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Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics of obedience and responsibility in the context of pacifism and just-war

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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S ETHICS OF
OBEDIENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY
IN THE CONTEXT OF PACIFISM AND JUST-WAR

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ABSTRACT

The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has largely been dependent upon the understanding of his position of pacifism and just war in the context of the Second World War. His own writings and presentations, particularly ones advocating for pacifism, seem contrary to his actions and involvement in the resistance movement against Nazi Germany. Scholars on both sides of this debate have presented compelling evidence to sway their audience one way or the other concerning Bonhoeffer’s ethical position. This debate is further complicated by Bonhoeffer’s own view of his life as a “straight and unbroken course.” As many have claimed Bonhoeffer’s ethics to justify their own stance on pacifism and just-war, the purpose of this paper is to determine if such claims are warranted.

This paper seeks to investigate such claims by looking at Bonhoeffer’s own writings throughout the course of his life. It traces his biography in attempts to place his writings in context. While many of his writings are important in understanding Bonhoeffer’s worldview, this paper largely focuses on Sanctorum Communio as the basis for his theological framework, and his publications of Discipleship and Ethics wherein
lies the tensions of understanding his position. This paper will attempt to show that while Bonhoeffer was not against pacifism and in fact advocated for peace, his contextual ethics serves as strong evidence that he was not a pacifist according to its most basic definition.
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INTRODUCTION

On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed at Konzentrationslager Flossenbürg on the charges of conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Elements of the German state were becoming increasingly dissatisfied that the Führer was leading the people deeper into the path of war and darkness. Abwehr, one of Germany’s military intelligence branches, was one such group that housed some of Germany’s dissenters, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Other resistance efforts came in the formation of groups, such as the White Rose, and assassination plots made by high-ranking members of the German military. Ultimately, all plans that involved Hitler’s demise failed. Bonhoeffer and his conspirators were captured and sent to prison. Bonhoeffer himself was hung in Flossenbürg two weeks before the 90th and 97th army infantry divisions of the United States liberated the concentration camp, and one month before Germany finally surrendered the war.

While his life was short-lived (he was only thirty-nine at his death), the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer lives to this day. He may be considered one of the 20th century’s most influential figures in Christian theology and ethics. He may also be considered one of its most perplexing figures when it comes to ethical decision-making. Both pacifists and just-war theorists like to claim his legacy as being within their own tradition because of his teachings on peace and non-violence in contrast to his conspiratorial actions taken against Hitler and the Nazis. However, understanding the sum of a person in light of merely his actions does not do justice to the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his
contributions to the Christian tradition. How do we understand the legacy that he leaves behind, and how do we interpret his actions in light of his body of work? In light of these tensions, a closer examination of his life, work, and circumstances must be undertaken in order to appreciate Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the role of Christ’s disciples in the midst of violent conflict and the threat of a global totalitarianism.

Recent research into the beliefs and actions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer might suggest that his involvement in the Abwehr plot has been misunderstood over the course of history. In their 2013 book, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, authors Mark Nation, Anthony Siegrist, and Daniel Umbel challenge the prevalent narrative that Bonhoeffer, who once advocated for pacifism, changed his position to violent resistance in light of the Nazi program of racial discrimination, persecution, and extermination, and the religious complacency of the German Christians. They further challenge the interpretation of others who read Bonhoeffer and conclude that his earlier works were from a time that did not fully realize the horrors of such evils as the Holocaust. They write,

> Among numerous Christians, academics, and others, typically a three-step move is made in relation to Bonhoeffer. First, we ‘know’ that Bonhoeffer was involved in one or more plots to kill Hitler. Second, this ‘knowledge’ then becomes the lens through which his theological and ethical legacy is understood. Third, then, we can of course see that what we thought might be true is indeed true, that *Discipleship and Life Together* are works from Bonhoeffer’s less mature period before he truly confronted the hard realities of a world war and the Holocaust. These early books may still be useful as expressions of piety and devotion. But for hard, real life we need the realism captured in the language of *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Thus words and phrases like “responsibility,” “this-worldliness,” “vicarious representative action,” “guilt,” “living unreservedly in life’s duties,” or “living in the realities of the world” – terms found in these later writings – are seen quintessentially as expressions that reflect and warrant his realism that led to

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1 Mark Theissen Nation, Anthony G. Siegrist, and Daniel P. Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?: Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).
his involvement in the plots to kill Hitler. Therefore Bonhoeffer’s life and legacy are seen much more in light of these latter two works. And whatever significance these earlier works have, they too are seen in light of Bonhoeffer’s later involvements in assassination attempts and key passages from these later works.²

His later writings would be needed to understand the ethics behind his more recent actions. On the contrary, Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel argue for the continuity of Bonhoeffer’s theology and ethics in his works from beginning to end right up until his death. They further argue, “It is highly unlikely that Bonhoeffer was involved in any assassination attempts.”³ Many other pacifist authors have operated under similar arguments to show that Bonhoeffer was never for violence but for strict obedience to peacemaking.

The more common narrative might be that Bonhoeffer is portrayed as a man who believed that Christ’s teachings call for an obedient life of peace and nonviolence, but the realities of the Holocaust required responsible Christian interpretation of Scripture and history that ultimately called for resistance to such evils. This also included violent resistance if necessary. Some, such as author William Kuhns, suggest that the misunderstanding of Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the conspiracy came from an inaccurate interpretation of Bonhoeffer’s pacifism. Thus his shift from pacifism to violent engagement was not a “total reorientation,”⁴ but a “change in his form of political

² Ibid., 12.
³ Ibid., 13.
involvement based on the proper way to relate Christ to a changed historical situation.”

Similarly, author Larry Rasmussen suggests that one must view Bonhoeffer’s pacifism as provisional and that he would never have subscribed to an absolutist position.

How can the legacy of one man lead to two different conclusions? This paper aims to address some of the tension between the two views of Bonhoeffer. What makes matters further complicated is that scholars on both sides have argued for a consistency in his thought and action throughout his life and writings. Bonhoeffer himself seemed to have seen his own life in this way. He wrote, “I am wholly under the impression that my life – strange as it may sound – has gone in a straight line, uninterrupted, at least with regard to how I led it.” Are Bonhoeffer’s beliefs, teachings, and actions consistent throughout his life and career?

It is very well possible that Bonhoeffer’s theological views, as they are reflected in his writings, may have changed over the span of his life. After all, God reveals himself in various ways in ever-changing historical contexts. However, it is also likely that the dichotomic readings of Bonhoeffer’s supposed idealistic and realistic periods are not so much a change in theology or worldviews, but eisegetical reading of his texts interpreted by the reader’s own theological context. In fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s moral ethic remains consistent throughout his life and career, through both periods of peace and of resistance. This paper will attempt to answer the question of the consistency of

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Bonhoeffer’s writings as a unified whole. While looking at his life through his work, this paper will particularly focus on what may be considered the point of bifurcation for interpreting Bonhoeffer and his differing views; his earlier writing of *Discipleship* based on his experiences at Finkenwalde, and his later writing of *Ethics* that came in the wake of his involvement with the conspiracy.
A SURVEY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER’S LIFE AND WORK

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is very well known today for his involvement in the Abwehr conspiracy and their plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. However, his contributions to the church and society in his roles as pastor, theologian, and professor are of greater importance. In order to understand Bonhoeffer’s motivations for his involvement with the German resistance, one must first become familiar with his body of work. Students of Bonhoeffer’s work are able to trace his theology and ethics from the very onset of his writings, beginning with Sanctorum Communio, all the way to his final writings written while in prison, Ethics.

Bonhoeffer’s Beginnings

Bonhoeffer’s introduction to academic distinction began with the presentation of his first doctoral dissertation in 1927, Sanctorum Communio, which was later published in 1930. This work was described as “a researched effort on Bonhoeffer’s part to understand the very basis of God’s relationship with peoples and communities in terms of human sociality.” His inquiry was prompted by his experience of a Catholic mass in Rome. Preconceived ideas were broken as he began to see the church as a universal Christian community and not in his previously understood frameworks of German Lutheran Protestantism. Bonhoeffer was a proud German citizen in his youth, which is

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evident in his upbringing. However, his expanding view of what it meant to be the
church would not only be a topic of academic research, it would prove to be critical in his
preparation for addressing what was to come in the way of Nazi theology. His concept of
the universality of the church would lead him to his international and ecumenical
relationships, and thus enabled him to “see instantly the lie at the heart of the so-called
orders of creation theology, which linked the idea of the church with the German Volk.”
The church could not be limited to the sectarian notions of Nazi theology. The church
was not intended to be a church apart from the world, but was “about the restoration and
consummation of the created sociality of all humanity.” In Bonhoeffer’s mind, the
church-community was found in Jesus Christ and an active agent in the community-at-
large.

In January 1933, Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany. That summer,
Bonhoeffer gave his Christology lectures at the University of Berlin. Eberhard Bethge,
Bonhoeffer’s student, friend, and biographer, called this “the high point of Bonhoeffer’s
academic career.” Though none of his original notes or manuscripts could be found,

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8 An account of Bonhoeffer’s early life can be found in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich
Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), and Eric
Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich*
(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

9 Metaxas, 53.

10 Clifford J. Green, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in Dietrich

they remained the “basis for his thinking about Christ” throughout the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{12}

His outline was divergent from other Christological studies, in that Bonhoeffer began with Christ’s presence in the Word, sacraments, and the church-community, before delving into the historical Christ and critical study.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Nazi Theology and the Confessing Church}

During that time and the years following, the influence and power of the Nazis increased. This had a tremendous effect on the German state church. Bonhoeffer was all too aware of this from the onset.

To Bonhoeffer’s dismay, [anti-Semitic/pro-Aryan] legislation was accepted with enthusiasm by many church people either eager to vent their own anti-Semitic feelings or to protect their newly guaranteed perquisites. Nazism had, in fact, pandered to a privilege-seeking clergy in Germany that saw in the misfortunes of Communists and Jews only an opportunity to reinforce the Christian churches with further status and power. The Nazi “millennium,” then beginning, would be hailed as Christianity’s finest hour as well, and Hitler would be hailed as the twentieth-century savior of Germany. Not surprisingly, one school catechism of the Third Reich proclaimed that “as Jesus set men free from sin and hell, so Hitler rescued the German people from destruction… Jesus built for heaven; Hitler, for the German earth.” It did not take this piece of crude prose to convince Bonhoeffer that, under Hitler, Germany was sinking into a hell of inhumanity and moving against a newly created group of outcasts, Jews, and political dissenters. For him it was Germany’s and Christianity’s worst hour.\textsuperscript{14}

Christanity was misappropriated for Hitler’s own purposes. Along with Hitler’s installment as chancellor came a renewed inquiry into the “Jewish Question,” a socially accepted euphemism for the discrimination of Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth


\textsuperscript{13} Bethge, \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography}, 220.

\textsuperscript{14} Kelly and Nelson, 110-111.
centuries. From then to the end of the war, the persecution of Jews escalated from the boycott of Jewish businesses to the deaths of roughly 5.9 of the 8.8 million Jews of Europe and Russia. What was labeled as the Shoah (catastrophe, in Hebrew) by the Jews, and the Holocaust by the rest of the world was the realization of Hitler’s “Final Solution” to eliminate the Jews in Europe. Many died from starvation and exhaustion in the concentration camps, while others were brutally executed. Bonhoeffer could not predict the full consequences of the Nazi policies enacted over the decade, but he certainly knew that any level of allegiance to them would betray his commitment to following Christ.

While many German Christians felt it was important to keep the unity of the German church under Hitler’s vision of Gleischaltung (uniformity/coordination), others saw Christianity and Nazi philosophy as incompatible. Bonhoeffer and others went away to Bethel, where the gospel and grace were visibly being lived out in Christian community, in hopes to compose a confession that would “spell out the basics of the true and historic Christian faith” in contrast to Nazi ideology. In the end, after all its revisions, Bonhoeffer refused to sign the confession he had originally drafted, for it had

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16 Dawidowicz, 403.

17 Metaxas, 176.

18 Ibid., 183-5.
strayed too far from its original content. The document, which originally was intended to take a stand against the German Church’s allegiance to Hitler, ultimately conceded to compromise and it had become a “magnificent waste of words.”¹⁹ Not all of his efforts were wasted however, as this further propelled Bonhoeffer and others to give life to the Barmen Declaration and to the Confessing Church. This was their move to declare their separation from the “German Christians” wayward theology. Bonhoeffer would further declare that it was the Reich church that had broken away from the true confession, and it was the Confessing Church that remained true to the faith.²⁰ Further steps included the development of the preachers’ seminary (also referred to as Finkenwalde), which Bonhoeffer took charge of in 1935.

Lessons from Finkenwalde

Perhaps it was his dissertation or the memories of his time spent at Bethel that led Bonhoeffer to envision a new “monastic” community within the seminary at Finkenwalde.²¹ It was not to be a “community turned in on itself,” but restoration of the church that depended on a “new kind of monasticism, having nothing in common with the old, but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation

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¹⁹ Ibid., 185.

²⁰ Ibid., 226.

²¹ In Sanctorum Communio, 6, editor Clifford J. Green suggests, “Sanctorum Communio is a foundational work. Familiar with this book, readers of Life Together will discover that life at the Finkenwalde seminary of the Confessing Church was built upon its theology.”
of Christ.”

The seminary only lasted for two and a half years before the Gestapo closed its doors, but some of the fruits were two of Bonhoeffer’s best-known writings.

*Discipleship* (published in English as *The Cost of Discipleship*) would become, according to Bethge, “Finkenwalde’s own badge of distinction.” Originally a set of seminary lectures, *Discipleship* introduced incoming students to a radically different initiation to theological study for that time. Many of the themes were derived from Bonhoeffer’s existing doctoral publications and seminary lectures, particularly those on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. His understanding of Christ’s teachings was to some degree influenced by his encounter with Jean Lasserre’s pacifism. When Bonhoeffer had the opportunity to study abroad in America at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he befriended Lasserre who was then one of Bonhoeffer’s fellow seminarians and his first encounter with a contemporary Christian pacifist. Biographer Eberhard Bethge wrote, “Lasserre confronted him with an acceptance of Jesus’ peace commandment that he had never encountered before… After meeting Lasserre the question of the concrete reply to the biblical injunction of peace and of the concrete steps to be taken against warlike impulses never left him again.”

Bonhoeffer’s call to peace further built upon his understanding of the universality of the church in Christ that was found in his doctoral work as well as his *Christology* lectures.

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24 Ibid., 153.
Unlike his previous writings, *Discipleship* was born in the context of Hitler’s influence and the compromise of the German Church. This was evident in his references to those who had accepted “cheap grace” and so “the Christian should live the same way the world does.” In contrast, “costly grace” was “costly, because it costs people their lives,” which was a price Bonhoeffer himself would literally pay.

*Life Together* came in the aftermath of the school’s closing. Bonhoeffer felt compelled to put in writing the experiences and lessons learned at Finkenwalde so as to “voice his conviction that the worldwide church itself needed to promote a sense of community like this if it was to have new life breathed into it.” If *Sanctorum Communio* can be seen as theoretical, *Life Together* can be considered the results of his theoretical applications in practice. Editor Geffrey B. Greene writes,

> What Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together* on the nature of community, the dialectic of Christians’ being together yet needing time to be alone, their service, their life, and their practice of confession and the Lord’s Supper, presupposes the Christo-ecclesiological groundwork of *Sanctorum Communio*. The faith-searching explorations that followed in *Act and Being* served to deepen Bonhoeffer’s insights into the way that God’s revelatory Word breaks through the impasse of human egotism and the manipulative desires of an emotionally grounded, self-centered ‘love,’ offering individuals and communities the chance to become hearers of that Word, as well as Christ to one another.

Bonhoeffer’s Christological and ecclesiological frameworks that are evident in his earlier works are remarkably consistent and informative throughout his writings up to this point.


26 Ibid., 45.


28 Ibid., 7.
One simple thematic point emerges from reading *Life Together*, that is, Christ in community. “The Christ of *Life Together* is the binding force of that community in its ‘togetherness,’ gracing Christians to go beyond the superficial, often self-centered, relationships of their everyday associations toward a more intimate sense of what it means to be Christ to others, to love others as Christ has loved them.” This stood in contrast to the German Christians’ evident lack of Christ in their role as the church and their complicity to Hitler’s agenda.

**Conspiracy and Imprisonment**

War in Europe was escalating, and Germany declared a conscription requiring Bonhoeffer to join in the war. Though he was able to defer for a year and escape the country, Bonhoeffer felt that it was necessary for him to share in the sufferings of the nation in order to participate in rebuilding its future. In order to share in their sufferings, he would have to live under the authority of a tyrannical system that required compulsory service to his country. Directly and publicly objecting to the war was not an option lest he place other members of the Confessing Church in a dangerous predicament. Already conspiracies within and against the German state were under way, and Bonhoeffer was already well acquainted with some key members. Hans von Dohnányi, brother-in-law to Bonhoeffer, was a part of Abwehr and the resistance against Hitler. His brother, Klaus Bonhoeffer, was also involved in the resistance. It was through Dohnányi that Bonhoeffer was able to avoid being directly involved in combat, which in obedience to Christ he had serious conscientious objections. In light of the evil that plagued Germany and the rest of

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29 Ibid., 8.
Europe, Bonhoeffer saw that obedience required more than confession; it required resistance against evil.

It was during this time that Bonhoeffer began writing *Ethics*. This, too, was written in the context of the Nazi occupation. What differentiated Bonhoeffer’s thinking between this writing and that of *Discipleship* was, as Bethge refers to, the move from confession to resistance. Bonhoeffer viewed the church as the voice necessary to speak out against the Nazis. However mere confession would no longer satisfy his qualifications for obedience to Christ. Bethge wrote,

Bonhoeffer introduced us in 1935 to the problem of what we today call political resistance. The levels of confession and of resistance could no longer be kept neatly apart. The escalating persecution of the Jews generated an increasingly intolerable situation, especially for Bonhoeffer himself. We now realized that mere confession, no matter how courageous, inescapably meant complicity with the murderers...

Thus we were approaching the borderline between confession and resistance; and if we did not cross this border, our confession was going to be no better than cooperation with the criminals. And so it became clear where the problem lay for the Confessing Church: we were resisting by way of confession, but we were not confessing by way of resistance.  

Political resistance was never on the minds of Bonhoeffer and his young students, which included Bethge. Their confession of faith was regarding the status of the church, not of the state. Some even believed early on that Hitler’s initial acts were in the nation’s best interests. This, however, quickly changed when lines between church and state, religion and politics, began to blur and the former could not remain silent in light of the latter.

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31 Ibid., 19-20.
On a few occasions, Bethge gave an explanation of the difference between confession and resistance. He said, “Resistance is connected with political calculation, rational assessment of success and appropriate strategy and tactics… Resistance knows of various levels of concealment and deception requiring discipline and a sense of responsibility. It has to put up with the ambiguity of actions and actors.”\(^{32}\) On the other hand, “Confession cannot worry about success or failure. It lives only by him whom it confesses, the crucified and risen one… Confession seeks the pulpit and if necessary the courtroom, not in order to make a show, but to give a clear and unambiguous message.”\(^{33}\) Confession was the unequivocal declaration of faith and obedience to Christian discipleship. Bonhoeffer’s costly grace required costly confession, especially in the Nazi context. His views, which were embodied by various declarations and confessions, directly opposed Nazi theology. But these confessions were not enough for Bonhoeffer. Though he saw that they were well developed to refute the Nazification of the church, it spoke nothing for the victims of this process.\(^{34}\) For Bonhoeffer, confession seemed to take on a defensive posture against the Nazification of the German church, but did not fight on behalf of the victims of the Nazi regime. He eventually came to see confession without resistance to be under cheap grace that he denounced in *Discipleship*.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 26-7.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 26-7.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 24.
In his biography, Bethge describes the five stages of resistance Bonhoeffer experienced. First was simple passive resistance. Second came an openly ideological stance without the conception of a new political future. Third was of being informed accessories to the preparations for the coup. Fourth came active preparations for a post-revolt period. While many were able to traverse between these four stages, very few, in Bethge’s observation, were able to take their commitment to resistance to its final stage, active conspiracy. As a conspiracy, planning and responsible action must take place. It was not a place for anarchy or desperation. Bonhoeffer sought the reconstruction of the Germany that the Nazis had taken apart. This was the reason Bonhoeffer had returned to his homeland; in participating in its struggles he would also participate in its reconstruction.

Bonhoeffer and several other conspirators, including his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, were arrested in April of 1943 after successfully rescuing fourteen Jews in an effort labeled “Operation 7.” However their efforts did not go unnoticed and it had put their collusion under the Nazi’s watch. Ironically, little was known about Bonhoeffer’s conspiracy until after his arrest. Author Eric Metaxas writes, The Nazi’s didn’t have any inkling of Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the conspiracy, or that there was a conspiracy at all… His imprisonment, and Dohnanyi’s, was for more innocuous reasons. One centered on Operation 7, which the Gestapo took for a money-laundering scheme. They couldn’t fathom that Bonhoeffer and the others were mostly concerned with the fate of the Jews. Another reason had to do with the Abwehr’s attempts to obtain military exemptions for the pastors of the Confessing Church.

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36 Metaxas, 441.
It was only later, when evidence was found linking Abwehr members to an assassination plot against Hitler, that Bonhoeffer faced execution. Meanwhile, he was able to continue his participation in the conspiracy and at the same time contribute to his final work, *Ethics*. Chapters of his book were smuggled out of his prison cell and eventually into the hands of Eberhard Bethge who posthumously edited the final volume.

*Ethics* is the culmination of Bonhoeffer’s previous works, and may be regarded as his *magnum opus*. Many of the themes emerged from his early writings, such as the church-community of Christ from *Sanctorum Communio*, his ethic of peace from *Discipleship*, and the centrality of Christ from his *Christology* lectures. However, the occasion for its drafting must also be taken into account in understanding this book. Some scholars observe two motives behind Bonhoeffer’s urgency to provide an ethic for the Christian church. Clifford Green writes, “Bonhoeffer wrote his *Ethics* with two main concerns and contexts in mind: first, ethics for postwar time of peace; second, the ethics of tyrannicide and coup.” Editors Kelly and Green consider it “an attempt to address the great moral dilemmas posed by the war and the need to resist a blatantly evil government.” Both motives stemmed from the soberly truthful but optimistic reality of a delusional and yet fully redeemable Germany. Bonhoeffer saw the erroneous path the nation was being taken down but hopefully prepared for its rebuilding by developing an ethic that opposed Hitler to the extent of tyrannicide.

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38 Ibid., 10.

39 Kelly and Nelson, 352.
If anything, Bonhoeffer was fully committed to what he believed, as it is well known that he participated in the conspiracy plot to eliminate Hitler. This would be the crux of the debate that examines his life and actions according to his early and later writings. Bonhoeffer himself would be unable to defend his own actions as he was executed on April 9, 1945, just weeks before the United States liberated the prison and Hitler committed suicide. Since *Ethics* was published posthumously, it is unclear whether Bonhoeffer himself would have considered it complete, or in what order his thirteen individual manuscripts might have been arranged. Regardless, *Ethics* serves as the culmination of Bonhoeffer’s life and work that stands firm against evil during an era of uncertainty.
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS IN SANCTORUM COMMUNIO

Sanctorum Communio was Bonhoeffer’s foundational work by which all of his other writings find their footing. It is impressive that such a seminal work would have lasting impact on his theology and writings, especially Ethics, as well as his actions over the course of his life. Themes of accepting guilt, vicarious representative action, and responsibility that permeate the pages of Ethics find their inception here. Kelly and Nelson write, “In the [Sanctorum Communio] we see, too, a statement of the ideal ground of those actions on behalf of the oppressed that would become the pulse of Bonhoeffer’s own resistance to Nazism and of his role in the conspiracy.” It is also perhaps in this context that Bonhoeffer considered his life as if it were being lived in a straight and unbroken line.

Christology and ecclesiology were important considerations early on in his work. “Christ existing as church-community” was an especially important theme in Bonhoeffer’s dissertation. It was through the church that Christ was active in the world. Clifford Green writes,

Bonhoeffer does not interpret the Christian community as a religious ghetto, but advances a thesis about human sociality per se. When Bonhoeffer writes in his Ethics that the Christian community is “a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form,” that is another way of stating the point already made in his first book, that “the church is God’s new will and purpose for humanity.”

40 Kelly and Nelson, 55.

This was in contrast to Bonhoeffer’s observation that the church was historically and religiously misrepresented. For Bonhoeffer, the church was historically misunderstood as a society of “voluntary associations” or “compulsory organizations” of its members rather than as a community. A voluntary association meant that it was no different from the rest of the world’s constructions, where people were able to come and go as they pleased so long as they satisfied their own interests. Associations existed as long as there were members to continue their identity. Similarly, A compulsory organization brought into question the authority under which it was organized, which Bonhoeffer alluded to as of earthly origin. However, both were formed under the human understanding of identity. On the other hand, the religious community, which was in Bonhoeffer’s mind the church, was one that was established by God, and existed through and elected in Christ. Bonhoeffer wrote,

The relation of Christ to the church is twofold. Christ is the foundation, the cornerstone, the pioneer, the master builder. But Christ is also at all times a real presence for the church, for it is Christ’s body, and the people are members of this body or members of Christ himself… The church is the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence of God.

Bonhoeffer understood this to be “Christ existing as church-community.” The church was very much a part of the world and history, but was also unique from the world in its christological reality.

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42 *Sanctorum Communio*, 253.

43 Ibid., 134-137.

44 Ibid., 139-141.

45 Ibid.
In order to understand Bonhoeffer’s “Christ existing as church-community,” one must grasp his concept of “I-You” relationship in light of creation and redemption. Brendan Leahy observes Bonhoeffer’s reaction “against nineteenth-century liberal anthropomorphic theology” for one that emphasized the sociality of human relations in creation.  

Bonhoeffer wrote,

> Our concern here is the relationship of the person, God, and social being to each other. The I comes into being only in relation to the You; only in response to a demand does responsibility arise… One human being cannot of its own accord make another into an I, an ethical person conscious of responsibility. God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God’s active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human You is an image of the divine You.

One’s own ethic was determined by the relationships carried through one another. This was particularly important for him in understanding the place of the church in the world. He continued,

> It will become clear that the Christian person achieves his or her essential nature only when God does not encounter the person as You, but ‘enters into’ the person as I. Consequently, in some way the individual belongs essentially and absolutely with the other, according to God’s will, even though, or precisely because, the one is completely separate from the other.

It was through God that individuals in humanity and in the church were able to relate to one another. This was what Bonhoeffer considered the “primal state.” However, it was not the reality in which society existed, particularly because of the sinfulness of humanity that led to the brokenness of community. Leahy writes, “It was sin, collective guilt, that caused a rupture, leading to ethical atomism and isolation. The ‘collective person’

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46 Brendan Leahy, “‘Christ Existing as Community’: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Notion of Church,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73, no. 1-2 (February 2008): 38.

47 *Sanctorum Communio*, 54-55.

48 Ibid., 56.
became fragmented.” Only through Christ’s salvific work could this “collective person,” who was the body of Christ, the church, be redeemed. Thus the redeemed church-community that was in the world could then show the rest of society God’s intended purpose for all humanity.

This community of Christ was marked by love, according to Bonhoeffer, in two particular but mutually dependent ways, by structurally being “with-each-other,” and by actively “being-for-each-other.” The former meant that each believer was spiritually connected to one another as the body of Christ. Bonhoeffer used an example saying, “It must come to the point that the weaknesses, needs, and sins of my neighbor afflict me as if they were my own, in the same way as Christ was afflicted by our sins.” Here the believer was not an isolated member but a part of the larger church-community. The latter meant that each believer was committed to actions toward one another. If “being-with-each-other” was typified with solidarity, “being-for-each-other” was marked by activity. He wrote,

This being-for-each-other must now be actualized through acts of love. Three great, positive possibilities of acting for each other in the community of saints present themselves: self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor; intercessory prayer; and, finally, the mutual forgiveness of sins in God’s name. All of these involve giving up the self ‘for’ my neighbor’s benefit, with the readiness to do and to bear everything in the neighbor’s place, indeed, if necessary, to sacrifice myself, standing as a substitute for my neighbor.

49 Leahy, 39.
50 Sanctorum Communio, 178.
51 Ibid., 180. See Gal. 6:2.
52 Ibid., 184.
One’s “being-with” and “being-for” were, in Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, two sides of the same coin. Developing this theology would also play a significant role in his later years as he faced the Nazi threat.

Though *Sanctorum Communio* was only the beginning of his theological formations, what he developed here would have significant impact on his life and actions. His concept of “being-with-each-other” is clearly reflected in the development of the Finkenwalde community. His “being-for” would be a contributing factor for his participation in the resistance. Though he didn’t know it, Bonhoeffer’s life would catch up to his theology. He wrote,

> It is apparent in the self-renouncing work for the neighbor I give up happiness. We are called to advocate vicariously for the other in everyday matters, to give up possessions, honor, even our whole lives. With the whole strength that we owe the church-community we ought to work in it… Love demands that we give up our own advantage. This may even include our community with God itself. Here we see the love that voluntarily seeks to submit itself to God’s wrath on behalf of the other members of the community, which wishes God’s wrath for itself in order that they may have community with God, which takes their place, as Christ took our place.\(^{53}\)

Ironically, love for one’s neighbor, to whom God has called the believer, potentially included the separation from the “church-community”. In Bonhoeffer’s case, this would take shape as he later on distanced himself from the German Church that became complicit with Nazi ideologies.\(^{54}\) This concept of “being-for” was later developed in *Ethics* as the necessity to accept the consequences of one’s actions, including guilt, without seeking to avoid them, just as Christ took on the guilt and sin of the world.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Similarly, as some scholars believe, Jesus was separated from God at his moment of crucifixion in his obedience to God’s will. See Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; 2 Cor. 5:21; and Gal. 3:13.
BONHOEFFER’S ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The centrality of Bonhoeffer’s Christology and ecclesiology is critical to his orientation to the world. It was what informed his understanding of ethics with regard to the responsibility he had with his neighbor and the community at large. In exploring his ethics, it becomes clear that Bonhoeffer’s actions are evaluated in light of Christ’s relationship to the church.

Ethics is the study of how one governs one’s own life by formulating their own worldview. Certainly most, if not all, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s works are an attempt to define his own understanding of the world in terms of his theology of Christ and the church. It is difficult enough to determine what is ethically best in the best of circumstances. In Bonhoeffer’s context, determining what was ethical had greater ramifications not only for himself, but also for the church and society at large. Words like right and wrong, good and evil, fitting and unfitting, can become blurred when they exist in the context of Nazi occupation. Most of Bonhoeffer’s adult life and work seemed to be the task of navigating such murky waters while maintaining his identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In order to understand Bonhoeffer’s ethical framework, one must first understand the differing stances in understanding the world’s realities and the models by which one is governed.
Stance

Catholic theologian Charles A. Curran and others see stance as the starting point for moral theology.\(^5\) Stance is what “gives us a perspective on reality,” and gives “unity and order to what we see.”\(^6\) Another way to understand this is in the language of “worldview.” How do people interpret the world in which they live, and how does that inform their moral order? Curran gives some examples of varying Christian perspectives. For James Gustafson, according to Curran, stance is seen through the life and work of Jesus Christ.\(^7\) Robin Lovin shares this perspective in that stance is determined by a person’s understanding of “what God had done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”\(^8\) James Sellers understands ethics in light of salvation and wholeness, and even for others to a greater degree an ethic of love.\(^9\) Curran requires the larger scope of incorporating the “fivefold Christian mysteries” of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection destiny.\(^10\) Understanding stance in light of the various ethical models may bring greater clarity in understanding one’s process of decision-making.


\(^{6}\) Ibid.


\(^{9}\) Curran, 31-33.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 33. One can argue that Gustafson’s Christocentrism as stance, or Bonhoeffer’s for that matter, is hardly different from Curran’s fivefold mysteries. What is critical to
Understanding Bonhoeffer’s stance is an important process in interpreting his decision-making. It is evident that his lens for understanding the world stemmed from his understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer’s Christology was in fact the “interpretive key” in his understanding of church, society, and ethics. This interpretive key was evident throughout most, if not all, of his major works, from Sanctorum Communio to Ethics. In the Christology lectures he gave at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer began with the question, “Who is Christ?” This christological question was distinct from the soteriological question, “What has Christ done?” Christology looked into the person of Christ while soteriology looked into the work of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, Christology was an important lens through which he viewed the rest of his discipline, for Christology was the starting point for all that is known in the Christian church. He wrote, “Only scholarship that knows itself to be within the realm of the Christian church could agree that Christology is the center of the realm of scholarship itself. That means that Christology is the invisible, unrecognized, hidden center of scholarship.” Christ became the center for understanding all other inquiries to follow. If one is to understand Bonhoeffer’s ethics, one must understand his Christology.

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understanding Gustafson and Bonhoeffer is that Christ is central to the fivefold mysteries, including sin by serving as an antithetic example of living the holy life.

61 Kelly and Nelson, 111.

Bonhoeffer understood Christ as the one who was actively present in the life of the church because Christ was “the new humanity” and “the church-community.” The resurrection made Christ more than an influential figure from a fixed period in time, like many of the other figures of Scripture. Rather he was one who was present in the very life of the church. Bonhoeffer’s Christology lectures outlined this understanding of presence in two ways; in reality as Word and sacrament, and in form as the church-community. According to Bonhoeffer, Christ as Word is distinguished as the “word spoken to us” by the living Word and not merely human “responsibility” or timeless universality. Christ speaks as the Word in the moment of his choosing. Christ as sacrament reveals the Word proclaiming the gospel in action. Because the Word and sacrament take place only in the church-community, Bonhoeffer uses the language of equating Christ with the church-community.

After describing the person of Christ who was present in the life of the church, Bonhoeffer continued by explaining where he was present in relation to humanity. Christ’s place, for him, took an all-encompassing position in existence, history, and nature. According to Bonhoeffer, Christ is at the center of our existence as the one who judges humanity and as one who fulfills the law, thereby defining the end of one’s

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63 Ibid., 315.

64 Ibid., 317. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christ is not timelessly and universally accessible as an idea; instead he is head as Word only there where he allows himself to be heard.”

65 Ibid., 316. Editor Larry Rasmussen writes, “As Bonhoeffer indicates, ‘responsibility’ is thus inherently relational, a concrete time-bound and place-bound answering to and answering for; it is accountability to, with, and for others.”
existence, and also the beginning of a new existence. Through Christ humanity is judged for its sin, and through Christ humanity is justified by his sacrifice. This was Bonhoeffer’s ontological understanding of the person in light of Christ. This was not only true for the history of humanity; it was also true in cosmic history and in creation. The meta-narrative of creation, fall, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection are centered on Christ as the Word and reality of the church.

**Models of Ethical Reasoning**

Understanding Bonhoeffer’s stance is the starting point for interpreting the motivations behind his action, but it does not sufficiently explain why he was able to participate in the conspiracy. In order to do this one must understand the model by which Bonhoeffer acted in accordance. Curran describes model as “the overarching way of analyzing and understanding the moral life.” Lovin simply explains this as a “way of reasoning.” If stance is a way of understanding the world in its broadest sense, then model is the framework of one’s moral and ethical decisions based on their stance towards the world.

In his 1960 Robertson Lectures at the University of Glasgow, H. Richard Niebuhr delivered what may now be considered his greatest ethical exposition on Christian moral reasoning called, “The Responsible Self.” Prior to its presentation, the two dominant

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66 Ibid., 324-325.

67 Curran, 60.

68 Lovin, 72.

models of moral reasoning were teleology, that which sees the moral life in pursuit of ends and goals, and deontology, that which sees the moral life in pursuit of laws, duties, and obligations.\textsuperscript{70} Niebuhr’s contributions added an alternative way of looking at moral decision-making that was previously considered exhaustive and complete.\textsuperscript{71}

Niebuhr introduced each of his ethical models of reasoning with the use of symbols in relation to the person. His first symbol, not in primacy but in his view prevalence, was “man-the-maker.” This symbol was understood as the teleological school of thought. In his view, the “man” who lived to achieve a certain end or goal would make his path take shape towards those certain ends. The language of “good” and “bad” are employed when determining the criteria for individuals to follow. Curran wrote, “Something is good if it brings you to the goal and bad if it prevents your attaining that goal.”\textsuperscript{72} Moral decision-making was based on ends that it seeks and the goodness of the decisions to reach such an end.

Niebuhr’s second model was “man-the-citizen,” which described the deontological school of thought. The citizen was one who lived under the law.\textsuperscript{73} The citizen was an individual who lived under a certain governing body and so was subject to the rules they set out. A good citizen was one who obeyed such rules. The language of “right” and “wrong” more aptly describes what determined proper action.

\textsuperscript{70} Curran, 60.

\textsuperscript{71} Lovin, 212.

\textsuperscript{72} Curran, 66.

\textsuperscript{73} Niebuhr, 51.
While society at large adhered to one model or the other, and in some cases attempted to employ both, Niebuhr viewed that neither truly reflected the reality of the world in which he lived. In this context, Niebuhr attempted to introduce a new model for moral reasoning, the responsible self. He related this relatively new term, at the time, to others like duty and virtue. These individuals were seen as “responsive beings, who in all [their] actions answer to action upon [them] in accordance with [their] interpretation of such action.” Rather than searching for the good or the right, the responsible self asks the question, “What is going on?” and responds appropriately with that which fits the situation.

This was not meant to apply exclusively to any Christian moral framework. It was not to be a “prescriptive definition” of the Christian life. However, Niebuhr took some time to describe how this was understood in Christian morality. For this he turned to biblical and historical theology. Niebuhr read the Apostle Paul’s letters, particularly on

74 Ibid., 47, also related responsibility to law, goodness, and morality. Lovin listed three models of ethics, teleology, deontology, and areteology, or virtue ethics. He makes the argument that what is virtuous is determined by the context of relationships between individuals, humanity, and history. Similarly, Curran, 73-80, pairs the idea of relationship with Niebuhr’s symbol of responsibility, calling it the relationality-responsibility model. As humanity is in relationship with one another, with history, and with God, we are called to respond to actions upon us. Virtues are understood within the context of those relationships.

75 Niebuhr, 57.

76 Ibid., 60.

77 In the introduction to The Responsible Self, 13, James Gustafson writes, “Some readers of this book may look for some prescriptive definition about how a responsible self ought to behave in one particular instance or another, or they might look for some rules of responsible behavior, or for some assurance that the Christian community is by definition of its existence in Christ a community of superior responsibility. These things he will not find. This is no manual with an immediate practicality in determining for others what their moral life ought to be.”
Romans, and interpreted the human condition as “man-under-law.” The moral life was obedience to the Law, and sin was transgression and disobedience. Thus in deontological terms, proper moral decision-making was based on the obedience to God’s laws. Sin was disobedience, and salvation was the justification of the person and acquittal in God’s presence. On the other hand, moral life according to teleological terms was having the proper view of God and of self. Sin was to “miss the mark” on this understanding rather than to break the law. Niebuhr described it as the “perverse direction of the drives in man, or of his will in general, towards ends not proper to him.” Sin was acting in accordance with one’s disordered sense of self. Salvation then becomes the restoration of one’s proper view of God and oneself.

Niebuhr recognized that both symbols used in the church were not perfect. In the symbol of the responsible self, sin was the inability to respond to God as he was acting upon the individual. According to Niebuhr, God is, among many other agents, acting upon the person and requires a response. Sin is being irresponsible to God while these other “powers and principalities” rule over the individual for their attention. In this case, sin was not considered disobedience to the Law, as with the citizen, or a distortion of God or of one’s self, like the maker, but rather enmity towards God. Herein lies the understanding that the responsible self is a relational being. Salvation comes from a

78 Ibid., 131.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 140, calls this enmity the “natural mind,” or in other words humanity’s natural orientation towards God.
reconciled relationship between God and humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

How did Bonhoeffer understand morality in terms of Niebuhr’s models? Answering this question may help to understand how various scholars come to understand Bonhoeffer in their own readings of his works. It is important to note that each person reading Bonhoeffer not only engages with his stance, but also with their own, which provide the varying interpretations and conclusions about his life and work. These considerations must be taken into account when discussing the key themes of obedience and responsibility in his later works.
Though *Discipleship* was published in the aftermath of Finkenwalde Seminary’s dissolution, the lectures on which the book was based were at the core of the school’s curriculum. Hitler had already been in power for five years when the seminary first opened its doors. By then, the Nazi’s had already instituted many of their programs and doctrines concerning both state and church affairs. Documents such as the “The Law for the Restoration of Professional Civil Service” had taken effect only months after Hitler’s election. Within it was the Aryan Paragraph that prohibited Jews and other non-Aryan ethnicities from holding jobs in government positions and from participating in German cultural activities.81

Bonhoeffer was personally affected by these laws because his sister, Sabine, was married to Gerhard Leibholz, who along with their two daughters were categorized as Jews. But his personal life was not the only thing that was affected by these laws. His world of academia and the life of the church were being challenged by Nazi doctrine. The Aryan Paragraph that excluded Jews, including Jewish Christians, from civil service also excluded them from ministry roles in the state sponsored church. Further, fear within the German church led many of its leaders to comply with Hitler’s doctrine. Only a few, including Bonhoeffer, saw this influence as contrary to everything they believed.

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Much of what is found in *Discipleship* can be interpreted as a reaction to what Bonhoeffer observed was going on in the churches of Nazi Germany. His opening remarks against the idea of grace being cheap served as a rebuke to the German Christians who lost sight of what it meant to be Christ’s disciples and instead chose the easier alternative of complicity with the Nazi program. Bonhoeffer wrote,

> Cheap grace means justification of the sin but not of the sinner. Because our grace alone does everything, everything can stay in its old ways. “Our action is in vain.” The world remains world and we remain sinners “even in the best of lives.” Thus, the Christian should live the same way the world does…

> Cheap grace is preaching without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.  

He saw that the very church that proclaimed Christianity was filled with this cheap grace that required very little from the German Church. On the other hand, costly grace was costly precisely because it required something of the disciples. He wrote, “It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live.”  

Bonhoeffer’s prophetic words would be realized in his own death years later.

Bonhoeffer believed that in order to experience this costly grace, one must become a disciple of Jesus Christ. In order to become a disciple, one must obey Christ’s call to discipleship. The thesis of *Discipleship* can be put in this way; “Only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe.”  

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82 *Discipleship*, 43-44.

83 Ibid., 45.

84 Ibid., 63.
believed and had faith but did not act according to Christ’s commands. To be a disciple was to obey the Son of God. This was the primary task of the disciple. When Jesus met Peter and Andrew at the seashore, his first act was not to teach them to believe but was a command for them to follow. Bonhoeffer wrote,

> Jesus’ concrete call and simple obedience have their own irrevocable meaning. Jesus calls us into a concrete situation in which we can believe in him. That is why he calls in such a concrete way and wants to be so understood, because he knows that people will become free for faith only in concrete obedience.\(^\text{85}\)

He understood obedience to Christ’s call to discipleship as a precursor to faith through grace.

> It is here that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian discipleship appears to take on a deontological framework. To be Christ’s disciple required that one primarily obey the teachings of Christ rather than interpret it according to one’s own understanding. Bonhoeffer argued against those who would call out such blind and strict obedience as legalistic. He argued against those who would reinterpret Christ’s literal commands into something figurative or meant only for personal piety. For Bonhoeffer, Christ’s commands were simple and clear. The disciple’s task is to simply obey.

**Pacifism**

> With this criterion in mind, it is easy to read into Bonhoeffer’s views on nonviolence and pacifism in *Discipleship*. The book stood in contrast to its historical setting when many German Christians blindly followed false Nazi teachings. While Germany was declaring war and annexation on its neighbors and military service was each citizen’s duty, Bonhoeffer espoused a message that was radically different. As much

\(^\text{85}\) Ibid., 81.
as Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” was counter-cultural in its day, Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* challenged the status quo that was found in the prevailing religion that was Christianity.

Many who view Bonhoeffer as a pacifist draw their insights from his interpretation of Christ’s “Sermon on the Mount.” His interpretation was largely affected by his encounters with Jean Lasserre during his time abroad in America. It was in fact Lasserre who “provided the initial impulse for Bonhoeffer’s great book *Discipleship.*”

Bonhoeffer’s new understanding of the sermon seemed to be a personal great awakening that changed the course of his life. He wrote,

> The Bible – especially the Sermon of the Mount – freed me… That was a grand liberation. There it became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church, and gradually it became clearer how far this has to go… I now saw that everything depended on the renewal of the church and of the ministry… Christian pacifism, which I had previously fought against with passion, all at once seemed perfectly obvious.

This was a radical change from his previous position supporting acts of war for the sake of one’s family and people. Bonhoeffer abandoned this sort of nationalism that called citizens to take up arms for the motherland and their fellow countrymen. This was all the more true in light of the Nazi’s rise to power and their prejudicial rhetoric that ultimately terminated millions of lives. The extent to which Bonhoeffer would have to go against the grain was to the point of costly obedience, a constant theme that is found in *Discipleship.*

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A significant portion of the book was dedicated to Christ’s inaugural sermon, which read like a commentary on the biblical text and also on the state of the nation. He addressed, line-by-line, Christ’s sermon beginning with the eight-fold blessings. According to Bonhoeffer, these blessings were meant for the disciples who chose to obey Christ’s call to follow him. He wrote,

[Jesus] has called each individual one. [The disciples] have given up everything in response to his call. Now they are living in renunciation and want; they are the poorest of the poor, the most tempted of the tempted, the hungriest of the hungry. They have only him…

Therefore, “Blessed!” Jesus is speaking to the disciples (cf. Luke 6:20ff.). He is speaking to those who are already under the power of his call. That call has made them poor, tempted, and hungry. He calls them blessed, not because of their want or renunciation. Neither want nor renunciation are in themselves any reason to be called blessed. The only adequate reason is the call and the promise, for whose sake those following him live in want and renunciation.\(^\text{88}\)

Christ’s true blessing came to those who gave up their lives for his call. This answering of the call to obedience placed the disciples in the condition of poverty and persecution. Such were the results for those who lived a counter-cultural life.

One of the characteristics attributed to those who would call themselves Christ’s disciples was that they were called to be peacemakers.\(^\text{89}\) For Bonhoeffer, this meant that Christ’s disciples were to “renounce violence and strife,”\(^\text{90}\) and find their peace in Jesus Christ. He wrote,

Christ’s kingdom is a realm of peace… Jesus’ disciples maintain peace by choosing to suffer instead of causing others to suffer. They preserve community when others destroy it. They renounce self-assertion and are silent in the face of hatred and injustice. That is

\(^\text{88}\) Discipleship, 101.

\(^\text{89}\) Matt. 5:9.

\(^\text{90}\) Discipleship, 108.
how they overcome evil with good. That is how they are makers of divine peace in a world of hatred and war.91

Such disciples were blessed because of their self-denial for the sake of Christ. This was the beatific fortune of those who were poor, hungry, and persecuted because of their obedience to Christ.

Bonhoeffer engaged in several other passages from the Sermon on the Mount that related to peace and non-violence. Regarding Matt. 5:21-26, Jesus’ teaching on anger, he wrote,

The commandment to which Jesus first refers his disciples forbids murder and entrusts the disciples with the well-being of their brothers or sisters. The life of one’s brothers and sisters was granted by God and is in God’s hand. Only God has power over life and death. There is no place in the faith-community of God for a murderer… Jesus’ followers are forbidden to commit murder under penalty of divine judgment. The life of a brother or sister is a boundary for Jesus’ followers which may not be crossed.92

Bonhoeffer seemingly took a straightforward passage and applied it to the lives of Christ’s disciples. Included in this was the idea that having anger toward another was just as accountable to judgment as murder. However, Bonhoeffer included an additional level of accountability when it came to another’s guilt; causing others to become angry. He wrote,

Contempt for others makes worship dishonest and deprives it of any divine promise. Individuals as well as church communities who intend to enter God’s presence with contemptuous or unreconciled hearts are playing games with an idol. As long as we withhold service and love from a sister or brother, as long as he remains a target of our contempt, as long as a sister or brother has something against me or Jesus’ community, our offerings will remain unaccepted. It is not just my own anger which gets between me and God, but even the fact that a brother or sister exists whom I have abused, humiliated, and dishonored, and who “has something against me.” So the community of Jesus’ disciples ought to examine itself as to whether, for the sake of the world, it has

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 121-122.
participated in hating, despising, and humiliating others. To do these things is to be guilty of their murder.\textsuperscript{93}

\textit{Discipleship} was written in the context of anti-Semitism and persecution from powers and authorities that included the German Christians. Bonhoeffer’s comment was as much for them as it was for his own students. The church’s contempt for the Jews and their allegiance to the Nazi’s unjust programs caused their Jewish “brothers and sisters” to become angry, and in so doing likewise become as guilty.

In regards to Matt. 5:38-42, Jesus’ teaching on retribution, Bonhoeffer suggested that Christ’s disciples are released from the Old Testament responsibility of retributive justice and are instead bound to Jesus Christ and his overcoming of evil. Only in non-retaliation can evil be defeated. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
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…

Suffering passes when it is borne. The evil comes to an end when we permit it to pass over us, without defense. Humiliation and debasement are revealed as sin when the disciple does not commit them, but bears them, without defense. Assault is condemned by not being met with violence.\textsuperscript{94}
\end{quote}

Bonhoeffer further restricts the use of retributive justice by eliminating the dichotomy between private life and public office. He was referring to Martin Luther’s interpretation of the passage as it related to their respective responsibilities for addressing evil, who said, “A Christian should not resist any evil; but within the limits of his office, a secular

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 133.
\end{flushright}
person should oppose every evil.” Bonhoeffer did not accept this dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. He wrote,

This distinction between private person and bearer of an office as normative for my behavior is foreign to Jesus. He does not say a word about it. He addresses his disciples as people who have left everything behind to follow him. “Private” and “official” spheres are all completely subject to Jesus’ command.

Jesus spoke to an audience that was living in the midst of evil, not isolated from it. It was not spoken to a particular Christian community that lived in its own world, but to one that was living in the world that faced many challenges of evil. Likewise, Bonhoeffer’s call to nonresistance was not just for those living in isolated community but to the church community as a whole. In other words, there was no place for retribution in God’s created order.

Bonhoeffer addressed the last of Jesus’ teachings from Matthew 5, to love one’s enemies. For him, this reference to love made the pericope the embodiment of the Sermon on the Mount thus far. Particularly, love for one’s enemy was for him the mark of a true disciple of Jesus Christ. This was counterintuitive to what Bonhoeffer referred to as the natural person, one who was responding to evil and the law according to human nature. He wrote,

Loving one’s enemies is not only an unbearable offense to the natural person… It offends the natural concept of good and evil. But even more important, loving one’s enemies appears to people living according to the law to be a sin against God’s law itself. Separating from enemies and condemning them is what the law demands.


96 Discipleship, 135.

97 Ibid., 138-139.
However, Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies was the unnatural, and yet, obedient call to discipleship. This kind of love separated the disciples from the rest of the world.

Bonhoeffer wrote,

> What is undivided love? Love which does not show special favor to those who return our love with their own. In loving those who love us, our kindred, our people, our friends, yes, even our Christian community, we are no different than the Gentiles and the tax collectors. That kind of love is self-evident, regular, natural, but not distinctly Christian… Jesus does not need to say that people should love their sisters and brothers, their people, their friends. That goes without saying. But by simply acknowledging that and not wasting any further words on it, and, in contrast to all that, commanding only love for enemies, he shows what he means by love and what they are to think about the other sort of love.  

Christ’s call to discipleship was costly because it was counter to what was natural and what came easy. Loving one’s enemies would cost the person their right to whatever they thought they were due. Instead, Christ’s disciples were to take up the cross as Jesus had done and love their enemies even in the midst of suffering. By no means did Bonhoeffer consider this an act of contrition nor was he condoning evil. Rather loving one’s enemies in the face of evil was the greater love born out of strength and truth, without the guilt of hatred. Love for one’s enemies was the call to discipleship.

With such texts in mind, it is easy to interpret Bonhoeffer’s life and theology as pacifist. Bonhoeffer himself experienced a spiritual renewal in which pacifism was inseparably linked to his understanding of Christianity. It is not only in the texts of

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98 Ibid., 143.
99 Ibid., 140.
100 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 205. See also Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 40. Hauerwas mentions in his footnotes that he unsure of what kind of pacifism Bonhoeffer represented, stating, “It is not clear to me that Bonhoeffer assumed that his christological pacifism required a disavowal of violence in any circumstance.”
Discipleship that one can interpret Bonhoeffer as a pacifist. In a 1932 lecture given at an ecumenical Youth Peace Conference, he spoke,

There is a widespread and extremely dangerous error that says that in the justification of struggle there is already the justification for war, that this contains the fundamental yes to war... we must face the next war with all the power of resistance, rejection, condemnation. Not out of the Enthusiast establishment of a commandment... but rather out of the obedience to God’s commandment that affects us today, that there should be no more war because it robs us of the view toward revelation. We should not balk here at using the word “pacifism.” Just as certainly as we submit the ultimate pacem facere to God, we too must pacem facere to overcome war.

In August of 1932, he spoke, “The church forsakes obedience whenever it sanctions war.

The Church of Christ stands against war in favor of peace among the peoples, between nations, classes and races.”

It is true that Christ has not given us specific rules for our conduct in every possible complex, political, economic, or other situation that may arise in human life. However, this does not mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not give a clear answer to the problems that confront us. To the simple reader of the Sermon on the Mount, what is says is unmistakable.

The conclusion here is that one should not commit to violence. These passages and others affirm Bonhoeffer’s call to the church for a pacifist approach towards war. With the evidence of such convictions it is difficult to resolve the discrepancy between his pacifist writings and speeches with his actions within the resistance. In order to understand

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103 “Christ and Peace;” in Berlin, 259.
Bonhoeffer’s actions in light of his theology, one must also investigate his later writings that eventually culminate in *Ethics*.
RESPONSIBILITY IN *ETHICS*

As war escalated and Germany’s moral failure, if not political failure, became evident, Bonhoeffer saw the need for a dissenting voice that stood against Hitler’s Nazi Germany. He had already conspired to join in the Abwehr resistance and plot against Hitler’s regime. He had also hoped to participate in the rebuilding of German society after the Nazi fall. It was for this reason he returned to his homeland while ministering abroad, and it was also the impulse for his writing of *Ethics*.

*Ethics* was a project Bonhoeffer hoped to complete during his final years in prison. Evidence suggests that he wrote some of the first manuscripts in 1940. By 1943, when he was arrested, Bonhoeffer had written much of the manuscripts that compose what is considered his *Ethics* today. However, as they were received in various manuscripts with no evidence as to how he planned to organize them into chapters, one can only surmise how Bonhoeffer intended to order them into one cohesive book. Some of his individual manuscripts are also considered to be incomplete, leaving room to wonder what has been left unsaid. Originally published in 1949, subsequent revisions and the reordering of its chapters display the various ways in which editors have interpreted Bonhoeffer’s train of thought.

In order to understand Bonhoeffer’s language of responsibility, one must first understand his view of reality. Bonhoeffer’s reality, the way he perceived the world in which they lived, was a world reconciled to God in Christ. Bonhoeffer was very much against the prevailing view of the dichotomy between the spiritual and the worldly,
between the holy and the secular. Rather God’s ministry of reconciliation found in Christ’s incarnation was what allowed for the dissolution of these dichotomies into the one true reality. He wrote,

In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world… In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17). From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions.\textsuperscript{104}

This christological orientation remained consistent through much of his thinking. Christ was at the center of how Bonhoeffer viewed the world in which he lived. Christ was not only the center of the church-community, but also of the community-at-large and the interpretive lens for understanding and engaging in the world.

As the interpretive lens for the world, Christ became Bonhoeffer’s understanding of what was good. Good as a concept could only be seen in light of this Christ-reality. There was no room for humanistic understandings of what was good. The inquiry into the Christian ethic began with a re-imagined question that was, “What is the will of God?” He wrote,

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?\textsuperscript{105}

The former questions addressed the idea of realizing good as a human pursuit. The latter refocused the worldview to one that recognized the reality of the world in Christ.

Understanding what was good came only in understanding that God was the ultimate

\textsuperscript{104} Ethics, 54.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 47.
reality, a reality that included concepts such as good and evil. Knowing what was good could only come from knowing God. He continued,

> Without God, all seeing and perceiving of things and laws become abstraction, a separation from both origin and goal. All questions of our own goodness, as well as of the goodness of the world, are impossible unless we have first posed the question of the goodness of God. For what meaning would the goodness of human beings and the world have without God? Since God, however, as ultimate reality is no other than the self-announcing, self-witnessing, self-revealing God in Jesus Christ, the question of good can only find its answer in Christ.  

The first two questions were irrelevant without understanding the goodness of God ultimately manifested in Christ, his incarnation, death, and resurrection.

**Responsibility**

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of this reality in Christ was an important factor in how he interpreted his actions in the resistance, particularly with what he regarded as responsible action. This idea of responsibility stemmed from his understanding that people do not exist merely as individuals who are able to distinguish between good and evil. He dismissed the idea that ethical decision-making could be reduced to static absolutes. Rather, people live in community and in relation to one another making them dependent on one another and responsible to one another. He wrote, “This means that a human being lives in encounter with other human beings and that this encounter entails being charged, in ever so many ways, with responsibility [Verantwortung] for the other human being.”

A person living responsibly meant that the individual was participating

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106 Ibid., 49.

107 Ibid., 220.
in the reality of their communal systems, whether it is family, society, or other communal relationships.

Herein lies Bonhoeffer’s moral ethics. To act morally meant to act responsibly to one another. Without the context of being in community with the other, ethics was meaningless. This was the reality that Bonhoeffer was suggesting. He wrote,

The moment a person accepts responsibility for other people – and only in doing so does the person live in reality – the genuine ethical situation arises… The subject of the action is no longer the isolated individual, but the one who is responsible for other people. The action’s norm is not a universal principle, but the concrete neighbor, as given to me by God. The choice is made no longer between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil; instead, it is risked in faith while being aware that good and evil are hidden in the concrete historical situation.¹⁰⁸

Moral decision-making required taking into account that good and evil are not black and white nor is it practiced in isolation, but must be understood in the context in which one lives. Bonhoeffer continued,

To act out of concrete responsibility means to act in freedom – to decide, to act, and to answer for the consequences of this particular action myself without the support of other people or principles. Responsibility presupposes ultimate freedom in assessing a given situation, in choosing, and in acting. Responsible action is neither determined from the outset nor defined once and for all; instead it is born in the given situation. The point is not to apply a principle that eventually will be shattered by reality anyway, but to discern what is necessary or “commanded” in a given situation.¹⁰⁹

Moral decision-making was considered the result of an individual acting responsibly in a given situation, in complete freedom and complete accountability to the consequences of that action. For Bonhoeffer there was no room for absolute definitions of good or evil.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 221.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 221-222. Editor Clifford Green makes note regarding the use of “commanded” saying, “Putting ‘Gebotenes,’ ‘what is commanded,’ in quotes indicates that [Bonhoeffer] wanted it understood both in its everyday meaning of ‘what is appropriate’ and in the possible meaning of God’s ‘commandment.’”
when in specific contexts good was no better than the evil itself. This was not to say that
everything was relative, but Bonhoeffer did see that morality could not be determined by
mere absolutes, and human responsibility played a large factor in such decision-making.

Bonhoeffer’s concept of responsibility did not end with the action that
immediately transpired, but included the acceptance of the consequences for that action.
They are both submitted to God’s judgment because he, in his incarnation, determines the
ultimate reality and the good. Bonhoeffer wrote,

> Whereas all action based on ideology is already justified by its own principle, responsible
action renounces any knowledge about its ultimate justification. The deed is done, after
responsibly weighing all circumstances in light of God’s becoming human in Christ, is
completely surrendered to God the moment it is carried out. Ultimate ignorance of one’s
own goodness or evil, together with dependence upon grace, is an essential characteristic
of responsible historical action.¹¹⁰

He was less concerned with identifying what was good. The concept of good could only
be understood through the will of God and not by human principles. Thus in order to live
the moral life, one must surrender completely to the will of God, justification and all. In
understanding responsibility in the context of Christian discipleship, Bonhoeffer
suggested that responsibility could not only be understood in the reality of Christ but also
evidenced in the life of Christ. As he mentioned earlier, the ultimate reality was one that
is understood through God who became human, which is in Christ.¹¹¹ In his incarnation,
Jesus was able to empathize with humanity to the point of entering into human guilt.
Bonhoeffer wrote,

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 225.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 223. See also page 73 in *Ethics*. 
Jesus is not concerned with the establishment and realization of new ethical ideals, that is, with some kind of personal quality of being good, but exclusively with God’s love for human beings. That is why he is able to enter into human guilt, *able to be burdened with their guilt*... Jesus becomes burdened with guilt; indeed, he becomes the one upon whom ultimately all human guilt falls. Jesus does not shirk it but bears it in humility and infinite love. As one who acts responsibly in human historical existence, as a human being having entered reality, Jesus becomes guilty.  

Though he was sinless, Jesus’ responsible action according to the will of God led him to take the burden of guilt for the sins of humanity. This in turn led to his obedient death on the cross.

Responsibility and guilt were inescapably linked in Bonhoeffer’s mind.

“Everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty.” Jesus, in his obedience, could not escape his responsibility to death for taking on the sins of the world. Likewise, humanity cannot escape the guilt that comes from acting responsibly. However, Bonhoeffer suggests that guilt is not something that is to be avoided. Guilt is the consequence of responsible action and is the object of God’s divine judgment. Bonhoeffer wrote,

> Those who, in acting responsibly, seek to avoid becoming guilty, divorce themselves from the ultimate reality of history, that is, from the redeeming mystery of the sinless bearing of guilt by Jesus Christ, and have no part in the divine justification that attends this event. They place their personal innocence above their responsibility for other human beings and are blind to the fact that precisely in so doing they become even more egregiously guilty.

To avoid guilt meant to deny the redeeming work of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In contrast, Bonhoeffer’s Christological stance would suggest that guilt was completely necessary in order to justify the work of Christ lest humanity be divinely justified.

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112 Ibid., 233-234.

113 Ibid., 234.

114 Ibid.
judged on its own merits. All this is grounded in God’s love for humanity. According to Bonhoeffer, the love of God is directed toward humanity in precisely their humanness and not according to some ideal construct. Ultimately, God’s love is demonstrated in his incarnation by becoming fully human, accepting the full responsibility of human guilt.

It seemed necessary that Bonhoeffer took space in his writing to address one of his previous subjects, that is the Sermon on the Mount. It was in fact he who suggested that obedience to Christ was each and every believer’s call to Christian discipleship. However, this did not mean that following Christ was limited to mere personal piety. Bonhoeffer understood this obedience in the context of the greater reality of the world. Discipleship was not to be taken as a principle or ideal divorced from the world. He wrote, “The ‘ethic of Jesus’ fails either within the large context of dealing with the historical world… or it retreats into the extremely narrow confines of the private life of the individual.”\textsuperscript{115} He continues, “But such an ‘ethic of Jesus’ does not lead to concrete historical responsibility.”\textsuperscript{116} This ethic of Jesus to which Bonhoeffer was referring was one that took seriously the call towards obedience to Jesus’ moral teachings but rejected the situational context in which the follower lived. Ernst Troeltsch wrote concerning such an ethic as one that was “marked by emphasis on purity of intention and a greatly intensified reverence for all moral commands, without any allowance for conflicting

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
motives or for expediency.” Similarly Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Bonhoeffer studied under during his time at Union Seminary, addressed this subject as well. He wrote,

“The ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life… The absolutism and perfectionism of Jesus’ love ethic sets itself uncompromisingly not only against the natural self-regarding impulses, but against the necessary prudent defences of the self, required because of the egoism of others. It does not establish a connection with the horizontal points of a political or social ethic or with the diagonals which a prudent individual ethic draws between the moral ideal and the facts of a given situation. It has only a vertical dimension between the loving will of God and the will of man.”

Such an ethic, one that did not take into consideration the realities of the world in which humanity lived, was insufficient for Bonhoeffer in his understanding of the true reality that is in Christ. Rather, Bonhoeffer’s ethic of responsibility was one that was in incarnate engagement with the world and all its realities and not merely on idealistic principles.

While the “Ethic of Jesus” emphasized the vertical dimension of humanity’s relationship with God and their absolute obedience to his commandments, Bonhoeffer’s ethic of responsibility highlighted the communality of society, one’s inescapable relationship with another in the community and the subsequent responsibility towards the other. The Sermon on the Mount and other moral teachings were not taught in a vacuum, but within the contexts that considered the complexities of the historical reality. Bonhoeffer considered Christ as the embodiment of responsibility because of his


willingness to enter into the acceptance of guilt alongside humanity.\textsuperscript{119} Understanding the Sermon on the Mount then must also be read in light of the one speaking in accordance with responsibility.

\textsuperscript{119} In \textit{The Responsible Self}, H. R. Niebuhr also suggests that Jesus Christ was the paradigm of responsibility, as one who was responding to the divine actions of God upon him.
PERSPECTIVES ON BONHOEFFER’S PACIFISM

In reading *Discipleship*, it seems as though claims of Bonhoeffer’s pacifism are justified. His commentary on the Sermon on the Mount displayed numerous instances where obedience to Christ’s commands, particularly regarding restraint, non-violence, and non-retaliation, is the call to Christian discipleship. Several of his lectures and sermons also point to his call to the churches in realizing peace. However, his involvement in the resistance, along with his writings and sermons as some would argue, give a different outlook on his life as a whole. Given these observations of Bonhoeffer’s life and work, two possible interpretations emerge. One interpretation is that Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the resistance movement is misunderstood and he had always maintained his pacifism throughout his circumstances. The second interpretation that emerges from a study of Bonhoeffer’s life is that he was never a pacifist, or at least he moved away from pacifism to realism and to resistance.

**Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel**

In their recent book, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?: Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking*, authors Mark Nation, Anthony Siegrist, and Daniel Umbel proposed this first view that Bonhoeffer had maintained his belief in pacifism and that his involvement in the conspiracy to kill Hitler is misunderstood. They conclude with several arguments, some of which will be addressed here. First, they conclude, “It is highly unlikely that Bonhoeffer was involved in any assassination attempts.” In their third

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120 Nation, et. al., 224.
chapter, the authors look at Bonhoeffer’s involvement with the Abwehr intelligence agency and question whether this association made him a fellow conspirator and assassin. It is true that some members of the agency conspired against Hitler; author Sabine Dramm estimates about 0.4% of its members.\textsuperscript{121} It was also known that at this time, German citizens were increasingly being conscripted into military service as the Nazi expansion took place across Europe. Had he not joined the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer most likely would have been drafted into the German army and sent to the battlefield.

Bonhoeffer was able to join the intelligence agency because of his perceived value of having close ties with his international and ecumenical contacts. However, as some suggest, Bonhoeffer did not join Abwehr in order to actively participate in any assassination plots. Rather, his involvement with the agency was so that he would avoid military service in which he would be forced to go against his pacifist beliefs. Though he was associated with members who plotted against Hitler, Bonhoeffer himself did not play a significant role in such attempts. Dramm, whom the authors greatly rely upon, writes, “A closer analysis shows that Bonhoeffer’s real part in conspiratorial resistance activities was much slighter than is usually assumed, and this slight share brought hardly any demonstrable results.”\textsuperscript{122} She likens his role to that of a pastor for the resistance. She writes,

\begin{quote} 
He was important for what he said, perhaps less for what he did. The “internal role” that he played in his resistance circle can most readily be described as intellectual pastoral care… He was a pastor, a father confessor, a spiritual advisor… Bonhoeffer strengthened
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 240.
other people in what they did at points where the church was silent, and therefore, in spite of some difference, among those involved in the resistance he strengthened believers especially.\footnote{123}{Ibid.}

Any involvement with the resistance could be attributed to association and not participation in any assassination plots. His arrest was the result of the uncovering of certain financial irregularities related to Operation 7 where Bonhoeffer and his colleagues attempted to rescue the lives of fourteen Jews. Thus Bonhoeffer in actuality never pulled any trigger, planted any bomb, or carried out any other clandestine activity that compromised his prior convictions of pacifism.

The second point is that Bonhoeffer was a self-proclaimed pacifist. Many of his lectures, sermons, and writings point to this conviction. Many of these instances came prior to his writing of \textit{Discipleship}. This book can be seen as the culmination of his work and study on the Sermon on the Mount since Jean Lasserre introduced him to pacifism. The authors recognize that Bonhoeffer’s pacifism must be understood as a “practical pacifism.”\footnote{124}{Nation, et. al., borrows the term “practical pacifist” from Karl Barth, \textit{The Doctrine of Reconciliation}, part 2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 4 of \textit{Church Dogmatics}, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 550.} That is because Bonhoeffer was opposed to acting according to principle. They write, “[Bonhoeffer] was in principle opposed to reducing ethics to principles.”\footnote{125}{Ibid., 226.} For Bonhoeffer, what was important was simple obedience to Christ who is in the present reality, and not to some timeless principled absolutes. So for the authors, Bonhoeffer’s pacifism was one carried in the practice of costly obedience to Jesus Christ.

\footnotetext{123}{Ibid.}


\footnotetext{125}{Ibid., 226.}
Larry Rasmussen

The second view is that Bonhoeffer was never a pacifist, at least in the strictest sense, and had made a shift away from pacifism towards a stance of realism. This position takes into consideration the numerous accounts of his statements advocating for peace and non-violence, but concludes that he was never committed to absolute pacifism. Even Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s student and close personal friend, suggests that Bonhoeffer was never a pacifist. In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, author Larry Rasmussen traces the significant moments in Bonhoeffer’s writings and addresses that point to his leaning away from absolute pacifism. Rasmussen begins with his 1929 address in Barcelona, where a young Bonhoeffer rejected the sort of pacifism that abandoned the concerns for one’s neighbor in favor of a legalistic and absolute adherence to the Law. When understanding Bonhoeffer’s history, this would not be strange since this address preceded the moment many considered his realization of pacifism in 1931 when he met Jean Lasserre. Rasmussen continues to look at his following addresses up to 1932 noting that while his nationalistic feelings have toned down much, Bonhoeffer still had yet to fully commit to a strict pacifism. If anything, it may be considered a “provisional” pacifism. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Therefore the Church must not preach timeless principles however valid, but only commands which are valid today. To us God

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127 Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 96-100. He writes, “Christian pacifism is rejected because it sacrifices the nearest neighbor… and because it rests upon a lifeless, legalistic exegesis of Matthew 5-7 that can only make the Christian a slave of the Law.”

128 Ibid., 101.
is ‘always’ God ‘today.’” While peace was something the church should pursue, there was still a place for war as a necessary evil. This was a significant shift from his previous position only a few years before, and there was still time for Bonhoeffer to explore his own commitment to pacifism by the time he wrote *Discipleship*.

Understanding Rasmussen’s interpretation of *Discipleship* (published as *The Cost of Discipleship*) may be critical to his view of Bonhoeffer’s position against pacifism. It is undeniable that after studying the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer wrote what he intended to be a renewed ethic of peace, non-violence, and non-retaliation in *Discipleship*. In a lecture he gave in Berlin, he said,

> It is true that Christ has not given us specific rule for our conduct in every possible complex, political, economic, or other situation that may arise in human life. However, this does not mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not give a clear answer to the problems that confront us. To the simple reader of the Sermon on the Mount, what it says is unmistakable.

This unmistakable teaching was an ethic of pacifism. Rasmussen understands this ethic to be an ethic given to the disciples of Jesus, but is not necessarily given to the secular world. He writes,

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129 Ibid., 101-102, quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin Robertson, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper, 1965), 162. Rasmussen understands Bonhoeffer’s use of the word “today” as a contextual ethic that is dependent on time and space. Rasmussen, 25, writes, “Bonhoeffer’s ethic is therefore contextual in a double sense. On the one hand, the Christian should make his decisions in a particular theological context, namely within a Christo-universal understanding of the world, a world reconciled in Christ, the ontological center of existence. On the other hand, the Christian’s decisions are also made in a particular historical context, the knowledge of which is indispensable for discerning Christ’s particular *Gestalt* in this time and place, for uncovering the concrete command of God that will bring reality to expression here and now.”

130 This does not mean that he was opposed to pacifism, but that he did not take up the position himself.

In The Cost of Discipleship] nonviolence and even nonresistance are required of disciples, but Bonhoeffer is emphatic that this cannot be made a principle for secular life. The world will not follow Jesus’ way of nonviolence and nonresistance; to transpose his way into a strategy for public order would thus be to wear “the blinkers of perfectionism” and to indulge “in idealistic dreams.”

Rasmussen continues by viewing Bonhoeffer’s understanding of pacifism as a principle in the secular world as a denial of God’s “gracious provision for preservation through the maintenance of public order.” He concludes that what must be understood is Bonhoeffer’s “two-spheres doctrine” that dichotomized church and secular life.

Rasmussen continues by showing an evolving Bonhoeffer from this earlier period marked by “provisional pacifism” to a period of “selective conscientious objection” to “agonized participation.” He writes, “Bonhoeffer’s general bearing is pacifist, if by that is meant a strong opposition to war.” But by the time Bonhoeffer wrote Ethics, war was already at hand, and he was already thinking toward the post-war order of rebuilding. According to Rasmussen, “The abnormal times of [necessity] confront men with the question of ultima ratio and appeal to ‘the free responsibility of the agent, a responsibility that is bound by no law.’” He continues,

This relation of free responsibility to the ultima ratio was shown to be Bonhoeffer’s rationale for conspiratorial breaking of law. Times do arise which demand violence as ultima ratio action, but the employment of this violence must never be made normative for other times…

132 Rasmussen, 106.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 116.
135 Ibid., 109.
136 Ibid., 111. Ultima ratio means “last resort.”
The test for the justice of the \textit{ultima ratio} is not in the deed itself but in the end it serves and in the acknowledgement of the guilt incurred in attaining that end. It must be the breaking of law for the sole purpose of restoring the Rule of Law.\footnote{Ibid., 111-112.}

Bonhoeffer was called into a war that he did not ask for. It was a war for the soul of Germany and its Christians. In order to save its people and rebuild its post-war society, Bonhoeffer had to actively participate in such conspiratorial and morally ambiguous activities while accepting the consequences of guilt.
CONCLUSION

In 1984, Tom Brokaw of NBC Nightly News prepared a documentary marking the 40th anniversary of the D-Day, an Allied offensive against German occupied Normandy, France. The book that followed was a compilation of the stories that were told by survivors of that event and of the second Great War. After completing the project, Brokaw could only conclude, “This is the greatest generation any society has ever produced.”138 He described them as people who held values of responsibility, duty, honor, and faith in the highest of standards. They are commonly described as the generation that “fought not for fame and recognition, but because it was the right thing to do.”

The right thing to do. That has been the underlying question many have tried to discern by understanding the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is often looked to as a guiding light during times of war because of his experiences during one of the darkest periods in history. He is seen as one who had the answers to the difficult questions, such as whether it is right to condone the killing of another human being or whether it is okay to bear false witness and deceive when it seems necessary under the right circumstances. One person commented, “If it were not for Bonhoeffer I would be a pacifist.”139 This is a shared sentiment among ethicists, theologians, and everyday citizens alike. But does it accurately interpret Bonhoeffer? Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel would disagree. It is difficult not to when one reads Discipleship and sees the clear call to

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139 Nation, et. al., 13.
obedience and peacemaking. On the other hand, it is clear that Bonhoeffer did not support an ethic that stood on principle alone. One must conclude that this must also include a principled position such as pacifism.

So what did Bonhoeffer think was the right thing to do? He must have had an opinion one way or the other since he had considered his life being led in a “straight line.”¹⁴⁰ Many interpret this statement to mean that his thought and actions remained consistent throughout the course of his life. Many also view Bonhoeffer as a person who was sure of his convictions, and with that understanding they have determined their own ethical viewpoints based on that understanding of his legacy. But those who do fall into the trap of principle that Bonhoeffer was fervently against. For Bonhoeffer, morality was not something to be determined in the vacuum of the mind, but only in community and relationship could one determine right or wrong action. This community was defined by the presence of Christ. One must then read Bonhoeffer with this in mind.

A few points must be taken into consideration in attempting to understand Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ethics of pacifism, resistance, obedience, and responsibility. First, he was a man living in an unprecedented time of moral ambiguity for the modern era. There may have arguably been very few periods in history that surpass the horrors of the Holocaust. However none can compare to it in the collective memory of the modern world. None could also imagine such an event ever taking place, yet it did. Bonhoeffer lived in a time during which the world he died in was far different from the world he was born into. Even the years between the time he spoke peace in Barcelona in 1932 to the

¹⁴⁰ Letters and Papers from Prison, 352.
time he wrote *Discipleship* in 1938, or to the time of his death in 1945, global and political realities were in tremendous flux. It would be unrealistic to think that every aspect of Bonhoeffer’s views of moral decision-making would remain consistent throughout these tribulations. When reading Bonhoeffer, one must be open to the possibility that his thoughts on the matter of pacifism may have changed over time.

Second, it is easy to read into Bonhoeffer’s works with the lens that the reader brings into the text. For instance, author Mark Nation admits that he is very well aware of his own convictions as a pacifist.\(^{141}\) Likewise, realists are susceptible to read into Bonhoeffer with their own worldviews in mind. While both perspectives are helpful tools in interpreting Bonhoeffer’s own understanding of his life and actions, neither should be taken as the rule for interpretation.

A third factor must be considered in Bonhoeffer’s understanding of pacifism. In attempting to understand his perceived shift from pacifism to resistance, scholars have attempted to provide a definition of what the term “pacifism” meant according to Bonhoeffer.\(^{142}\) One scholar compares Bonhoeffer’s pacifism with that of Gandhi, who “saw nonviolence as ‘an active force in pursuing justice’ rather than trying to fight injustice while remaining ‘untainted.’”\(^{143}\) By this view, one was participating in the status quo of violence if they were not actively resisting violence. Thus pacifism takes on an

\(^{141}\) Nation, et. al., 225. This is not to say that there book has presented a biased argument regarding Bonhoeffer’s call to peacemaking.

\(^{142}\) Gides, 12-15, provides a thorough overview of the various attempts in defining pacifism.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 13.
active participation of resistance. While such attempts at redefining pacifism may strengthen one’s argument, ultimately it is difficult to determine how exactly Bonhoeffer viewed his pacifist claims, and it is more helpful to use such terms as they are commonly understood. Rasmussen’s definition serves as the most helpful in having a common dialogue.144

With these considerations in mind, one must let Bonhoeffer’s words speak for themselves when interpreting his life and actions. First, it is clear that Bonhoeffer’s ethical stance was based on his Christological worldview of Christ as the church community. This was a consistent theme found in Sanctorum Communio, Discipleship, and Ethics. Perhaps this is what Bonhoeffer was referring to in his prison letters stating that he believed his life remained an unbroken line. In Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer explored the concept of Christ existing in the world as the church community. With Christ as the head, the church was the incarnate body of Christ living and active in the world. This was not a voluntary association or compulsory organization, but was a community that was brought together joined in and through Christ. This was concretely displayed in its practices by being with each other in community and by being for each other through acts of love.

Discipleship was the result of an experiment in community. Though the experiment did not last very long, the lessons Bonhoeffer took away from it are valuable to this day. Among them was the idea that costly discipleship was for the sake of the

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144 Rasmussen, 95, writes, “The pacifist is one who always views the use of violent coercion as an evil and who rules out war even as a necessary evil.”
preservation of community when others would seek to destroy it. It entrusted one another with mutual well being. However the Nazis would eventually dismantle this community of believers changing the context of Bonhoeffer’s new arena of ethical engagement. Thus the firm statements found in Discipleship must be understood in this context.

The impetus for Ethics was this new context in which no German citizen could escape the conflict at hand. Bonhoeffer’s Christological focus still remained, but he was writing in a time of war while preparing for peacetime rebuilding. This leads to the second point, that is; Bonhoeffer’s own language suggests that he was very much against an ethic based on principle divorced from the context in relation to the Christ-community. Such an ethic was at best humanism in which what was good or right was determined apart from God’s will. Bonhoeffer asked the question, “What is the will of God?” as the primary step toward ethics. His Christology led him to understand God’s will in the context of community, which was very much dependent on the historical situation. Therefore, Bonhoeffer’s ethic required the ability to respond to its present circumstances and not merely rely on absolute principles. Adherence to such principles would only lead to legalism, to which Bonhoeffer was opposed. His higher calling was that of obedience to Christ, which breaks through legalism according to his grace.\(^{145}\) The very nature of principle also allowed for the avoidance of guilt. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, saw guilt as a necessary component of responsible action that should not be avoided, just as Jesus, while he was guiltless, took on the guilt of humanity in his crucifixion.

\(^{145}\text{Discipleship, 59.}\)
Then how does one answer the question, “Was Bonhoeffer a pacifist?” This paper has already suggested that using Rasmussen’s definition of pacifism would serve as the most helpful place to start. When held to this definition, Bonhoeffer was not a pacifist.\textsuperscript{146} According to Rasmussen’s definition, pacifism at its core is an absolutist position. Only by being resolute in its absoluteness does it qualify as pacifism. That being said, Bonhoeffer operated from an ethic that was not principled or absolute, but contextualized to the community-society in which he was engaged. Individuals were to participate in the “reality of their communal systems,”\textsuperscript{147} and in the “concrete historical situation.”\textsuperscript{148} Bonhoeffer was not committed to absolute pacifism, but rather to godly obedience while responding to his present environment.

Reinterpreting the narrative, as Nation, Seigrist, and Umbel have suggested, also does not serve to understand Bonhoeffer’s ethics. Regardless of his motivations for joining the \textit{Abwehr} conspiracy and his role in it, or the reasons for his arrests, Bonhoeffer’s actions were not that of someone who was a pacifist. Even his dear committed student, friend, and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, admitted as much.\textsuperscript{149} Bonhoeffer was as much a conspirator as the word implies regardless of the role he played, whether it be pulling a trigger or speaking out against the totalitarian regime. It is

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{146}] Mark K. Nation, “‘Pacifist and Enemy of the State’: Bonhoeffer’s ‘Straight and Unbroken Course’ from Costly Discipleship to Conspiracy,” \textit{Journal of Theology for Southern Africa} no. 77 (December 1991): 74, also comes to a similar conclusion based on Rasmussen’s definition.
\item[\textsuperscript{147}] \textit{Ethics}, 220.
\item[\textsuperscript{148}] Ibid., 221.
\item[\textsuperscript{149}] Bethge, \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography}, 153.
\end{itemize}
clear Bonhoeffer’s actions should lead him to be seen as one who was resistant to the evil that was at hand, even to the point of conspiracy.

Many theologians, ethicists, and citizens of the world have used Bonhoeffer as the basis for justifying their position on just war and pacifism. While being able to speak to both positions, Bonhoeffer would first draw their attention to Christ’s call to follow him. It is in their obedience to follow in any and every circumstance that answers the question, “What is the right thing to do?” The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer reaches far beyond whether he was a pacifist or a resister. His theology of Christ and the church-community has greater importance than to just answer the pacifism/just-war debate. It was this theological understanding that carried him through his experiences at Finkenwalde and in Tegel Prison, and in his development of costly discipleship and ethical responsibility. He was a man living very much in his present moment in which his Christ-community was under attack and being undermined. Its role of conveying Christ’s presence to the rest of society was being diminished before his very eyes, and Bonhoeffer sought to resist this in any way possible. Both the Finkenwalde community and his involvement in the resistance were responses to this calling. In the end, Christ’s call to “come and die” was Bonhoeffer’s act of obedience. However, in his costly obedience, he truly lived in Christ. That is reflected in more than just his resistance, but in the legacy that he leaves for today’s community of saints.
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