regarding justice is that it is part of the unified life that Bonhoeffer wrote about. Justice is both ultimate (God’s final justice) and penultimate (justice as part of the four mandates), but Bonhoeffer’s concern was that it be used for teaching unity with Christ. That was his final goal and the reason for his concern that the penultimate not be rejected.

It makes a difference before God whether, in the midst of a fallen, lost world, people preserve or violate the order of marriage, whether they practice justice or despotism. Of course, those who preserve marriage and those who protect justice are still sinners, but it makes a difference whether the penultimate is respected and taken seriously.

The next chapter in Ethics is the chapter, Natural Life. While this chapter is an incredibly interesting chapter that deals with the right of natural life and the theological absence of natural law in Protestant theology, it is more globally ethic than a direct exposition about justice. Therefore, we will not evaluate this chapter at this moment, but will continue to the chapter Church and World I, which is where we find the next mention of justice.

“Church and World I”

With the distinction from our previous chapter that justice is valuable in preparing the path for unity with Christ, it is very interesting to see what occurs when Bonhoeffer further writes about justice in Ethics.

This begins in the chapter titled Church and World I. The series editors date this as a late writing due to the paper and ink that Bonhoeffer used. They point out that Bonhoeffer wrote a letter dated September 24, 1942 with the same ink and one of his notes used the same type of paper. Therefore, it is their assumption that Bonhoeffer wrote this chapter around the same time.

If this dating is accurate, Bonhoeffer wrote Church and World I approximately six months before the assassination attempt on Hitler’s life (which failed due to a faulty fuse on the bomb) and seven months before Bonhoeffer’s arrest.

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462 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 163.
463 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 164.
464 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 166.
465 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 340, n.4.
One can imagine that this period of time was a time of stress and anxiety for Bonhoeffer because of his involvement with the resistance. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover how Bonhoeffer now views justice. Whereas before justice was a tool of the government used to maintain the mandates of God, now we will see that justice becomes personified and even more—justice becomes a victim in his mind.

He begins by writing that during the Third Reich—"the deification of the irrational powers of blood, of instinct, of the predator within human beings,"—all noble ideals pointed directly back to Christians. What he writes is that whenever:

- there was an appeal to reason, whenever in the face of arbitrariness, there was an appeal to the written law; whenever, in the face of barbarism, there was an appeal to culture and humanity; whenever in the face of their violation there was an appeal to freedom, tolerance, and human rights; whenever, in the face of the politicization of science, art, and so on, attention was drawn to the autonomy [Eigengesetzlichkeit] of the various areas of life—then this was sufficient to evoke immediately awareness of some kind of alliance between the defenders of these threatened values and Christians.467

What occurred at this time, according to Bonhoeffer, is that the thought that there were noble ideals that Christianity should fall in line with reversed, and the noble ideals found that they needed Christianity instead.

This was a result of Christ being the center—as Bonhoeffer repeatedly pointed out. “Instead, the decisive point is that a return to the origin [Ursprung] occurred—in the hour of danger, the children of the church who had become independent and had run away now returned to their mother.”468 Even though they appeared different than at their birth, still, like magnets, they found their true nature. “Reason, justice, culture, humanity and other concepts like these sought and found new meaning and new strength in their origin.”469 And then he bluntly states what that origin is—“This origin is Jesus Christ.”470

With this we see Bonhoeffer returning to the idea that he proposed when he discussed justice within the mandates. Justice is not a goal or ideal to obtain or glorify. Instead, justice is the result of unity with the true goal and the true ideal. “Christ is the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of theology, but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture.”471 Only when Christ is the center can there be true justice—not as an ideal, but as the river that results from the spring.

Next we see the very seriousness that Bonhoeffer perceives within his nation. He subtly points out the godlessness of his situation—and takes an approach that is somewhat surprising if we remember how frustrated Bonhoeffer was with his own Confessing Church. Whereas within the Confessing Church his stance was that “whoever is not for me is against me,”472 he now inverts that and agrees with Mark 9:40 by writing that “whoever is not against us is for us.”473 Bonhoeffer’s view is that the times are so desperate that one must not only depend on comrades, but also accept non-enemies. Not only those who have been true to Christ, but those who have even an inkling of the result of Christ must be embraced. Their timidity brings them into the fold of protection.
This is true for all those who in their struggle for justice, truth, humanity, and freedom have once again learned to utter the name of Jesus Christ, even if only with hesitation and genuine timidity. This name provides safety for them and the noble values they defend. At the same time, this name claims both them and these values.  

For Bonhoeffer, this change is surprising except that we see he still speaks about the same problem that he disapproved of within the Confessing Church. Here he says “in their struggle these confessing congregations were forced to recognize that the very neutrality of many Christians was the gravest danger that would lead to the disintegration and dissolution of the church, indeed, that it was essentially hostility toward Christ.” He points out that this requirement of loyalty to Christ caused the Confessing Church to become smaller within the church community, but, on the other hand, it enlarged the borders for true membership. It is also here that we see ideals presented as victims.

So it gathered people who had traveled from afar, and to them it could not deny its community and protection. Wounded justice, oppressed truth, humiliated humanity, violated freedom—all these now sought the Christian community, or rather its Lord, Jesus Christ. And thus it came to know the other saying of Jesus as a living experience: ‘Whoever is not against us is with us.'

Bonhoeffer also points out that these values can be persecuted just as human being can be persecuted, and we note that this brings their return as well—“...but it is the concrete suffering of lawlessness, organized lies, of hostility to humankind and acts of violence; it is the persecution of justice, truth, humanity, and freedom that drove people, to who these values were precious, under the protection of Jesus Christ and thus under his claim…”

Just as we saw earlier that God often used suffering to bring people to Christ, suffering causes the same reaction in values. “Instead, the relationship between church and world appears to us today as this new recognition of the origin that is awakened and bestowed through suffering, that is a flight to Christ resulting from persecution.” Likewise, just as by flight to Christ a person is justified, Bonhoeffer says justice is also justified “by Jesus Christ alone.”

This section gives the appearance that Bonhoeffer writes an apologetic for the church and her mandate within his situation. He points out twice that it is not Christ that needs to be justified, but rather the principles—justice being one of them. Within the church is where this occurs.

This is important to Bonhoeffer because this is what he believed was the responsibility of the church even from the time of his dissertation—to be the place of the proclamation of Christ. Stanley Hauerwas described this as “…Bonhoeffer rightly understood that the gift the church gives to any politics is the truthful proclamation of the Gospel.” Perhaps for Bonhoeffer more than anyone else, even in such disastrous times the fact that the church stood her ground was hope.
It is with the Christ, persecuted and suffering together with his church-community, that justice, truth, humanity, and freedom seek refuge. It is the Christ who is unable to find shelter in the world, the Christ of the manger and the cross who is cast out of the world, who is the shelter to whom one flees for protection; only thus is the full breadth of Christ’s power revealed.481

After this we find Bonhoeffer discussing Christ’s relationship to the wicked and the good, but here the discussion explicitly referring to justice ends.

What we learn from this chapter is that Bonhoeffer still refuses to glorify justice or to make it a goal to attain. Instead, justice is a result of that which he steadfastly declared—all goals worth obtaining are the result of only one true goal—unity with Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What we find while evaluating justice in Ethics is the importance of unity with God as a result of reality. Bonhoeffer believed that God was the ultimate reality, and therefore we cannot gain an accurate understanding of any situation without seeing the world exactly as God sees it. This is reality for Bonhoeffer. The reality perspective that Bonhoeffer believes God has for the world is that it is already redeemed and reconciled to God. This means that one can be unified with God because God provided the opportunity. This seems to be the cornerstone and basic presupposition that Bonhoeffer has for every aspect of his theology as well as justice. Once one grasps this value, then one can move on to accurately consider topics.

What follows in Bonhoeffer’s work regarding justice reflects this principle. His four mandates return to unity with God and God as the overriding authority of all. We learned from considering the four mandates that in the end the mandates must submit to the reality of Jesus Christ and his rule. We saw that this fact had implications for Bonhoeffer’s context in the area of the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws, and also for the freedom of the church.

The idea of unity continues as we consider justice in Bonhoeffer’s chapter, “Ethics as Formation.” We see that Bonhoeffer rejects ethical principles that override unity with God’s will. He upholds the simple person—who is singularly unified with God—as the answer to the problem of resisting the pressure of the Third Reich.

In “Guilt, Justification, Renewal” unity is again the focus as Bonhoeffer points out that much of the guilt for the injustice of the Third Reich lays at the doorstep of the church. We saw that this is because the church failed to proclaim the message of Christ’s redemption of the world and instead capitulated to the order of the day.

Even in the chapter “Ultimate and Penultimate Things” Bonhoeffer returns to unity. He points out that both must be accepted as the reality that God has planned for the world and rejection of either leads to disunity with God through fanaticism. This occurs because God uses the penultimate things of this world to bring people into unity with Christ, and destroying the path that God uses also destroys the path God uses to accomplish this.

Even in the final chapter that we examined—“Church and World I,” unity was the goal of all justice. What we found in that chapter is that the principle of justice, in the end, necessarily returned to Christ and unity with him. Justice only occurs when all is in unity with Christ.

481 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 346.
Throughout this examination of Bonhoeffer's view of justice, the priority of unity with Christ was the overriding theme. We see, therefore, a glimpse into the motivation for Bonhoeffer’s endurance. With the importance of unity to Bonhoeffer, we will include it in our last chapter on Bonhoeffer’s endurance.
THE EFFECT OF BONHOEFFER’S THEOLOGY ON HIS ENDURANCE

Now that we asked the questions about Bonhoeffer’s theology regarding evil and regarding justice, and we carefully and systematically evaluated *Sanctorum Communio*, *Creation and Fall*, and *Ethics*, while also referring to *Discipleship*, it is time to ask whether his theology sustained Bonhoeffer’s faith during his imprisonment and eventual murder. Will we find surprising new theology as a result of his imprisonment, or will we find a contextual application of his previously developed theology?

To do this we will use the findings to determine reoccurring themes in Bonhoeffer’s theology. Our argument is that Bonhoeffer’s beliefs and thought processes motivated his actions just as any other human’s. His beliefs will have impacted his endurance, or they will have been discarded. We will now compare what we learned from Bonhoeffer’s earlier theology to *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

*Letters and Papers from Prison* is a compilation of personal correspondence between Bonhoeffer and his family, as well as his friend, Eberhard Bethge. Bethge, through Bonhoeffer’s wishes, became Bonhoeffer’s biographer. In addition to gathering and editing the incomplete *Ethics*, Bethge also published Bonhoeffer’s correspondence. Therefore, what we have in the last book is a very personal reflection of Bonhoeffer’s own thoughts, emotions, and trials as he spent two years in the isolation of a prison cell.

The unfortunate effect of *Letters and Papers from Prison* is that it is often used as a springboard for Bonhoeffer’s theology rather than considered as a result of his previous experience and theology. What is meant by this is that many people read *Letters and Papers from Prison* and then interpret Bonhoeffer—both his resistance and work—from that perspective.

This chapter will do the opposite. We will consider *Letters and Papers from Prison* as a valuable source of reflections by a superb theologian while in a stressful situation. We shall remember that these writings occur during a time of deprivation for Bonhoeffer. He was deprived of a social context in which to perform theology. Censors regulated his contacts and correspondence. Frequently, while reading the letters, we learn that his family complained due to the inability to visit him. In fact, his oldest brother—Karl Friedrich—pointed out that he did not come to visit because then Bonhoeffer’s parents or fiancé would need to give up their visit.482 This needs to be taken into account when considering Bonhoeffer’s theology in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. He reacted only to information he obtained from the ‘wireless’—therefore, Nazi propaganda—and conversations with others who were under censorship by prison officials. While in prison Bonhoeffer lost the ability to personally observe culture and the church, and we must be aware that this also impacted his theology. However, for a study on endurance of faith, *Letters and Papers from Prison* is a superb source for comparison.

In this chapter we introduce propositions, give evidence for the proposition from our research in chapters two, three, and four, and then see if Bonhoeffer’s prison letters support the proposition. We will not include everything that we discovered in the previous chapters

because in our examination we learned that our questions led us to Bonhoeffer’s concerns but they were not always Bonhoeffer’s primary concerns. For example, examining evil did not give us the conclusions we purposed to find in beginning this work, but did bring us to awareness of Bonhoeffer’s refusal to name good and evil. We also found his treatment of nihil negativum interesting, but this could not be said to be an important part within Bonhoeffer’s endurance. At this point, we will then focus directly on Bonhoeffer’s goals.

This means we will consider only recurring themes in his theology and his familial situation. We will assume that his chosen career and his closest contacts had the greatest impact on his character and thought processes. We begin with Bonhoeffer’s family and then follow with theological findings.

The Impact of Bonhoeffer’s Family on His Endurance

Our first proposition regarding Bonhoeffer’s endurance is: Bonhoeffer’s family support and childhood rearing provided an emotionally and psychologically stable base for Bonhoeffer from which he gained strength during his resistance and imprisonment.

We saw witness to this in chapter two of this dissertation through Bethge’s words that Bonhoeffer had a certainty of judgment. Bethge also describes the involvement and caring provided by Bonhoeffer’s parents as well as the sheltered and prestigious environment Bonhoeffer grew up in. Bonhoeffer supports Bethge’s observations through comments in his letters to his family about the quality of support the children received and its benefit during his prison term. We also see him encouraging the younger members of his family through this difficult time by exhorting them to remember the behavior and traditions of the adults around them.483 This is important because certain personal characteristics have been discovered as common within individuals who chose to resist the Third Reich or to rescue victims of Nazi policy.484

This study has been the work of several social scientists through the work of The Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute at Humboldt State University, Arcata, California. This group extensively studied individuals who opposed the Third Reich. Within their work entitled Embracing the Other: Philosophical, Psychological, and Historical Perspectives on Altruism they form a definition of “heroic altruism” that they “describe as altruistic activity undertaken in extreme situations.”485

Their conference volume is large—consisting of 453 pages. We will only consider one contribution—Ervin Staub’s “The Origins of Caring, Helping, and Nonaggression: Parental Socialization, the Family System, Schools, and Cultural Influence.” From the title of the contribution, we can see why this is an important consideration for Bonhoeffer and his relationship to his family system.

483 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 294-295.
Under the section of Staub’s article entitled “Child rearing that promotes caring, helping, and non-aggression,” Staub argues that individuals who develop strong attachment to family in infancy are able later in life to develop healthy, trusting relationships with others. “Secure attachment is probably a rudiment of trust both in others and in the self, of positive valuing of other people and a positive identity.” 486

Throughout Letters and Papers from Prison, it is obvious that Bonhoeffer is strongly attached to his family. When one reads his letters, the warmth and gratitude Bonhoeffer feels towards his family is palpable. Even when Hans Von Dohnanyi writes to him in guilt that he has brought Bonhoeffer to the place of prison, we see Bonhoeffer responding that he would not even hear of it being Dohnanyi’s fault. Instead, he reflects on all the “good things” the family has shared together. 487 He is even more open with his mother—one example being the letter he wrote to her on 15 May 1943. Here he writes:

I feel myself so much a part of you all that I know that we live and bear everything in common, acting and thinking for one another, even though we have to be separated. Thank you for all your love and concern and loyalty day by day and hour by hour. 488

Bonhoeffer also gives us a picture of his parent’s commitment to their family and how they supported them even in bad times:

It’s always so comforting to find you so calm and cheerful despite all the unpleasantness you have to put up with as a result of my imprisonment. You, mother, wrote recently that you were proud that your children behaved ‘respectably’ in such a grim situation. In fact we’ve all learnt it from the two of you, especially when you were so completely calm during serious illnesses in the family and didn’t give anything away. So it has probably become a legacy. 489

This leads to the second argument by Straub, which is that certain parental behaviors also contribute to prosocial behavior. What he writes is:

These (behaviors) include parental warmth, affection, or nurturance; the tendency to reason with the child, to explain why the parents expect certain behaviors while they disapprove of others, and especially ‘induction,’ pointing out to children the consequences of their behavior on others, both negative and positive; firm but not forceful control, the parents leading the child to actually act according to values they regard as important, to follow important rules; and natural socialization, the parents guiding the child to engage in behavior that benefits others, to cooperate with others, so that learning by doing can follow… 490

These are behaviors that we see Bonhoeffer self-identifying with in the previously quoted section. But he does talk about these issues in other places as well.

What a blessing it is, in such distressing times, to belong to a large, closely-knit family, where each trusts the other and stands by him. When pastors were arrested, I sometimes used to think that it must be easiest for those of them who were unmarried. But I did not know then what the warmth that radiates from the love of a wife and family can mean in the cold air of imprisonment, and how

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487 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 32.
488 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 40.
489 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 127.
in just such times of separation the feeling of belonging together through thick and thin actually grows stronger.⁴⁹¹

And in a letter to his great nephew upon his baptism, he writes about his larger family:

The urban middle-class culture embodied in the home of your mother's parents has led to pride in public service, intellectual achievement and leadership, and a deep-rooted sense of duty towards a great heritage and cultural tradition. This will give you, even before you are aware of it, a way of thinking and acting which you can never lose without being untrue to yourself.⁴⁹²

Further evidence of the importance of the Bonhoeffer style of childrearing and socialization is given to us by the number of deaths and imprisonments the family suffered. From the three surviving sons (after WWI), two were imprisoned and killed for resistance activities. From the four daughters, two had husbands who were imprisoned and killed, one daughter was shortly imprisoned for suspicion of resistance activities, and one daughter’s son-in-law was imprisoned for resistance. (Another daughter had already immigrated to England to protect her husband who was Jewish.)

When we see the number of children who were involved in or supported resistance activities, we see that they shared a common altruism that was unusual in such large families. This lends evidence to Staub’s findings that early socialization develops the desire and personality for resistance.

We also said in chapter one that if Bonhoeffer was from any other family, he may not have been killed for his resistance. Other theologians—Martin Niemöller, for example—were imprisoned but not killed for resistance. Hitler’s government banned Bonhoeffer from teaching and writing, and finally imprisoned him for his activities. However, it was not until the Gestapo found Hans Von Dohanyi’s file that recorded Nazi crimes that Bonhoeffer was killed. Had Bonhoeffer’s family not been so prominent, and had the family not been socialized in a manner that urged resistance, Bonhoeffer may have followed the path of Niemöller—imprisoned but not murdered.

We see other evidence of the interconnectedness of the family when, in order to help his brother, Klaus, and other family members who were imprisoned because of their resistance, Bonhoeffer refused to escape. Bonhoeffer had a workable escape plan that he was ready to implement when the Zossen files were found and others members of his family were arrested.

Bonhoeffer describes in his letters how well-liked and respected he was in Tegel Prison. In fact, many of the letters he writes to Bethge were smuggled through guards who formed friendships with Bonhoeffer. We now know that one of these guards agreed to help Bonhoeffer escape. The guard and Bonhoeffer would then go into hiding. However, with the discovery of the Zossen file Bonhoeffer gave up his escape plan because his escape would make the situation for his brother, brother-in-law, and nephew-in-law (Bethge) much more difficult during their interrogation.

When we consider this story, we see that while Bonhoeffer is frequently seen as a martyr in opposition to the Third Reich, he was really a martyr for his own family. He had the opportunity to escape and save his own life, but gave up that opportunity for his family’s sake.

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⁴⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 70.
⁴⁹² Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 294-295.
Because of and for his family, we see Bonhoeffer in the last months of his own life giving his life for them. Here we see the fruition of his theology—living for others—combined with the bonds of love for his family stimulating his own endurance and causing him to live his theology in a tangible manner.

Now we will continue with an evaluation of his theology to see what additional aspects about Bonhoeffer’s endurance we can learn.

*The Centrality of Unity with God*

Now we offer our second proposition: *Unity with God was the most important theological supposition for Bonhoeffer, and unity with God—rather than ethics regarding evil or justice—formed the presuppositions for all of his theology, goals, and actions.*

As we worked through Bonhoeffer’s materials, it was impossible to miss how often Bonhoeffer returned to the subject of unity with God—especially in *Ethics*. At the end of each topic we studied we found Bonhoeffer arguing that unity with God was the answer. He was not arguing for a placid agreement to an established code of conduct. Understanding unity with God in this manner would violate all of Bonhoeffer’s theology. Instead, he argued for an active embracement of God and his will. Bonhoeffer had definite ideas of what that meant, as we will see in each chapter.

In chapter two, we see that Bonhoeffer initially addressed the topic of unity with God in *Sanctorum Communio*. Here Bonhoeffer laid the foundation for how unity with God now occurred and the positional placement of humanity. He described the reality of humanity’s relationship to God and the fact that Christ’s redemption brought humanity into unity *positionally*, although perhaps not behaviorally, in each situation.

In chapter three, we learned about unity as the created state for humanity, and that humanity destroyed unity with God because Adam wanted to know good and evil more than he wanted to know God. Bonhoeffer introduced us to Adam’s desire to overcome his created state as the creature in order to become more than the creator. He explained the “pious question” and the lasting damage that piety created.

In chapter four the overriding aspect of unity with God appeared in Bonhoeffer’s insistence on embracing our humanity and embracing the world. Bonhoeffer applied his former arguments as substantial support for a wholehearted involvement in God’s will for humanity.

As we look back over these chapters, we see that the themes that were involved in all of his works were then based on unity with God. Wolf Krötke also notes this continuity in his article that analyzes Luther’s theological impact on Bonhoeffer. He writes, “There was one fundamental and most crucial aspect in which Bonhoeffer was always in agreement with Luther: taking seriously the *solus Christus*. None of the various stages of Bonhoeffer’s life ever departed from a concentration on Christ alone.”

What is surprising, though, is that Bonhoeffer did not develop the importance of unity with God in reaction to contextual situations; but rather, before the occurrence of the Third Reich. It is impressive that the young graduate student found the theme of his theology so early in his career, and it formed his whole understanding. Now we know, thanks to Krötke’s

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work, that this was probably the influence of Luther upon him that did not dissipate due to circumstances.

Since this topic was so central to Bonhoeffer and appears time and time again in each of his works, it is only honest to consider what impact it had on his endurance. We will now delve deeply into unity with God by breaking the findings that we have in this area into three further propositions. They are:

1. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ’s work as universal was based in God’s reality. He saw all of humanity within this reality.
2. Bonhoeffer understood humanity as the penultimate state that God chose for humanity. He did not have an inflated understanding of humanity and therefore did not become disillusioned with the behavior of Christians around him nor demand an ethical standard outside of unity with God.
3. Bonhoeffer believed the disunity created by religiosity contributed to his country’s societal problems, but religiosity could be overcome with the appropriate application of reality.

We see for Bonhoeffer’s endurance that proposition (1) gives him a positional view of humanity, (2) offers a behavioral explanation, and (3) offers hope through an action plan for a healthy church and society after the war.

Now we will consider the proof for each proposition, the implications, and whether they remained with him until the end.

The Implications of Universal Redemption

1. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ’s work as universal was based in God’s reality. He saw all of humanity within this reality.

We discovered in chapter two that Bonhoeffer introduced and initially argued for universal redemption in Sanctorum Communio. There we saw him use the idea of original sin to arrive at the conclusion of universal redemption. His argument was that since Adam was a member of the human race, his sin of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil infected the whole of humanity. This sin formed the peccatorum communio.

The following argument is that when Christ performed the act of redemption on the cross, he redeemed the collective person and created the sanctorum communio. By the work of Christ all disunified humanity became unified humanity. Bonhoeffer said that now all people are “accepted, included, and borne.”

This is what Bonhoeffer defines as reality. God’s reality is that he is reconciled to the world, although the world does not realize it. Bonhoeffer saw the world as two situations—people who are redeemed and realize it, and people who are redeemed and do not realize it.

We will see how he dealt with the first group when we consider our second proposition. The second group is the important group for this proposition.

We see that for Bonhoeffer there was no doubt regarding the positional standing of every human being. What made a difference in this claim for his endurance was that he believed it was God’s will for him as a theologian for him to proclaim that message in cooperation with the church.

This gave him an accurate perception of what was occurring around him in society, and what the solution was. He could see that actions within the Third Reich did not
correspond to a society that recognized its redemption. In fact, the actions in the Reich corresponded exactly to a society ignorant of the position of redemption. The leadership waged war against Godly attitudes, perverted and used populist morality to reject true Godliness and to create a false piety, and destroyed others who were also redeemed by God—either through impossible living standards or death.

Bonhoeffer saw his task as making the ignorant aware. This was the impetus for his struggle with the church that we also saw in chapter two. Bonhoeffer wanted the church to take a stand against the Führer principle because it aligned unity with the wrong source. The idea of complete alignment was the same principle that Bonhoeffer advocated even before Hitler’s grasp at power. However, Bonhoeffer advocated complete alignment with the real savior—not the Führer. It must have been difficult for Bonhoeffer to see his country finally agree to complete unity, only to have chosen an idol—Gleichschaltung.

However, this motivated him rather than causing him to give up. We see that urging the church to proclaim unity with God was his goal until 1939 when he switched to political resistance. Even while politically resisting, we see from Ethics that he was still preoccupied with letting people know about their redemption and reconciliation to God—“…in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included and borne…”

In particular, when speaking about redemption, we see that very late in his imprisonment Bonhoeffer retained the understanding of redemption and reconciliation that he developed first in Sanctorum Communio.

We find it in his letter to his godson and great-nephew, Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge. Bonhoeffer wrote a long letter to him in May 1944 to commemorate the baptism of young Bethge. In it he describes what he foresees for the church and its proclamation in the coming years. Especially about the proclamation he writes:

> 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.

So we see that even at this late date in Bonhoeffer’s theology he considers that God is at peace with the world. This shows us that he still sees humanity within the borders of being redeemed just as he had since Sanctorum Communio.

Very interesting to this portion of our study is that Bonhoeffer connected God’s redemption and endurance in his own words. It was in a poem that he wrote in June 1944. He entitled it “The Past” and in it he struggles with the torment he feels while sitting in his cell and thinking about the past. He resolves the tortuous thoughts with a hope that he envisions:

> I stretch my hands out,
And I pray—
And a new thing now I hear:
‘The past will come to you once more,
And be your life’s enduring part,
Through thanks and repentance.
Feel in the past God’s forgiveness and goodness,
Pray him to keep you today and tomorrow.’

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494 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 67.
495 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 300, italics mine.
496 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 323, italics mine.
Here we note that Bonhoeffer sees the part of his life that will endure as the past, and in the past was God’s forgiveness. It is an act that was already done, and with it we see that the importance of humanity’s redemption did not only help him deal with others, but with himself. Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer—the traitor to his country and attempted murderer—was “accepted, included, and borne.”

We also see how much hope and strength for endurance this idea brought him in his letter that he wrote the very next day. He just heard of the Normandy Invasion, and he writes to Bethge:

I’m sending you this hurried greeting, simply because I want in some way to share the day with you yourself and with all of you. The news didn’t come as a surprise to me, and yet things turn out differently from what we expect. Today’s texts take us to the heart of the gospel—‘redemption’ is the key word to it all. Let us face the coming weeks in faith and in great assurance about the general future, and commit you way and all our ways to God.

This letter has an exuberant tone, and again Bonhoeffer connects his hope for the future with redemption. We see from these three examples that Bonhoeffer did not lose his conviction about humanity’s reconciliation as he went through the time of resistance and imprisonment; but rather, redemption and reconciliation became dearer to him and brought him more hope. Since he himself made the connection between endurance and reconciliation, and hope and reconciliation, we see the assumption that resulted from observing his theology was accurate. Part of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s endurance was a result of his understanding of Christ’s universal redemption of humanity.

This basic proposition formed a presupposition for all of Bonhoeffer’s following theology. We will see in the next two propositions dealing with unity that Bonhoeffer’s understanding about universal redemption is indeed in his argumentation. And with our second main proposition—the church’s contribution to his endurance, universal redemption is still present and plays a large role there as well.

**Humanity as a Creature**

2. Bonhoeffer understood humanity as the penultimate state that God has chosen for humanity. He did not have an inflated understanding of humanity and therefore did not become disillusioned with the behavior of Christians around him nor demand an ethical standard outside of unity with God.

While we saw how the positional aspect of humanity’s redemption contributed to Bonhoeffer’s endurance in the former section, this current proposition also is connected to humanity and endurance. Bonhoeffer did not have a laundry list of holiness that he expected from his fellow Christians. He did not exalt them as saints; but rather, expected them to act completely human.

This, combined with the fact that he thought most people were ignorant of their redemption, means that Bonhoeffer did not become disillusioned with people around him and lose hope. Bonhoeffer never expected humans to be more than how God created them—as

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497 This refers to how he would have been conceived at the time of his imprisonment by the majority of his fellow countrymen. See, John W. de Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer’s Legacy: A New Generation,” found at http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=72 on June 15, 2009.

the creature and not God. This understanding of humans as humans began in *Sanctorum Communio* but Bonhoeffer enlarged it in *Creation and Fall*. In *Creation and Fall* we learn that the created state for humanity was a unified state. Adam was the creature, and he lived with God as the center of his existence. As long as Adam chose to remain in this state all was well.

It was, however, Adam’s rejection of his humanity that destroyed his unity with God. Adam was not content to remain the creature who received his knowledge and life from God. He rebelled and wanted to be God. He wanted God’s knowledge, and he wanted to be able to judge as God judged. Instead of desire for God, through Adam humanity now had desire only for itself.

Bonhoeffer believed that humanity was stuck in this mindset of trying to overcome their created state and would remain stuck until they understood their positional situation of already being redeemed. Part of this understanding was the fact that humanity needed to understand that it lived in the penultimate state and that penultimate was perfectly alright because it was the will of God for humanity.

Bonhoeffer could see that many people—even Christians—could be drawn into the propaganda of the Third Reich. Not through a lack of holiness or morality on their own part, but exactly the opposite. They could be drawn in because of the age-old problem of trying to overcome their humanity and destroy the penultimate. They were seduced—just as Adam was—by the promise of bigger and better. They were told they could create the ultimate just by being better than what they were, and by destroying that which did not fit in with their idea of the ultimate.

Bonhoeffer knew that this seduction—and therefore the problem of Germany’s society—could be solved if humanity embraced its creaturliness. Since, as we also learned in chapter three, life is only possible when in unity with God, embracing our creaturliness is the most important task a human can accomplish. To do this, humanity must “participat(e) in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.”

He began to argue for “Christ’s encounter with the world.” Society needed to realize that it must stop trying to outdo God’s plan for the world if they were ever to become completely unified with God. Therefore, Bonhoeffer argued for the penultimate so that at least Christians would begin living in the world rather than trying to create the ultimate in its place.

This is not to say he did not suffer discouragement based on the behavior of Christians even with this theology. But the evidence that he persevered due to his theology appears in Bethge’s biography and was addressed in chapter two of this dissertation. It is this: after the battle for the church failed, Bonhoeffer began political resistance. This signals not a giving up, but a change in tactic. Bonhoeffer first tried to persuade Christians of their calling. But when that failed, he moved to eliminate the danger to their understanding by participating in the assassination attempt on their seducer—Adolf Hitler. He never abandoned his beliefs or lost hope due to ungodly behavior. Instead, he switched tactics in his opposition. He tried to remove the one who threatened to destroy the penultimate.

This switch in tactics is obvious. Bonhoeffer died because he took part in an assassination attempt on Hitler’s life. But the reason for the attempt was still his theology,

i.e., that humanity was an acceptable state that was planned by God to be lived in the penultimate world. As with all our arguments, if this conviction regarding humanity and penultimate stayed with Bonhoeffer even after his imprisonment and continued to help him endure in his hope, then we should see him carrying the idea within *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

We do see this argument supported in three various places in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Bonhoeffer discusses them rather late—the first in April 1944—so we know that this theology stayed with him throughout his imprisonment.

The first approach is in the famous section regarding religionless Christianity. However, we will deal in-depth with that section with our next proposition. Therefore, to avoid repetition, we will move on to the second support for our argument.

This came on May 29, 1944. Bonhoeffer was clearly claiming the center of life as the place where God wants to be.

> Here again, God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the center of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin.501

Here Bonhoeffer agrees with what he wrote in *Ethics*. God encounters humanity in its very earthly presence—as the center and not the end of life. For Bonhoeffer, there was no waiting for eternity in order to have God. Humanity needed to live in this world with God, and they needed to live in the restored state of humanity—recognizing God as their center.

The third reference is from a letter dated 27 June 1944. This is a very valuable letter to our proposition because Bonhoeffer discusses both redemption and the need for humanity.

> He says that Christianity erred by thinking about redemption as only a New Testament concept and as a “redemption from cares, distress, fears, and longings, from sin and death, in a better world beyond the grave.” Instead, he says that Christianity should see redemption as a vehicle to live in the here and now. He uses Israel as an example. “Israel is delivered out of Egypt so that it may live before God as God’s people on earth.” Christ’s redemption has only sharpened this. He compares it with mythology and finds, “the difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament.”

Bonhoeffer even seems to connect living in the reality of this world with being truly Christian:

> The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself (‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’), he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one. Redemption myths arise from human boundary-experiences, but Christ takes hold of a man at the center of his life.503

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When he finishes this section, he tells us that his “thoughts are constantly revolving around the same theme.” 506 We see that he still maintains what he wrote in Ethics with a referral to Creation and Fall. In Creation and Fall he argued that humanity must live with God in the center, and in Ethics he included the justification for ‘this world’ in his argument for the penultimate.

We now know that Bonhoeffer continued to claim the necessity to live as humans in this world even while in prison. If there ever was a time when escapism into piety or spiritualism would be a temptation, it was from the bleakness of a prison cell. Continuing to live in the reality of humanness at this time is a testimony of how deeply Bonhoeffer internalized his theology—in addition to his own words.

We see again that Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison support our proposition. Understanding and being human gave Bonhoeffer a perspective of reality that contributed to his endurance.

The Religious Dilemma

3. Bonhoeffer believed the disunity created by religiosity contributed to his country’s societal problems, but religiosity could be overcome with the appropriate application of reality.

If we keep in mind our previous section, it is not surprising that Bonhoeffer applied his understanding of reality to his societal problems. But it may be disconcerting to some that he believed religiosity (what he called the ‘pious question’) was at the core of the inertia of his fellow Christians and citizens. For Bonhoeffer, religiosity was the chasing after a piousness that did not take into consideration that God already redeemed and accepted the world just as it is. It was a piousness that wanted to build the ultimate here on earth and rejected the penultimate as God’s reality.

The name of this section is The Religious Dilemma because for many Christians it will be just that—a dilemma. As we saw in the introduction, for Arminians the prevalent thought is that we should leave the world behind. For other traditions, humanity is by nature depraved and needs to be mortified by austerity and piety. For Bonhoeffer both of these ideas are wrong and are rebellious because it replaced reality with pious actions. It is an escapism that attempts to handle the reality of the world by attempting to create the ultimate through one’s ‘holiness.’ That is a difficult concept to embrace if one should come from any of those traditions.

Bonhoeffer’s conclusion is a result of him seeing the denial of humanity as an attempt by humans to become more than God, and to deny their positional status. This is an argument that comes from his exegesis of Genesis in Creation and Fall. From that research, Bonhoeffer argued that Adam’s sin was a sin of piety rather than bald rebellion. Adam was finally seduced—not by wicked, ribald promises of pleasure, but by promises of being more holy. He would know good and evil and would be able to judge it. In fact, he would even be able to judge God because he would know what God knows. Therefore, wanting more piety meant Adam desired to judge God, rather than being judged by God. Bonhoeffer believed this desire was an attempt to escape God’s plan for them—reality—and a manner of usurping God’s position as the creator. Being religious was one of humanity’s attempts to not be

506 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 337.
human. So in the end it was rebellion after all, even when cloaked in piety. And, because of this rebellion, humanity now lives a separated existence. It is separated from God, separated from itself, and separated from others.

We even saw the beginning roots of this argument in *Sanctorum Communio*. There Bonhoeffer offered a more mild rejection of religiosity over against the church. He said that when the relationship that God established is overlooked, then “religious impulses” receive focus instead. We see again that he juxtaposes being pardoned by Christ and in relationship with him to religion. “Rather, God established the reality of the church, of humanity pardoned in Jesus Christ—not religion, but revelation, not religious community, but church. This is what the reality of Jesus Christ means.”

So we begin to see that Bonhoeffer was already signaling a problem with religion when he began his theological career. Before he explained what the problem exactly was, his audience could note a concern. However, with *Creation and Fall*, it is obvious. He names religiosity as the initial sin that brought the fall. He even labeled it “the pious question.”

This separateness obviously brings social problems. In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer said that when humanity attempts to know good and evil they know only their own good and evil which has nothing to do with what God thinks is good and evil. Since they are disunified from God, what they think is good is already evil.

Obviously, scapegoating fellow citizens was then evil since the judgment of them already occurred in a separated state. The only remedy for so great an error was to become unified with the will of God. Perhaps this is why Bonhoeffer readdresses the theme in *Ethics*. In *Ethics* he points out the errors that occur from attempting to judge good and evil and argues again for the return to unity with God.

What Bonhoeffer argues in all three works is that people must leave religion behind, must reclaim their humanity given to them by God, and live from the will of God rather than their own piety. If this were to occur, then the problem of good and evil—the problem of separateness rather than unity—would be minimized. If society were to hear that homosexuals were already redeemed by Christ, part of the collective person, and needed to hear of their acceptance, then perhaps it would not have been easy to ship them off to concentration camps. If gypsies were understood to be part of the penultimate and an opportunity to usher in Christ's coming in grace, then hatred of them would be mitigated.

We see why the church’s understanding and proclamation was Bonhoeffer’s primary concern. The implications of a proper application of his theology would have prevented the Reich from targeting people. Then the value judgment of one being good or “bad” over against an inhumane standard is impossible. A human’s standing is sufficient because Christ is sufficient.

In fact, that this theology remained with Bonhoeffer is uncontested. Of course, his continuance of religionless Christianity in his prison letters is famous. However, for the sake of thoroughness we shall review his comments. And in the end we will see that not only did this understanding of and opposition to religiosity help Bonhoeffer endure, but offered him hope as well.

Did Bonhoeffer maintain his ideas about religiosity, humanity, and unity with God while in prison, or did that change? Eight months into his imprisonment we receive the first indications. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, he describes the things he uses while in solitude to help him in his faith. One of which is “to ‘make the sign of the cross’ at our morning and

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evening prayers.”\textsuperscript{508} He then says something that tells us what he thinks about religiosity while in prison, but also confirms his position before prison. “Don’t be alarmed; I shall not come out of here a \textit{homo religious}! On the contrary, my fear and distrust of ‘religiosity’ have become even greater here.”\textsuperscript{509} So we see that he is still convinced that religiosity is a problem. Even to the point that he says he is afraid of it.

Continuing in \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, we find that one year after his imprisonment he writes to Bethge in a manner that sounds familiar to \textit{Ethics} and \textit{Creation and Fall}. Here he writes, “I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weakness but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man’s life and goodness.”\textsuperscript{510} And then a few lines later when he ends the letter to Bethge, he writes, “Some time, just read Prov. 22.11,12; there is something that will bar the way to any escapism disguised as piety.”\textsuperscript{511} We see that he still maintains the importance of God in the center of life just as he claimed in \textit{Creation and Fall}, and he is still opposed to an escapist piety as he denounced in \textit{Ethics}.

It should then not surprise us that in the beginning of this letter he addresses religion. This is the famous letter wherein Bonhoeffer questions what it means to have a “religionless Christianity.”\textsuperscript{512} The energy that one feels coming from Bonhoeffer’s pen attests to the importance he feels about this subject and to the hope that it brings him.

Bonhoeffer discusses with Bethge the times in which they were living and what will happen after the war. Then he approaches the idea of how Christianity will look once the war is over. He says that people are no longer religious, and he wonders what that means for Christianity since previously Christianity rested on “the ‘religious a priori’ of mankind.”\textsuperscript{513}

But he is not hopeless in his consideration of what religionless Christianity means. This is the situation that Bonhoeffer hoped for and now he considers “…what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is religionless Christianity?”\textsuperscript{514}

Bonhoeffer is not negative in his consideration of religionless Christianity. A little later in the letter he does become negative once again, but it is towards religiosity. He says, Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end or when human resources fail—in fact it is always the \textit{deus ex machina} that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure—always, that is to say exploiting human weakness or human boundaries.\textsuperscript{515}

This is why he tells Bethge that he would prefer to speak of God as the center. Religiosity always makes humanity the center until it fails, and then it brings the concept of God into the

\textsuperscript{508} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 135.
\textsuperscript{509} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 135.
\textsuperscript{510} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 282.
\textsuperscript{511} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 282. In a footnote to this biblical reference, Bethge has added that Bonhoeffer was probably mistaken in his biblical reference, and says that he thinks Bonhoeffer meant Prov. 24: 11 instead.
\textsuperscript{512} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 280.
\textsuperscript{513} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 280.
\textsuperscript{514} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 280.
\textsuperscript{515} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, 281-282.
plans. Bonhoeffer will have none of this. For him God must be the center from the beginning.

This is exactly his claim from before his imprisonment. Now we see that Bonhoeffer has hope that his argument will be tested. This gives him hope rather than despair. So much hope that he writes to Bethge near the end of the letter, “How this religionless Christianity looks, what form it takes, is something that I’m thinking about a great deal, and I shall be writing to you again about it soon. It may be that on us in particular, midway between East and West, there will fall a heavy responsibility.”

With this we see that Bonhoeffer never released his understanding of God as the center and reconciled to humanity. In fact, what we find during his imprisonment is that the idea of being able to practice his theory energized Bonhoeffer and gave him hope for the future. This hope of Christianity without religion helped him to endure, not only in imprisonment but even during the difficult years of the church struggle.

However, that was not the end of Bonhoeffer’s agreement with his former theology. On June 27, 1944 Bonhoeffer again addresses the need to fully participate as human in this life. He writes to Bethge,

The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament. The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself (‘My God, why has thou forsaken me?’), he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ.

Bonhoeffer began hoping for Christianity that was not endangered by religiosity in *Sanctorum Communio*. There we saw that he recognized the church as the place where the proclamation of redemption rather than religiosity would take place. We see him claiming humanity as necessary for unity with God, and we see him rejecting impotent piousness. Most important we see that these concepts stayed with him even in his later writings and gave him hope for his society after the Third Reich. This was a key point for Bonhoeffer’s endurance. Now we will continue to consider the second main proposition that we named as a point of endurance—his understanding of the church.

**The Meaning of the Church for Bonhoeffer’s Endurance**

Here we will address our final position: Bonhoeffer believed that all of society was encompassed by the church; he had nowhere else to turn to, and he heartily embraced the church as God’s will for the redeemed world.

As we stated in the previous section, Bonhoeffer believed that Christ existed as church-community. This was his argument in *Sanctorum Communio*. He did not see the church as a social arena where the holy congregate. Instead, he saw the church as revelation because this

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is where Christ existed. The sole purpose of the church, we learned, is for the message of redeemed humanity to be proclaimed in order to bring the reality of unity with God to humanity. We can now see why Bonhoeffer considered the church as the new social order. The reality for Bonhoeffer was that all of society was in this social order anyway due to redemption and simply needed to recognize it.

Since this was central to all of Bonhoeffer’s theology and his understanding of reality, we will consider how this impacted his endurance. We will ask whether he continued with his belief about the importance of the church throughout his prison writings.

**Christ, the Church, and Unity with God**

Bonhoeffer’s treatment of the church shows us a second aspect of Bonhoeffer’s endurance. Even when the actions of the churches disappointed him, he never confused the visible church with the reality of the church. While the visible church may act contrary to God’s will, the reality of the true church is that it is always in God’s will because it is Christ existing as the church-community. So he could never lose hope, even in the face of disappointing behavior by the visible church. Even should he choose to turn away from the church, where would he go? Turning away could not remove him from the church; it simply would cause him to be disunified from God.

Now we can see how Bonhoeffer endured through the church struggle without losing his faith, and why it is important to understand the primary role that the church played in Bonhoeffer’s theology and actions. The reality was that Christ existed as the church-community. The church-community was under attack by the Führer principle and the Aryan Clause. Therefore, Christ and his work were under attack. Regardless of all the social implications that came with the Third Reich, the root problem was that it hindered the proclamation work of the church. Until reality was established and the church returned to its proclamation, social issues would continue. Clifford Green also recognized this issue for Bonhoeffer. He writes, “Single-minded adherence to Christ was all it took to resist the whole worldly panoply of National Socialism.”

Bonhoeffer could endure until 1939 in the church struggle because he held hope that if the church would return to single-mindedness of their reality, the church could proclaim the universal reality of redemption for all people which would solve many social problems. Even after 1939 when he lost confidence in the visible German churches he still endured in hope for the real church—even to the point of returning from America to fight again for her.

We can understand that Bonhoeffer’s endurance was bolstered by his understanding of Christ existing as church-community during his church struggle and resistance. But did it impact his endurance of faith after the crisis of imprisonment?

Bonhoeffer does discuss the church in his letters to his family. Especially in the beginning of his imprisonment, we can mark the great importance that the church still had for Bonhoeffer.

In one of his early letters we see that Bonhoeffer points out that it is Ascension Day and because of this his thoughts are with the church. “My thoughts go out to all of you, to the church and its services, from which I have now been separated for so long, and also to the many unknown people in this building who are bearing their fate in silence.”

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518 Green in de Gruchy, *Cambridge Companion*, 120.
Bonhoeffer recognized the importance of the day because it belonged to the church is borne witness to by his fiancé, Maria von Wedemeyer. She writes, “He lived by the church holidays and by seasons, rather than by the calendar month, and the dates on his letters were sometimes approximations at best. He voiced his disappointment that he had not received a letter from me or anyone else expressly for Whit Sunday.”  So we see that Bonhoeffer did not abandon the church when he was imprisoned but that it remained so important for him that it continued to regulate his days.

We also see in his reference that he kept his earlier formulation of Christ’s redemption of the world. In the same section where he indicates he is thinking of the church he also writes, “Today is Ascension Day, and that means that it is a day of great joy for all who can believe that Christ rules the world and our lives.” We see that Bonhoeffer did not succumb to fatal discouragement regarding Christ’s work or the church even after being imprisoned. He still believed that the world was ruled by Christ regardless of what may be manifested around him.

It was not only his parents who he wrote this message to. We see also that his belief that God was in control of the whole world appears within a letter that he wrote to Hans von Dohnanyi.

Von Dohnanyi wrote to Bonhoeffer shortly after they were arrested. In this letter, Von Dohnanyi expressed regret that Bonhoeffer and Von Dohnanyi’s wife, Christel (Bonhoeffer’s sister), had been imprisoned because of this actions. Bonhoeffer writes back to Von Dohnanyi saying,

For you must know that there is not even an atom of reproach or bitterness in me about what has befallen the two of us. Such things come from God and from him alone, and I know that I am one with you and Christel in believing that before him there can only be subjection, perseverance, patience—and gratitude.

So here we see not only Bonhoeffer addressing that God is still in control of what happens, but that the only appropriate response to the troubles is to persevere. In this letter Bonhoeffer has himself tied the idea of God’s sovereignty over the world, the claim that Bonhoeffer proposed and developed in Sanctorum Communio, to his own perseverance.

As we continue through Letters and Papers from Prison we see further testimony to his understanding of Christ’s work and the importance of the church for him. The next time we see him talk about the church is again connected to the calendar. Again, along with marking the church holiday, Bonhoeffer comments on the importance of the church for him.

Well, Witsuntide is here, and we are still separated; but it is in a special way a feast of fellowship. When the bells range this morning, I longed to go to church, but instead I did as John did on the island of Patmos, and had such a splendid service of my own, that I did not feel lonely at all, for you were all with me, everyone of you, and so were the congregations in whose company I have kept Witsuntide.

Here Bonhoeffer tells us that he “longs to go to church” and that even the memory of his former congregations strengthens his ability to endure. In the next sentence he further

521 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 50.
522 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 52.
523 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 53.
accounts how the church helps him—he uses her hymns for emotional support and encouragement.

Every hour or so since yesterday evening I’ve been repeating to my own comfort Paul Gerhardt’s Whitsun hymn with the lovely lines, ‘Thou are a Spirit of joy’ and ‘Grant us joyfulness and strength,’ and besides that, the words ‘If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small’ (Prov. 24), and ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control’ (II Tim.1). 524

With the topics of the scripture verses, we can see that his endurance was very much on his mind and to bolster that he was using the familiar resources of his church community.

In this letter of 14 June 1943, he returns again and again to the topic of Whitsun—even when it comes to his release. “You’re all waiting just as I am, and I must admit that in some part or other of my subconscious mind I had been hoping to be out of here by Witsuntide⋯”525

It was not only in telling the time as he sat in prison where we see the church’s importance for Bonhoeffer. He also told his interrogator how important the church was in his actions and decisions.

When reading the outline of a letter he chose to write to the Judge Advocate, we must understand that Bonhoeffer needed to proceed extremely cautiously. He was still concealing the information regarding his resistance and the assassination attempt. However, he points out two aspects of the church that he maintained until late in the church struggle and which he never contradicted.

First, he describes his vision for the church that he held even from the beginning:

Only a church that is inwardly strong in faith can fulfil its hard task to the homeland during a war, which consists in the summons to unswerving (?) trust in God, to strong inward resistance, to perseverance, to firm confidence and [indecipherable] personal pastoral care to Germans fighting in the homeland [indecipherable]. 526

It should not be surprising to learn that Bonhoeffer thought that the church could be in service to Germany. The focus on his involvement in the attempted assassination of Hitler is so strong that we forget that he actually joined the Abwehr in order to try and save Germany from the draconian punishment and reparations as they saw after the First World War. It would be a mistake to discount Bonhoeffer’s nationality even though he was not a nationalist. Even with recognizing the guilt of his country, he did not want to bring harm to it—as was evidenced in his return from the United States to serve it at the cost of his own life.

However, that is not the most striking words that he wrote. What is most striking are the words “a church that is inwardly strong in faith.” Since we have evaluated Bonhoeffer’s theology in succession, we can see why having a strong church was important to him. For him, it was the reality of Christ and the testimony of Christ’s work.

We also see in this letter another aspect of the church struggle that Bonhoeffer would have quickly given up if his convictions had changed after 1939. That was the refusal by the confessing church ministers to register as recognized clergy with the state. Bonhoeffer alludes to the result:

524 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 53.
525 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 54.
526 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 64.
People may think what they like about the Confessing Church, but there is one thing of which it cannot be accused without being completely misunderstood: no one in it would at anytime regard ‘call-up’ as something ‘threatening.’ The hundreds of voluntary registrations by the young ministers of the Confessing Church and the great sacrifices made from their ranks speak clearly enough to the contrary.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers}, 64-65, italics mines.}

The sacrifice that Bonhoeffer speaks about here is the deaths of his seminarians because they belonged to the Confessing Church rather than the recognized German churches. They could not receive exemption from war service as Confessing Church pastors and therefore many of them died while fighting.

The deaths of his former students were devastating for Bonhoeffer and discounting the need to remain in \textit{status confessionis} would have been one of the first signals that Bonhoeffer would have given if his conviction regarding the church had changed. Instead, we see him even in imprisonment still arguing for the need for the separated witness—although in a more nationalistic manner than normal for Bonhoeffer.

With this signal, we know that Bonhoeffer’s view of the church persisted into his imprisonment. But that is not the only reference Bonhoeffer made to the church while imprisoned. The next time we find Bonhoeffer writing to his parents about the church confirms that he maintains his concern for the church. It is on Reformation day and as in Bonhoeffer’s previous letters, he recognizes the church’s day:

\begin{quote}
Today is Reformation Day, a feast that in our time can give one plenty to think about. One wonders why Luther’s action had to be followed by consequences that were the exact opposite of what he intended, and that darkened the last years of his life, so that he sometimes even doubted the value of his life’s work. He wanted a real unity of the church and the West—that is, of the Christian peoples, and the consequence was the disintegration of the church and of Europe; he wanted the ‘freedom of the Christian man,’ and the consequence was indifference and licentiousness; he wanted the establishment of a genuine secular order free from clerical privilege, and the result was insurrection, the Peasant’s War, and soon afterwards the gradual dissolution of all real cohesion and order in society.\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers}, 123.}
\end{quote}

In this reflection on Luther’s work, Bonhoeffer names his own concern that he had in common with Luther—the unity of society with the church. Bonhoeffer also signals his own wonderment that the very desire that he and Luther shared—an understanding of the unity of society with God through the church—was further damaged by Luther’s reformation of the church. Bonhoeffer’s own attempt to reform the church had a different failure to that of Luther—Bonhoeffer could not change the direction of the church at all.

We see that he still struggles with the same topic that he discovered in \textit{Sanctorum Communio} and that he dedicated so much time to during the church struggle and in \textit{Ethics}. While he was a confident, youthful, graduate student while writing \textit{Sanctorum Communio}, in his letter to his parents we notice his doubts now that he is a mature theologian.

Now he wonders how a noble gesture such as the unity of society could go so very wrong. He says that Luther’s desire for the same unity brought “the disintegration of the church and the West.”

We can hear in Bonhoeffer’s questioning his own question about his circumstances. How did a theologian who longed for his church to be unified end up in prison after participating in a plot to kill the leader of his country? Just as Luther longed for a unified church and experienced destruction because of his work, the same applied for Bonhoeffer.
This is the first time we see uncertainty with Bonhoeffer. He says it gives “one plenty to think about.” It was not only his own personal experience that Bonhoeffer needed to think about, but what his theology of unity meant as well. He gives us a hint further in the quotation when he describes a theological debate between two of his university professors:

I remember from my student days a discussion between Holl and Harnack as to whether the great historical intellectual and spiritual movements made headway through their primary or their secondary motives. At the time I thought Holl was right in maintaining the former; now I think he was wrong. As long as a hundred years ago Kierkegaard said that today Luther would say the opposite of what he said then. I think he was right—with some reservations.529

Bonhoeffer’s primary motivation was unity with God and it motivated him throughout the church struggle and his resistance. But it is true that he was not able to make headway with his primary motive. At this time the resisters still held out hope for Hitler’s assassination—Bonhoeffer’s second motivation. We see from his statement here that Bonhoeffer came to believe that a primary motive somehow had to be achieved by a secondary motive, and this agrees completely with his theology of avoiding the knowledge of good and evil and remaining unified with God that we found from considering Creation and Fall.

In another letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer gives us another signal regarding his theology and further expounds on his idea of religion that we discussed in the previous section on religionless Christianity. He is discussing Karl Barth’s critique of religion. Bonhoeffer says Barth replaced religiosity with “a positivist doctrine of revelation” and then critiques that doctrine by writing:

The positivism of revelation makes it too easy for itself, by setting up, as it does in the last analysis, a law of faith, and so mutilates what is—by Christ’s incarnation!—a gift for us. In the place of religion there now stands the church—that is in itself biblical—but the world’s in some degree made to depend on itself and left to its own devices, and that’s the mistake.530

Here we learn two things; one about the church and the other about the world. About the church we learn that it has replaced religion and about the world we learn that it should never be left to “its own devices.” This is a continuation of the theology we have seen since Sanctorum Communio but with a further insight into the church. Now Bonhoeffer tells us that the church has replaced religion. This tells us more about why he argued against religion (such as we saw in the previous section). Not only did religiosity cause disunity with God, but it was completely unnecessary because it had been replaced by the church. And it shows us that Bonhoeffer still maintained the importance of the church even in prison. The impact of his words is great. If Bonhoeffer is claiming that the church has replaced religion then he is still claiming the centrality of the church for humanity and the comprehensive inclusion of all humanity therein. For where there is religion, now there is the church.

We see then, whether we agree with Bonhoeffer’s argument or not, that in his mind the church is still primary and that it should not be separated from the ‘world.’ For Bonhoeffer these two still make a pair.

It is in the next passage that we will consider that Bonhoeffer gives us the answer to what the bridge will be for the church. If we think about what he said regarding religionless Christianity while at the same time recognizing the place of primacy of the church for Bonhoeffer, it can be confusing. Was Bonhoeffer arguing for a churchless Christianity—a

529 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 123.
530 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 286.
secular Christianity? This would then be a repudiation of the importance of the church in his life in his final days.

Part of the answer to that question is found in our argument made in the section, “Humanity and Endurance.” We see there that Bonhoeffer’s opposition to religion did not begin in prison and therefore his idea of religionless Christianity was not a result of a lost hope in the church, but a renewed hope in a vibrant Christianity. Bonhoeffer was hoping for a reformed church—one that did not include religiosity.

In a letter commemorating the baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge—the son of Eberhard and Renate Bethge—Bonhoeffer expresses his disappointment with the German churches. “Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world.” But Bonhoeffer still had hope—and an action plan—for the churches. In the next sentence he writes, “Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action.”

Bonhoeffer has introduced his idea for the existence and renewal of the church after her shame during the Third Reich. Instead of a secular Christianity as a result of religionless Christianity, Bonhoeffer envisions a servant church. Throughout the rest of his letters and writings this does not change. We can see that Bonhoeffer has an eye on and a hope for the future by what he writes regarding the church. He did not turn away from his faith, but was able to envision the world with a renewed church. He was, however, able to be patient in order to see this occur. He had learned from his early experiences not to rush in too quickly—

By the time you have grown up, the church’s form will have changed greatly. We are not yet out of the melting-pot, and any attempt to help the church prematurely to a new expansion of its organization will merely delay its conversion and purification. It is not for us to prophesy 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. ‘They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it’ (Jer. 33.9). 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, ‘The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter till full day’ (Prov. 4.18).

Bonhoeffer did not offer this estimation of the church with his eyes closed. He was very aware that the church had lost ground and that the world was moving on without it. On June 8, 1944, he wrote a very long letter to Eberhard Bethge describing the current trouble. Bonhoeffer indicates that Bethge has been asking “many important questions” regarding things that have been “occupying” Bonhoeffer’s thoughts. He writes that, “Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God’.” Bonhoeffer gives various aspects of this secularism, including

what he sees as a “secularized offshoots of Christianity,” these being “existentialist philosophy and the psychotherapists.” He is scathing in his evaluation of them. He says about them, “Wherever there is health, strength, security, simplicity they sent luscious fruit to gnaw at or to lay their pernicious eggs in. They set themselves to drive people to inward despair and then the game is in their hands.”

He is no more positive about the Christian apologists. “The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian.”

He moves on to give an historical account of the church’s attempt to resist secularization. All of which failed—even the attempts by theologians Barth and Bultmann. The reader is ready to give up all hope for the future of the church and then Bonhoeffer says, “Now for your question whether there is any ‘ground’ left for the church, or whether that ground has gone for good; and the other question, whether Jesus didn’t use men’s ‘distress’ as a point of contact with them, and whether therefore the ‘methodism’ that I criticized earlier isn’t right.”

He is again arguing for a servant church. Religion is again rejected. It is not about maintaining a system or an institution, but the deliverance of the message where and when it is needed. This will be the place of the church in a secularized world.

This thought stayed with him. In a letter dated August 3, 1944, he again discusses the church with Eberhard Bethge. He has included an outline for a book wherein the church takes the main lead. In fact, the book is a guideline for a renewed church. He explains its inclusion to Bethge by writing, “The church must come out of its stagnation. We must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life.”

Looking at the book proposal, we see he is still preoccupied with religionlessness and the church’s response to it. Here he again names piety as a problem. “(c) The Protestant church: Pietism as a last attempt to maintain evangelical Christianity as a religion.” He also is startling in what he says about the Confessing Church—“Generally in the Confessing Church: standing up for the church’s ‘cause’, but little personal faith in Christ.”

He follows these criticisms with an answer. To see his reaction against religion and his solution, we will quote the whole outline for Chapter 2.

Chapter 2.

a) God and the secular.

b) Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ. The experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that ‘Jesus is there only for others’. His ‘being there for others’ is the experience of transcendence. It is only this ‘being there for others’, maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this
being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach in any given situation. God in human form—not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying, nor in the conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc., nor yet in the Greek divine-human form of ‘man in himself’, but ‘the man for others’, and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.

c) Interpretation of biblical concepts on this basis. (Creation, fall, atonement, repentance, faith, the new life, the last things.)
d) Cultus. (Details to follow later, in particular on cultus and ‘religion’.)
e) What do we really believe? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it? The problem of the Apostles’ Creed? ‘What must I believe?’ is the wrong question; antiquated controversies, especially those between the different sects; the Lutheran versus Reformed, and to some extent the Roman Catholic versus Protestant, are now unreal. They may at any time be revived with passion, but they no longer carry conviction. There is no proof of this, and we must simply take it that it is so. All that we can prove is that the faith of the Bible and Christianity does not stand or fall by these issues. Karl Barth and the Confessing Church have encouraged us to entrench ourselves persistently behind the ‘faith of the church’, and evade the honest question as to what we ourselves really believe. That is why the air is not quite fresh, even in the Confessing Church. To say that it is the church’s business, not mine, may be a clerical evasion, and outsiders always regard it as such. It is much the same with the dialectical assertion that I do not control my own faith, and that it is therefore not for me to say what my faith is. There may be a place for all these considerations, but they do not absolve us from the duty of being honest with ourselves. We cannot, like the Roman Catholics, simply identify ourselves with the church. (This, incidentally, explains the popular opinion about Roman Catholics’ insincerity.” Well then, what do we really believe? Answer: see (b), (c), and (d).

Then he says very clearly in his section “Conclusion” how the church must handle those problems. “The church is only the church when it exists for others.” In this section he also includes the importance of being human. “It must not under-estimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul’s teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power.”

With all of this reference, we see that Bonhoeffer still saw the importance of the church for society and hoped that he would play a role in it. Even in prison he looked forward to the time when he would be able to impact the church with his theology. This letter, written only 5 ½ months before his final letter of 17 January 1945, allows us to see that he was sustained by his thoughts of the church and her mission throughout his imprisonment. Even though he had attempted in freedom to reform the church and failed, Bonhoeffer planned another attempt—which, of course, never occurred due to his execution on April 9, 1945.

This is the end of the review regarding the church in Letters and Papers from Prison. We have seen that the passion that Bonhoeffer began in Sanctorum Communio remained with him until the end and gave him hope for his release. We see that Bonhoeffer never gave up and planned even in prison for the health of the church. He planned reform, even after failing previously to bring reform, and introduced the need for the church to be a servant church.

543 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 382.
544 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, 383.
rather than an institution. Therefore, it is safe to say that the church played a large role in Bonhoeffer’s endurance and in his hope for the future.
6

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Now that our research is complete, we are able to evaluate the findings obtained through the research. The goal of this dissertation was to discover whether Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s endurance changed as a result of his theology regarding evil or justice. We learned that both of these topics were important enough to him that he addressed them in his theological works. The topic of evil he addressed in some fashion in three of his books—*Creation and Fall*, *Discipleship*, and *Ethics*—as well as some of his letters from prison. Justice made its appearance in *Ethics*.

We were able to uncover his thinking in these areas and to determine whether they contributed to his endurance by conducting a chronological, methodical, and close reading of his own theology. We primarily asked Bonhoeffer himself what his thinking was, but included scholars who offered materials dealing with Bonhoeffer’s treatment of his theology in these areas.

This method of research was not without its own problems. The most visible problem is the censorship of Bonhoeffer by the Third Reich during the time that *Ethics* and his prison writings were written. This means that Bonhoeffer did not have complete freedom to write his thoughts, and that we must be aware of a certain carefulness on Bonhoeffer’s part.

The second problem that we encountered in this research was not only a problem, but was, at the same time, an illumination to the research. The problem was the unfinished nature of *Ethics*. As was indicated in the text, *Ethics* was left at the time of Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment as a group of independent chapters. Bethge gathered these chapters into a manuscript. But since the manuscript was not edited by Bonhoeffer himself, a peculiar trait became noticeable.

As indicated, it was also an illumination. The trait was that in nearly every chapter that we examined, Bonhoeffer returned to the same theme—unity with God. It became repetitious.

It is well known in Bonhoeffer studies that Bonhoeffer’s theology is Christocentric—explained as unity with God in this dissertation—but that every time evil or justice is discussed Bonhoeffer returns to unity with God was a surprising positive result of an apparent problem. This was a development that was unsuspected when the project was first begun. It was suspected that the findings would be about evil and justice. But by the force of Bonhoeffer’s desire that still remains in his written word, the focus transferred from evil and justice and turned instead upon unity with God.

This in itself became a problem because it gave the study a one-sided dimension. This problem could only be addressed head-on and thoroughly analyzed in chapter five when we considered what the contributions to his endurance were.

Hopefully, the reader will not allow themselves to be put off by this repetition because it was the peak of our research and completely unexpected, which we think offers a telling glimpse into the person ‘Bonhoeffer’ and what his own desires and goals for his theology were.

It is not to say that we did not learn anything at all about evil or justice. In fact, in *Creation and Fall* we were able to learn a great deal about Bonhoeffer’s approach to evil. It is true that Bonhoeffer resisted defining evil—what it is and where it came from—as
untheological and the initial sin. But this does not mean that he had no comment or thoughts about the topic. Reviewing chapter three helps us to deduce what he thought about evil by observing what he said surrounding evil.

For example, we saw that he had no problem describing “the evil one”—the one who lies about being present at creation. Yet, he says that asking questions about evil that God has not already answered are godless questions because we are not able to go behind the beginning. We see that he is able to discuss evil while being, at the same time, resistant to defining evil. We saw this surprising occurrence again in *Discipleship* when we saw that in the beginning and end of the work he warned against naming evil, but in the middle he discussed naming and giving witness to evil actions.

This is because, for the most part, Bonhoeffer sees evil as a state of being rather than a defined action. His treatment of the *nihil negativum* in *Creation and Fall* seems to support this. He juxtaposes God’s creation—which he calls good—over against the *nihil negativum*. He does not call the *nihil negativum* evil, but if he chooses to remain congruent with his argument in *Creation and Fall* that good is always accompanied by evil, then we have no choice but to think of the *nihil negativum* as evil.

This corresponds with the rest of Bonhoeffer’s theology. His concern that we saw mostly in *Ethics* is for humanity to be in unity with God. In *Creation and Fall* he argued that only by living with God as the center was Adam fully human. And so it would make sense that evil would be the absence of God or the *nihil negativum*. But because it was already defined that Adam’s preoccupation with knowing good and evil was the original sin, Bonhoeffer does not return there by naming evil. Instead, he pleads for humanity to return to God as their center.

We learn another point in this about evil that perhaps Bonhoeffer was not aware that he argued. Somehow evil was in creation and simply ‘unveiled’ by humanity. Here, according to Frick, he borrows a term from Nietzsche and argues that Adam lives “beyond good and evil.”

Evil is there already; however, Adam only knows God so he only knows the good.

Again, we see that it is an actual state rather than an action by humanity. Adam chased after the knowledge of good and evil rather than remaining focused on God, and the evil that was present—of which Adam was previously ignorant—was unveiled.

Then we find that Bonhoeffer’s argument in *Ethics* is congruent with his earlier exegesis regarding evil. Naming good and evil always brings us into disunity with God because we lose our focus on the center and return to the original sin. Only by doing the opposite of naming good and evil, and only knowing the will of God can we avoid evil.

This means only by grasping our humanity, remaining human, and focusing on God can we ever hope to overcome evil. This is an interesting finding for society today when we are so beset by problems both nationally and internationally. It explains why at the moment we attempt to handle problems in order to solve them that we achieve the opposite—making the problem worse. Bonhoeffer, according to his theology, would recommend reconciliation before action and a single-minded focus on God’s will in that situation. Only in this manner can evil be overcome.

When considering what Bonhoeffer thought about justice, it was discovered that while many people mention justice along with the name of Bonhoeffer, little is written that considers Bonhoeffer’s view of justice systematically from his theology. This is an

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545 Peter Frick, “Friedrich Nietzsche’s Aphorisms and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology,” in Frick, *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation*, 175-199.
interesting situation since we learned that Bonhoeffer had a great deal to say about justice but, as with evil, it was an intricate view.

We learned as with all other topics that the basis for Bonhoeffer’s view of justice was an understanding of the world as reconciled to God. This eliminated a very important and common understanding when speaking about justice. It means that this world is not meant to be overcome but embraced. There is no call to build God’s kingdom on earth because this earth is what God has already ordained for humanity.

However, this does not mean that this world is then left to its own devices. We learned that Bonhoeffer understood the four mandates as God’s will for the world he created, and one in particular ensured justice—the government. As we noted, this was an amazing argument during the time of Ethics because it was precisely the government of the Third Reich which was perpetrating injustice. Even with the knowledge that Bonhoeffer had regarding the actions of his government, he remained true to his theology. His theology had a safeguard built into it which the Reich was ignoring and which would have been a corrective. That corrective was, naturally, Christ. Bonhoeffer argued that all four mandates fall under Christ as their protector and all four must submit to his rule—the government included.

This fact would have safeguarded justice and its application would have been secured. This was also the only manner available to handle Hitler. Only the love of God was any hope in that regard.

This is also probably the reason we saw him turn away from ideology about justice and name it as a weapon of a former generation. Instead, he sees personal responsibility as the pressing need for each person. But one cannot practice personal responsibility without simplicity, which for Bonhoeffer meant a single-minded unity with God. Here we return to the theme that Bonhoeffer believed was the answer to his contextual situation. Only by being unified with God can the world function in a just manner.

Bonhoeffer believed that this meant that we must be ready to accept God’s judgment upon us. Here Bonhoeffer enters into a discussion that is uncomfortable in our current context of restorative justice. Bonhoeffer claims that injustice and suffering sanctifies the human—not justice.

Of course, knowing the horrors that millions of people suffered at the hands of the Third Reich, this is a hard concept to accept. However, it does bring some relief when we consider that at this point he addressed his own church community and himself. Bonhoeffer believed that the fact that the Third Reich even existed was because of the failure of the church to remain engaged in society and her failure to proclaim reconciliation with God. He was telling the church that only through her renewal could society hope for renewal, and her only hope for renewal was to accept her judgment and repent.

Even with this heavy criticism and onerous task, Bonhoeffer held out hope for the church. He tells her that she is a source of justice that governments cannot do without. She is the queen of the mandates, and her presence is what gives the others protection.

He still warns, however, that the churches should not try to build a utopia on earth. What has been done is done. Bonhoeffer rejects the idea of reparations for this reason. He claims that it brings further wounds that deepen the injustice done and produces yet more problems. Instead, Bonhoeffer introduces and recommends the introduction of penultimate.

Bonhoeffer means penultimate as the vehicle that God uses to come to people. It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer is finally ready to talk about justice. Now that he has explained the four mandates and their purpose, suffering’s role in sanctification, and the role of the church, he is ready to talk about justice for the other. Still he does not approach justice from a humanistic idea of restoring the person to wholeness in a physical manner, but rather as restoring the other so that Christ can come in grace to the person. Therefore, for
Bonhoeffer, justice is part of bringing people to Christ through humane treatment. Justice is part of preparing the way of grace.

The final thing that Bonhoeffer would say about justice is that only when Christ is the center is there true justice. If we look at all his argumentation regarding justice, we can see this as the operating principle he uses throughout. This is why the church is so central in his claims. Christ existing as church community is the overarching principle, and it is because only in this manner justice can prevail.

This was our finding about the church in our final chapter. A recap of the previous chapters brought to light that the church and Bonhoeffer's love for her was one of the three main reasons for Bonhoeffer's endurance. We learned in chapter two that the church was the central social entity for Bonhoeffer. This was a natural conclusion because he understood the church as Christ existing as church-community. We also learned that he believed the church encompassed all of humanity and formed a new reality. Since all humans are reconciled to Christ, they are also bound to the church.

This is the basis for his whole theology. He saw reality as the point that the whole world was reconciled to God, but that community with God only existed within the church.

How very strongly this affected Bonhoeffer's theology was a surprise result of this study. We entered into this study expecting that an ethical approach would be the final conclusion. Instead, Bonhoeffer's own focus led us to understand that the church—not ethics—was what he considered as an answer to our questions.

Finally, we must say that the conclusions formed from this research were, by and far, encompassed within the idea of unity with God. This means two things. First, it means considering that it is impossible to have a cut and dried handle on evil or injustice. In fact, these should not be our focal point because they are not the most important, and they only cause further disunity. Bonhoeffer's overriding message was the centrality of unity with God. It is the basis of all thoughts and actions. It was the root from which Bonhoeffer's endurance sprang.

Therefore, if we apply this principle of Bonhoeffer's theology today, we would need to understand that helping people endure in their faith means that we would not focus on issues of good and evil; but rather, teach them the importance of being unified with God and following his will for them coupled with personal responsibility for the other.

The second aspect of unity is to understand that Bonhoeffer saw the church as the presence of unity with God. All of humanity was brought into this institution and now it is the vehicle of our relationship with God. Throughout his career and imprisonment, Bonhoeffer never gave up his belief that the real church was the presence of Christ. Even when we considered his endurance we found his hope was based on the thought of a renewed, servant church proclaiming to the world that it is redeemed, accepted, and loved.

This theology offers an action plan to the post-World War II church that is suffering under the threat of secularism. Bonhoeffer told his godson that we must stop trying to save the church as an institution. The church is something else now. Now the church is the word of God that is present whenever and wherever it is needed. It is not about having a building, a strategic plan, or discipleship programs. It is the proclamation of a world already accepted and loved by God. It is a message about the already realized oneness that humanity has with God and the outworking of such an understanding.

It is hoped that this study portrayed Bonhoeffer in his presentation of himself and that the research found herein will facilitate further discussion about endurance and crisis from a faith perspective. While this research had a decidedly one-sided approach—that of a Christian theologian, it is believed that the information found from this study can be used and
applied by all faith traditions using their own vocabulary and approach to the principles found here.

Unity with God is a reality that many faith communities embrace, and the implications that Bonhoeffer offered for this subject have a far ranging impact upon how one interacts with their community and neighbors. Likewise, acting with personal responsibility for those around you and whose life you impact is not a subject that is limited to a Christian perspective. We can also see that refusing to name good and evil would go a long way in our current world situation to end many religious wars and tensions throughout various faith traditions. And finally, understanding that all people belong to the Creator means that abusing the other is no longer a viable reaction to difference.
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