

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Christian's
Obligation to Responsible Action**

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Dedication

to all those who believe when I stop.....

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Introduction

Why Grace, Why Responsible Action. . .

Why Bonhoeffer?

During my life, I have struggled with what it means to be a Christian and whether I want to associate myself with those who call themselves Christians. I have been hesitant because I feared the labels that others would place on me. People can do good things and live responsible lives without saying they are Christians. However, if someone calls himself or herself a Christian, they have a certain obligation about how they will live their lives.

I have always been frustrated by people who call themselves Christians, yet do not seem to concern themselves with activities that I would consider essential to being a Christian. If someone calls himself or herself a Christian, it is necessary to participate in some sort of service to those who are in need or less fortunate. Identifying as a Christian and service to others must be thought of together. Christianity is not primarily about saving souls and bringing people closer to Jesus. It is not about feeling good and having a personal relationship with Jesus. Being a Christian carries with it certain responsibilities. Christianity is about struggling with personal beliefs and faith and how to show by example those beliefs and faith in daily life. Daily we must be reminded of our baptism and what it means to be a Christian.

People constantly call themselves Christians, but have they ever acted on behalf of another person? Jesus talks in the Bible specifically about doing things for others and

treating others as you want to be treated. The parable of the Good Samaritan talks both about action on behalf of another and about who one's neighbor is.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Lk 10:29-37, NRSV)

Jesus' teachings are very action based. Jesus usually gave examples of what actions people needed to take in a situation. This passage is specifically about the neighbor and inheriting eternal life. This example of action should be a springboard for Christians today and what they ought to be doing. The problem I will address is the importance but also the need of acting responsibly for others because of the gift of grace people receive from God. Action and service are essential to living out one's faith. Christianity is not simply about being saved and entering into heaven, it is about positive, healthy interactions and community on earth.

The issue of salvation brings up words such as "grace" and "works," words whose precise meaning is sometimes unclear. I want to connect grace with justification and discipleship. These words will lead us to understand the urgent necessity of taking action

to help our neighbor. Grace and obligation can be seen as two streets running parallel to each other but slowly they merge at a “Y” intersection. The call of Christ is a gift of grace; it is freely given. However, it is also a call to obedience, meaning, to be obligated to Christ. It is this call, an intersection of grace and obligation, which is a call to discipleship—the call to responsible action in the world.

In this paper, I examine the ideas of grace, discipleship, obedience, and responsible action through the lens of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer gives a radically different view from other contemporary theologians regarding what is expected in terms of action toward others. Bonhoeffer thought that the Christian must act on behalf of his or her neighbor while others did not have as strong a view on the requirement of action. Many theologians, some of whom Bonhoeffer has learned and drawn from, deal with similar ideas. However, many of them had more conservative ideas about responsible action and what is necessary as a Christian. When using the word conservative I mean a more reserved idea of what is required or what is the responsibility of a Christian. I am specifically using Bonhoeffer’s ideas, because I do not want a conservative understanding of our response to grace and responsible action.

Bonhoeffer lived the theology he wrote and talked about. His involvement in the resistance movement against Hitler during World War II was a way to live out responsible action toward his neighbors, the Jewish people. Agreeing with this, Klemens von Klemperer writes, “Bonhoeffer’s resistance was but an expression of his theology.”¹ He constantly asked himself whether he was doing the “will of God,” and that phrase dominated his everyday actions. Keeping the “will of God” as his focus was how he was

¹ Klemens von Klemperer, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Confession and Resistance,” Union Seminary Quarterly Review 53, no. 1-2 (1999): 58.

living his theology in daily life. This understanding is important because it is one thing to see theology as an academic discipline, and it is something else to live out one's theology in everyday life.

The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Germany, in February of 1906. He was born into a family that "was well-educated, gifted, closely-knit, part of upper-middle class, privileged society."² His father was a professor of psychiatry and a physician, while his mother raised him and his seven siblings.³ The family had high expectations for Dietrich and his siblings to make something out of themselves and become successful in the community because of the background and opportunities they were given. His father was very disappointed when Dietrich chose to study theology and work in the church. Dietrich worried about the expectations because his father did not see the church as a place that offered opportunities or pathways to success.

Bonhoeffer was not raised with weekly worship, but there was definitely a spiritual and Christian influence on Bonhoeffer. This influence came in the form of grace before meals and learning Bible stories, as well as the importance of a higher power.⁴ However, organized religion was not part of their life because the Bonhoeffers "perceived the church as an extension of bourgeois culture, closed to intellectual

² John W. de Gruchy, "Introduction," Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2.

³ F. Burton Nelson, "The life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

⁴ Nelson, 24.

challenge, and incapable of addressing the urgent issues facing society.”⁵ One can speculate that this thinking remained influential because of Bonhoeffer’s later views and actions against the church. Particularly when the church refused to address what was happening in Nazi Germany.

Bonhoeffer moved through school and his theological studies quickly. At the age of twenty-one, he wrote Sanctorum Communio, his doctoral dissertation.⁶ He continued to write many books until his death in 1945. Three years after writing his dissertation, he traveled to the United States to study for a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York. While there he attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where he learned about the struggle for equality of the black people in the United States. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of this struggle later influenced his sense of obligation to make the struggle of black persons known as well as the struggle of the Jewish people in Germany.

During the next period of his life, Bonhoeffer traveled to different European cities while studying and served as a pastor in London. It is often overlooked that Bonhoeffer was as much a pastor as he was an academic figure. Bonhoeffer returned to New York in 1939 at the urging of friends to keep him safe as the situation worsened in Germany. However, Bonhoeffer did not stay long because he realized that he had to return to Germany. He wrote,

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this time with my people...⁷

⁵ de Gruchy, 2.

⁶ Nelson, 28.

⁷ From Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christ, Zeitgenosse by Eberhard Bethge, as quoted in Cambridge Companion, 38-39.

This recognition was a turning point for him. He was choosing to return to Germany and oppose Hitler and the Third Reich, knowing that there was the chance that he would be killed. After this point in his life, it is important to discuss his involvement in the resistance movement.

Bonhoeffer struggled with the question whether or not to involve himself with the resistance against Hitler. Several family members who were involved ultimately helped convince him that it was something he needed to do. Once he was involved in the resistance movement, a change in thoughts and beliefs is evident in his writing.

In his writings and his actions toward the end of his life, we see his theology crystallize. The personal struggles he is in the midst of shape his theology and writing. His early writings laid the groundwork for his later works, which delve deeply into ethical issues.

In The Cost of Discipleship, one of his earlier writings from 1937, Bonhoeffer developed the ideas of grace, discipleship, and obedience. Grace is a gift from God that allows for the forgiveness of sins and grants a person salvation. He described grace as “costly,” meaning that once grace is accepted, there is a response that must occur. While grace is a gift from God, it comes with an obligation to action and service toward other humans. This response is accepting the call to discipleship. Grace is costly because Jesus gave his life for us to have grace and because God lost his only son for us.⁸ Discipleship is the “single-minded obedience” to live for Christ. All of these ideas are visualized and made concrete in responsible action toward the neighbor. Bonhoeffer’s life and

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 45. [Original English translation SCM Press Ltd, 1959.] Hereafter abbreviated as CD.

involvement in the resistance are important here because his life provides a concrete example.

Bonhoeffer was living out his ideas of responsible action, meaning he was attending to the needs of his neighbor. It was obvious to Bonhoeffer that something had to be done to stop Hitler. However, most people were either unaware of the deportation and murder of the Jews or did not see the need to stop Hitler because they were convinced Hitler was right. Because Hitler was in power, then the actions that he was taking were for them acceptable. Bonhoeffer disagreed with what Hitler was doing. Hitler was leading a nation to hate and kill based on one's appearance, ethnicity, religious background, sexuality, political allegiance, and many other things. Michael Berenbaum, a Holocaust historian, writes,

According to Nazi ideology, the world was divided into Aryans destined as the master race, followed by the lesser races identified by color, ethnicity, culture, and nationality...In the first years of the Nazi regime, terror was directed at political opponents – Communists, Socialists, liberals, and trade unionists – as well as members of the clergy who spoke out against the regime. Once these voices were silenced, terror actually increased as the Nazi state turned against whole categories of people, including Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, Freemasons, homosexuals, and the mentally retarded, physically handicapped, or insane.⁹

Hitler strongly believed that he was doing the correct thing by eliminating what he believed were "impure" races and people. The impure races and people were affecting everyone else's chance at survival. This comes from the survival of the fittest mentality stemming from Social Darwinism. Once the human race was seen as "pure," then there would be nothing that could stop them and they would be ready for everything. Innocent people were being killed, and Bonhoeffer could not allow this to happen.

⁹ Michael Berenbaum, The World Must Know: The history of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993) 51.

Bonhoeffer could not walk away because of his conviction that action must be taken for those in need. Douglas Huff, a respected philosopher and Bonhoeffer scholar, comments on Bonhoeffer's thought: "...for him [Bonhoeffer] there is no such thing as escaping your responsibility to act... You either oppose the persecution of the innocent or you share in it."¹⁰ Bonhoeffer was a compassionate man who always was thinking about and acting for the other person. There is not always as clear an example, as Hitler and the Holocaust, to indicate a need for responsible action.

Responsible actions take into account the obligation to do the will of God and the obligation to love and serve the neighbor and ourselves. Bonhoeffer's four mandates from his book Ethics, marriage and family, labor, church, and government—help to order and organize society and one's life. There is a structure within these mandates, and it is a guideline as to how one is to function and live. The mandates are a stepping-stone to action and specifically responsible action. The mandates are explained and discussed further in Chapter Three. A close look at Bonhoeffer's ideas will show that there is a need for responsible action and what sort of action that may be.

¹⁰ Douglas Huff, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/b/bonhoff.htm>> (12 June 2001).

Chapter 1

Luther and Bonhoeffer:

Are They That Different?

Bonhoeffer's ideas about grace will be the starting point of our discussion, because once grace is understood then the discussion can move into the response to grace. Much of his understanding comes from Martin Luther, but Bonhoeffer takes grace further, dealing more with the necessary response to grace by proposing an intersection or connection between grace and obligation. However, understanding Luther and the background on grace helps us understand what is created by the intersection.

Luther on Grace and Justification

Martin Luther developed his ideas about grace and justification during the Reformation in the 1500's when he broke away from the Papacy. Luther thought that justification happens by grace through faith. Luther talks about justification in relation to righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. Robin Leaver, who writes about Luther and his theology, quotes this passage from Luther:

And it is to this day, and will be to the end, the unanimous understanding and voice of the whole Christian church, which always in one mind and with one accord has confessed and fought for this article, that only in the name of Jesus forgiveness of sins is obtained and received. And in this faith they have been justified by God and saved.¹¹

¹¹ From D. Martin Luthers saemmtliche Schriften, edited by J. G. Walch, as quoted in Robin A. Leaver, Luther on Justification (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 23.

Salvation is a gift from God; it is not something that one has to earn. Luther made it very clear that it was by grace, not works, that a person is justified. As The Book of Concord states,

... we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but ... we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.¹²

These ideas Luther believed in were important in the 1500's; they were important for Bonhoeffer; and they are still relevant today.

Many did not see anything in Luther's theology beyond salvation by grace.

However, Luther wrote that there was more to grace than salvation. In the treatise Christian Liberty, Luther explains that grace equips a person to live one's life in a certain way. Some of Luther's followers during this time were fearful of associating anything other than salvation with grace. They believed that a required response from grace could be interpreted as being saved by works and not grace. That is, grace became a work. Luther felt, though, that works grew out of one's gift of grace and love for the neighbor. Throughout Christian Liberty, Luther is clear about a person being saved by grace and not works and that works do not earn grace. He says works or actions come from one's love and obedience to Christ. Luther says,

Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.¹³

¹² Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., From "The Augsburg Confession" in The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 39-40.

¹³ Martin Luther, A Treatise on Christian Liberty, ed. Harold J. Grimm, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress Press, 1957), 29.

In Christian Liberty, Luther also writes about obedience, which is crucial to Bonhoeffer's understanding of discipleship.¹⁴

Bonhoeffer on the Response to Grace

Bonhoeffer would strongly echo these ideas of Luther throughout his life. He came to his understanding of grace based on Luther. For Bonhoeffer, grace is a gift given to all people. However, Bonhoeffer focused more than Luther did on the response to grace. It can be assumed that Luther did not push the response part of grace as far because he was in the middle of a conflict with the Catholic Church that focused on works as salvation. Therefore, Luther risked people assuming he was only preaching the Catholic idea of works righteousness and not works stemming from a response to grace. Bonhoeffer takes Luther's ideas and reassures Christians of the gift of grace but pushes them to understand the response that is necessary.

When discussing salvation, people need to realize why it is a necessary thing. However, this paper will not address salvation in general, but only touch on it in relation to the topic of the ultimate goal of responsible action. If a Christian is obsessing over whether they are going to be saved, they can lose focus on all else. Their life is consumed by the fear of damnation. The gift of grace allows one to understand that they are justified by grace through faith. There is no longer a need to worry about salvation because it has been given as a gift.

¹⁴ A specific reference is cited in Chapter Two in the section "Obligation as Discipleship."

Understanding Law and Gospel

Within this discussion of salvation, the ideas of law and gospel arise. Within the Lutheran Church and tradition, these terms are central to religious practice and one's understanding of faith. The Lutheran tradition and Bonhoeffer believed that you had to have the law to understand the gospel and the gospel to understand the law.

The law functions to drive one to despair. In this despair, one's sinful nature is recognized and understood. The law drives one to despair because of the daunting task of fulfilling the will of God. The Book of Concord states, "Proclamation of the law and its threats may terrify the hearts of unrepentant people and bring them to a knowledge of their sins and to repentance."¹⁵ The law sets forth a call to repent.

The gospel is the gift of forgiveness for our sins. Once one has recognized his or her sinful nature, one goes to repent and be forgiven. The Book of Concord states, "This gospel proclaims that through Christ God forgives all the sins of those who believe the gospel, accepts them for Christ's sake as his children out of sheer grace without any merit of their own, and makes them righteous and saves them."¹⁶ It is in law and gospel that one is a sinner and saint.

Bonhoeffer also holds these definitions of law and gospel. These definitions are held in tension. This tension is not negative or positive—it is simply a tension of two ideas. Bonhoeffer shows this tension as he discusses one's obedience in discipleship:

¹⁵ From "Formula of Concord" in Book of Concord, 586.

¹⁶ Ibid.

"...only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes."¹⁷ One has to have both obedience and belief to live with Christ and fulfill Christ's will.

If the quote from Bonhoeffer is broken in half it can be better understood. The part "only he who believes is obedient" starts to sound like Bonhoeffer's idea of cheap grace.¹⁸ It is the understanding that one does not need to do anything. If one believes in God, then one must be obedient, which is all that is necessary for salvation. This one-sided thinking is problematic for Bonhoeffer.

The other half of the quote states, "Only he who is obedient believes." This side of the equation is similar to the notion of works righteousness. This phrase is the understanding that if one follows the law and does what one is told, he or she will be saved. This understanding leaves out the gift of grace and Christ's fulfillment of the law.

Bonhoeffer finds the point where these two ideas can be held together. At this point we see the tension that Bonhoeffer understands to be discipleship. It is through Christ's fulfillment of the law that one comes to see the promise in the gospel. God has commanded us to do good works. These works cannot be done without Christ. The idea of good works being done in the freedom that Christ has given one can be seen in The Book of Concord. It states, "It is also taught that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded for God's sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God."¹⁹ God has commanded us to go and do good works. It is because of Christ that one is able to fulfill the law, the command to do good works. Law and Gospel are hard to grasp because it

¹⁷ CD, 63.

¹⁸ Cheap grace will be discussed and defined later in this chapter.

¹⁹ Book of Concord, 40.

takes one to a place of unrest as the struggle to live in the grace from God is matched with the call to serve and love the neighbor.

These ideas of law and gospel become even more important for Bonhoeffer because of how they are used in his daily life. Jonathan Sorum believes that "Bonhoeffer insists on the necessity of obedience for faith precisely in order to preach the one law of this world as the law under which Christ is to be found as the crucified One."²⁰ When Sorum says the "law of this world," it seems that he is talking about the law of God in which Christ is found. Responsible action is following the law, however; the law does not need to be followed because Christ fulfilled the law for us in his death on the cross. Sorum's ideas, which take root in faith and salvation, can help propel us toward the goal of responsible action. Sorum expresses this when he writes, "Precisely Bonhoeffer's Lutheran understanding of law and gospel as expressed in The Cost of Discipleship is the basis for his activity on their behalf in the resistance."²¹ This quote is from an article that compares Barth's ideas of law and Gospel to Bonhoeffer's ideas in The Cost of Discipleship. Sorum seems to be arguing that Bonhoeffer thinks that obedience and faith are related and that it is not possible to have one idea without the other. Sorum sees Bonhoeffer's Christology as crucial to Bonhoeffer's notions of obedience and discipleship. Sorum gets at the heart of law and Gospel arguing that those two things drive Bonhoeffer to involve himself in the resistance movement.

Also, G. Leibholz addresses this point of how the law functioned in Bonhoeffer's life. Leibholz wrote the Memoir in The Cost of Discipleship, which reads, "Bonhoeffer

²⁰ Jonathan Sorum, "Barth's 'Gospel and Law' and Bonhoeffer's The Cost of Discipleship," Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago, Ill.: Covenant Publications, 1999), 221.

²¹ Sorum, 224.

was firmly and rightly convinced that it is not only a Christian right but a Christian duty towards God to oppose tyranny, that is, a government which is no longer based on natural law and the law of God.”²² Bonhoeffer lived a life that reflected his living in tension with law and Gospel.

Cheap and Costly Grace

Bonhoeffer refers to grace as “costly” because, while it is given to us, it is given with the expectation that those receiving the grace will do something in response. Bonhoeffer states, “Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.”²³ In following Jesus Christ and keeping him as our center and focus, we can come to understand grace. The gift of grace that God gives us is actualized because Jesus died on the cross for all people. In the cross and suffering Christ and grace are truly understood. It is necessary to acknowledge that even with grace as a gift a response to grace is required. At one time, the church recognized that grace came at a cost; however, the awareness of the costliness of grace faded over the years. For example, the monastic tradition recognized the costliness because they gave themselves in total obedience to the will of God.

Grace comes with an obligation to Christ, and that obligation is discipleship. Bonhoeffer did not think that all people could claim they were justified by grace: “The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ. Such a man knows that the call to discipleship is a gift of grace,

²² G. Leibholz, “Memoir” from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 29-30. [Original English translation SCM Press Ltd, 1959.]

and that the call is inseparable from the grace.”²⁴ Cheap grace is the opposite of costly grace, and it comes with no response or obligation. Bonhoeffer wrote,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.²⁵

Grace carries an obligation to respond.

The word “obligation” carries with it connotations with which many are not comfortable. Obligation says obliged and required to do something. Obligation implies that there should not be a choice, and many people like to think that they have the freedom of choice in their life. However, when discussing grace, there should not be a choice as to whether one will respond, but rather how one will respond. Once one receives the gift of grace, one has an obligation to respond to the grace by following Jesus Christ. The word grace begs for a response because one sees the amazing gift that has been possible through the life of Jesus Christ and his importance in one’s life. This response comes in the form of discipleship to Christ. In Bonhoeffer’s writing, three main obligations come from grace. These are to be obedient to Christ, to seek justice, and to love your neighbor.

Obedience to Christ is of the utmost importance. Seeking justice and loving your neighbor both emerge from obedience to Jesus Christ. According to Bonhoeffer, discipleship is obedience to Jesus Christ. It is living your life in a truly selfless manner as Christ lived his. It is taking the form of Jesus Christ in the world today. In obedience to Christ, one is fulfilling the will of God. The will of God is to respond to the need of one’s

²³ CD, 45.

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

²⁵ Ibid., 44-45.

neighbor. This is addressed more completely later, but obedience to Christ is ultimately about the needs of one's neighbor.

Chapter 2

Obligation. . .Not Such a Bad Thing

One's obligations to obey Christ, to seek justice and to love one's neighbor are crucial when talking about what it means to be a Christian. I first want readers to think of obligation in a good way and not see it as negative. It is not bad to be obligated to do something. This obligation to Christ is truly amazing and freeing, because one is living in God's hope and promise. This hope is that everyone is free. It is also in fulfilling one's obligation that one comes closest to understanding and demonstrating the love that God has for us. The joy and love that can be seen and expressed in meeting the needs of a neighbor are indescribable.

In obligation one is bathed with and truly living in grace. This is so because one is seeking justice and loving one's neighbor. These are exactly the things that are part of being a Christian. Loving one's neighbor is difficult because a person needs to see Christ in him or her every day. It is hard to see Christ in a roommate who does not do the dishes or someone who shoots and kills eleven students in a school. However, this response is expected because of the gift of grace and one's obligation to Christ.

Under the obligation that accompanies the gift of grace, persons must obey Christ, seek justice, and love the neighbor. Obedience to Christ is discipleship, which Bonhoeffer describes as an extension of grace: "Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship."²⁶ Those who understand the connection between grace and discipleship will lead lives of fulfillment and purpose. They will also have an appreciation for the

grace they receive. Our obligation is to do as Jesus' disciples did: drop what one is doing and follow him. Bonhoeffer writes, "The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus."²⁷ The disciples were being obedient to Jesus by following him; they were not trying to impress him with their unquestioning belief and faith in him. It is necessary for a person to have faith in Jesus; it is what directly propels one into action. Obedience to God because of grace is what allows us to take action. Our obedience, however, stems from our faith. Jesus is putting the call forth to everyone, and it demands a response from us. We choose how we will respond to the call, by how we live our lives.

Obligation as Discipleship

Discipleship is obedience specifically to Christ and the way Christ lived his life. It is the essence of Christ that needs to be emulated by Christians today. The notion of obedience to Christ specifically is needed because people can be obedient to others and follow other things, but it is not discipleship until it is obedience to Christ. The act of discipleship is not really about the person making a connection with Christ. God is the instigator, and it is up to the person to respond in such a way that shows they are in obedience to Christ. How people interpret and act on the call is as important as the call itself.

As mentioned earlier, Luther wrote about obedience in Christian Liberty. Luther believed that works come from one's obedience to God. For clarity, I am going to equate

²⁶ Ibid., 56.

²⁷ Ibid., 57.

Luther's word "works" with Bonhoeffer's word "actions." Luther writes, "Nevertheless the works themselves do not justify him before God, but he does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things."²⁸ One's actions occur because one loves and obeys God. These works or actions take place within obedience in discipleship.

All people receive the call to be disciples of Christ. The understanding that all receive the call stems from all people being part of the community of Christ and receiving the gift of grace.²⁹ As grace is received, a call is given to the individual; the two come together. And after the call has gone out, some sort of response is required of those who choose to hear the call. In this response, one comes to understand one's obligation as a Christian. When one receives the call with grace, the realization of one's obligation to Christ to do something is fully understood. This obligation is to become a disciple. Becoming a disciple means being ready to enter into responsible action. Responsible action is following the will of God and doing what it takes to fulfill the will of God. However, if a person does not act on this call, they are receiving only cheap grace, and the grace has no meaning for them. Such a person has not suffered or fought for something they strongly believe in.

A gift has been received, a call has been heard, and the hope is that a response will be made to follow Christ. One's faith should carry them through the decision to follow Christ. Bonhoeffer says, "In the end, the first step of obedience proves to be an act of faith in the word of Christ. But we should completely misunderstand the nature of

²⁸ Luther, 22.

²⁹ I am choosing to leave this sentence because I address the issue of all people receiving grace in my conclusion. I believe that all people receive the gift of grace; however, some might not understand it as grace. I am not implying that all people need to or should be Christian.

grace if we were to suppose that there was no need to take the first step, because faith was already there.”³⁰ Some people do not want to leave all that they are accustomed to having to follow Jesus. Leaving everything would mean walking away from family, friends, and daily routine. People are not willing to leave their comfort zone by venturing into activities that are unfamiliar and take the risk of discipleship.

Bonhoeffer believed there should be an immediate acceptance of the call to discipleship. This call can be seen in the Bible.

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (Mt 4:18-22)

The disciples dropped everything immediately and followed Jesus. It was not a matter of consulting family, a planner, or a pastor. Rather it was an act of faith to change one’s life in a single decision. When one accepts the call to follow Jesus, there is an understanding that one will live a life similar to Jesus. Living a life like Jesus’ is living a life on behalf of others.

The thought of having to live a life like Jesus’ can scare people. They know this will take them out of their comfort zone and place them in situations where they will suffer and be persecuted. The persecution does not always lead to death but a daily ridicule for believing in Christ and living a life on behalf of others. In these difficult experiences, one’s faith and focus on Jesus Christ can help to guide one through.

³⁰ CD, 66.

Chapter 3

God's Will and the Four Mandates

in Responsible Action

The disciple's obedience to follow Christ takes the form of discipleship. More specifically, discipleship is seen as responsible action, which Bonhoeffer talks about a lot. Bonhoeffer developed his ideas about action through a personal struggle with morals and ethics. This struggle is now in the form of his book, Ethics, first published in 1949. Bonhoeffer uses the selfless model of Jesus Christ to help define the fulfillment of the will of God. While God's will never changes, how one fulfills God's will does and is the primary focus when responsible action is defined. A description of God's will and the structure of the four mandates will lay the groundwork for understanding responsible action.

Bonhoeffer stressed that one must not ask the questions "How can I be good?" and "What can I do good?"³¹ These questions focus only on the individual and do not include God in the process. In Christian ethics, when humans try to decide between good and evil, they are separating themselves from God.³² In their origin, humans only knew about God in things, and not the difference of good and evil.³³ Instead, we must ask, "What is the will of God?"³⁴ This question allows God to be the starting point and the focus for our actions. Otherwise humans are putting themselves above God, assuming that they have the answers to what is good and what is not.

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 186. [Original English translation SCM Press Ltd, 1955.]

³² Ibid., 21.

³³ See Ethics pg. 21-24 for further discussion on man's origin and good and evil.

Fulfilling the will of God is loving God and loving and serving your neighbor.

God wills for us to be free, and this happens through Christ's death and resurrection.

Christ is our reason to live and serve.

Bonhoeffer sees God as the necessary starting point for ethical discussion because

Where there is faith in God as the ultimate reality, all concern with ethics will have as its starting-point that God shows Himself to be good, even if this involves the risk that I myself and the world are not good but thoroughly bad.³⁵

God and God's will are now what can guide the actions of people's everyday life. Huff

observes, "For Bonhoeffer, the foundation of ethical behavior is how the reality of the

world and how the reality of God are reconciled in the reality of Christ."³⁶ How one

fulfills God's will is shaped constantly by the concrete situation. Bonhoeffer also talked

about being in the world and the necessity of being aware of the world and its needs.

Mark Bocker writes, "Focusing on the will of God makes clear that the reality of the self

and the reality of the world are rooted in the reality of God."³⁷ The reality of God

becomes important because it is at the center of the will of God.

Throughout his writing, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that he is not going to give us a

prescribed set of things to do in specific situations. There are no formulas that stipulate,

when in this situation, take the following actions. Instead, he provides guiding principles

that center around Christ.

Bonhoeffer also understands ethics as formation. We cannot form the world or

ourselves.³⁸ However, we are to become more like the form that Jesus Christ took in the

³⁴ *Ethics*, 186.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

³⁶ Huff, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

³⁷ Mark Bocker, "Bonhoeffer's Appeal for Ethical Humility," *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago, Ill.: Covenant Publications, 1999), 292.

³⁸ Bocker, 292.

world. Bocker writes, "The form of Jesus Christ is the will of God in the world. In ethics as formation, the question concerning the will of God becomes a matter of discerning how Christ is taking form in the world."³⁹ Bocker is talking about how human beings take shape in the world today by fulfilling the will of God. How does a human just "be" in this world as a selfless being? Jesus Christ takes form in the world in concrete ways. The Bible shows the life of Jesus and how he interacted with the world. Today the church is supposed to show concretely how Jesus is taking form in the world. Bonhoeffer says, "The Church is the place where Jesus Christ's taking form is proclaimed and accomplished. It is this proclamation and this event that Christian ethics is designed to serve."⁴⁰ The Church is supposed to be where one can see Jesus Christ taking form in the world and this is one reason there is disappointment in the Church during the resistance. The Church needed to take some sort of action if it was going to be acting in a selfless manner like Jesus. In these concrete examples of taking form in the world, the reality of Christ starts to take shape.

Bonhoeffer's Four Mandates

Everyday responsible action takes form in what Bonhoeffer calls the four "mandates," which are marriage and family, labor, church, and government.⁴¹ The four mandates help to give shape to the reality of our life and everyday interactions. Within the four mandates, people are working on behalf of others. All of the mandates work together to help us fulfill the will of God. Bonhoeffer writes, "The divine mandates are

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, 89.

⁴¹ Ibid., 204.

dependent solely on the *one* commandment of God as revealed in Jesus Christ."⁴² This statement helps us understand how the mandates relate to God and God's will for us to be free individuals. Larry Rasmussen states, "In fulfilling one's duties within the mandates (as for example a husband, father, breadwinner, citizen, and churchman) the person conforms to Christ, does God's will, whether he is cognizant of it or not."⁴³

The mandate of labor involves our help and participation in creation. We are to be working on behalf of God. No one is excused from this mandate. All are to participate in the work of the world and the support of creation. Bonhoeffer writes, "The labour which is instituted in Paradise is a participation by man in the action of creation. By its means there is created a world of things and values which is designed for the glorification and service of Jesus Christ."⁴⁴ Creation is a way to get at the heart of relational interactions and the reality of humanity.

Similar to the mandate of labor, the mandate of marriage discusses one's involvement in creation, specifically, the male's role in creation. Bonhoeffer writes, "Through marriage men are brought into being for the glorification and the service of Jesus Christ and for the increase of His Kingdom."⁴⁵ While Bonhoeffer speaks specifically about the male's role in creation, he addresses the role and need for parents in the life of a child. Parents are also to teach their children about the obedience to Christ.⁴⁶ Parents not only teach their children but also [help to] act on their behalf when necessary. Children are not able to do everything on their own, so parents work with and for them.

⁴² Ibid., 284.

⁴³ Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1972), 30.

⁴⁴ Ethics, 206.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Bonhoeffer speaks specifically about men and males; however, his message seems to be valid for all of humanity.

The mandate of the government stands above labor and marriage. Everything is subject to the law and the government. The government keeps order so that the other mandates may occur without problems. Bonhoeffer stated that by "the establishment of law and by the force of the sword the governing authority preserves the world for the reality of Jesus Christ. Everyone owes obedience to this governing authority--for Christ's sake."⁴⁷ The government is not to be overpowering but only to help make sure that people are obeying the laws of a city, country, or anything else. Once the law of the people is followed, the law and Gospel of Christ can be fulfilled. This mandate is harder to grasp because Bonhoeffer himself went against the government. If one of the four mandates goes against the law of God, then Bonhoeffer has a problem with this. This seems to be what occurred when he was working to overthrow the government. Larry Rasmussen states, "Bonhoeffer regarded the totalitarian claims by one of the mandates, the state, as a flagrant violation of the command of God and cause for resistance."⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer is willing to go against the mandate of the government because the government was working against God's commandment.

The last mandate, the church, is slightly different from the other three because it helps to bring all four mandates together in the reality of Jesus Christ. The mandate of the church applies to all people, and it is to help with salvation and the realization of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer wrote, "This mandate is the task of enabling the reality of Jesus Christ

⁴⁷ Ibid., 207-208.

⁴⁸ Rasmussen, Dietrich..., see fn 67 on p. 29.

to become real in the preaching and organization of the church and the Christian life.”⁴⁹

The person who is involved in the other three mandates is also a part of the church. This mandate is to help unite all things in a person’s life in the reality of Jesus Christ. The church starts to touch on what is at the essence of both Bonhoeffer and responsible action. This essence is rooted in reality, the reality of Jesus Christ.

So in these mandates, the will of God and responsible action start to take shape in daily life. Bonhoeffer explained,

But the will of God is nothing other than the becoming real of the reality of Christ with us and in our world. The will of God, therefore, is not an idea, still demanding to become real; it is itself a reality already in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

Therefore, it is necessary to look toward the actions of Jesus Christ to understand the will of God. Ethics is seeing the will of God fulfilled in daily living. Rasmussen writes that the mandates “are dynamic orderings of community that give form to responsibility in society over time. They let life ‘flow freely’ without an overburdening of the ethical, on the one hand, and the atomization of the moral life, on the other.”⁵¹ The four mandates help give more direction to the thinking about responsible action.

⁴⁹ Ethics, 208.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 209.

⁵¹ Larry Rasmussen, “The Ethics of Responsible Action,” Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 223.

Chapter 4

Responsible Action

Responsible action is a central part of discipleship and obligation. Brocker states, "Our obligation to God and neighbor is fulfilled by 'responsible action' - that is, action on behalf of or in the place of others."⁵² Acting on behalf of or for others can take form in many ways. Jesus' dying on the cross for the sins of the world was an extraordinary action. Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance on behalf of the Jewish people was also extraordinary, but could never be equated with Christ's dying on the cross. However, not all responsible action is of the caliber of Jesus' dying on the cross. Jesus' dying on the cross saved all of humanity and this cannot be equated with anything else.

Responsible action is also seen as fulfilling the will of God. As discussed earlier, the will of God is actively loving and serving one's neighbor. Therefore, in responsible action a person is loving and serving a neighbor and helping to meet the neighbor's needs. Bonhoeffer defined responsibility as "the total and realistic response of man to the claim of God and of our neighbor."⁵³ Responsible action can be related back to our foundation, which is in Jesus Christ. Christ is the foundation of ethics. Christ is also the reality in which one lives, and one's actions correspond to what is real. Huff writes,

If an action is to have meaning, it must correspond to what is real. Since there is only the reality of Christ, Christ is the foundation of ethics. Any Christian who attempts to avoid falsehoods and meaninglessness in his or her life must act in accordance with this reality.⁵⁴

⁵² Brocker, 293.

⁵³ Ethics, 241.

⁵⁴ Huff, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

It is important that one's actions are grounded in something, and that something is Christ. Rasmussen writes, "If the question is who is the Christ of Bonhoeffer's kenosis Christology and his Christo-universal vision, the answer is, he is 'the man for others' whose very essence is being-there for man, nature, and history."⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer's Christology was extremely important, and Bonhoeffer's Christ is continued all the way through his writing on ethics and his work in the resistance. In discussing responsible action, Huff emphasizes Bonhoeffer's example of Jesus as a selfless person; this is how one is to use Christ as an example. It does not work to look to Jesus in specific situations because Jesus lived in his own specific and concrete situation. Jesus also has contradictory actions throughout his life. However, if Jesus can be seen as a selfless person, one can take the idea of selflessness and apply that to one's life.

Jesus, Huff writes, "is concerned solely and entirely with the well being of another."⁵⁶ Jesus' selflessness can be used as an example of how one can become selfless. This selflessness shows that one's priorities are on the needs of one's neighbor and not the self. Bonhoeffer writes, "To allow the hungry man to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one's neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbor."⁵⁷ Responsible action is acting for others and helping to meet their needs. "The responsible person is, thus, a selfless person, who does God's will by serving the spiritual and material needs of another. The selfless model of Jesus is his or her only guide to responsible action."⁵⁸ The responsible person must be ready to act for

⁵⁵ Rasmussen, Dietrich..., 21.

⁵⁶ Huff, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

⁵⁷ Ethics, 136.

⁵⁸ Huff, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

the neighbor whenever the need arises and not be worried about sinning or what will happen to them.

Once the responsible person decides to act, there can be no worry about whether the right or wrong thing is being done. The main concern, once action starts, is the need of the neighbor being fulfilled. If a person starts to think about right and wrong and the consequences that could ensue because of their action, then the person is no longer acting selflessly.

Responsible action can also be done for oneself. Sometimes it is necessary to act for oneself because others do not. Responsible action helps remind us about the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. However, responsible action cannot happen in isolation. To act on behalf of someone else, one has to be in a community and interacting with others. The idea of community is important not only to responsible action but to Bonhoeffer's thinking in general. Bonhoeffer adopts the phrase, 'Christ existing in community' from Hegel, and this becomes essential to his work in Christology and how community should work.⁵⁹ Understanding Christ in the context of community makes faith in Christ a relational reality.

The relationality of Christ spills over into how humans should relate to each other. "‘Being-there-with-and-for-others’ defines our true self as much as it does Christ's or God's in Bonhoeffer's description of ‘reality’ as foundational for Christian ethics."⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer sees community to be as important as our relationship with Christ, and this importance stresses the need for responsible action within community. If a community is

⁵⁹ Martin Rumscheidt, "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology," Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge, U.K.: University Press, 1999), 58.

⁶⁰ Rasmussen, "The ethics...", 217.

not responsibly meeting the needs of an individual, then it is necessary to act on behalf of ourselves.

Responsible action has been explained and the process from grace and obligation to discipleship is better understood with a clear understanding of responsible action. The Christian has an obligation to God to act for our neighbor and to carry out the will of God. But where does one go from here? Is it possible to act responsibly in our lives? What would it mean today to live responsible lives similar to Bonhoeffer's or even to Jesus'? The concrete examples that follow help shape an answer to these questions.

Bonhoeffer's Responsible Action

Bonhoeffer lived a life of responsible action. However, his action was extraordinary. Bonhoeffer felt that he had an obligation to the Jewish people to act on their behalf. He not only *felt* he had an obligation; he *knew* he had an obligation to the Jews. In fact, all people in Germany had an obligation, but most neglected it.

Bonhoeffer became part of the Abwehr in 1939. The Abwehr was the counterintelligence of the armed forces in Nazi Germany. This is where some of the resistance movement worked. Bonhoeffer was able to get clearance to travel around Europe because of his church connections. His travel gave him the chance to talk with religious leaders in the hope of alerting them to the situation in Germany. Doug Huff writes, "Bonhoeffer's role in the conspiracy was one of courier and diplomat to the British government on behalf of the resistance, since allied support was essential to

stopping the war.”⁶¹ He tried to inform others about the situation, including leaders outside the church. Unfortunately, no one felt the need to act immediately on the information that he passed along. Bonhoeffer also helped a group of Jewish people escape from Germany, which is known as Operation 7.

Two aspects of those who worked for the Abwehr was to help men stay out of military service and help Jews escape. Bonhoeffer was allowed to work with the Abwehr and sidestepped his duty of military action. Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi were part of Operation 7, which was working to help a group of Jews escape. They were able to get new papers for the Jews through their connections with the Gestapo. All of this was done through the Abwehr, with the Gestapo unaware of what was actually happening. While Bonhoeffer traveled, he helped with the arrangements for Operation 7. Eberhard Bethge, a long time friend and correspondent, writes, “So he went back to Zurich, saw Koechlin – as was necessary because of the ‘Operation 7’ – and on 23rd May wrote from Zurich to Bell in England, not indicating by a single word that he knew that he was in Sweden, or what plans were brewing.”⁶² The Jews escaped successfully. However, this act would later be what causes Bonhoeffer and Dohnanyi’s arrest. Kelly and Nelson write, “Eventually, however, it would lead to the intense suspicions that later become the grounds for the arrest of all the leading figures, including Bonhoeffer.”⁶³ The Gestapo investigated the Abwehr because the financial records were off from money they had used in the escape. Bethge recalls, “Thereupon Schmidhuber, and Captain Ickradt of the Munich *Abwehr* office, were subjected to an interrogation

⁶¹ Huff.

⁶² Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, ed. by Edwin Robertson, trans. by Eric Mosbacher et al., 1967 (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 661.

which produced, among other things, questions about the currency transactions for the Jews of 'Operation 7,' and incriminating answers."⁶⁴ As a result of this investigation, Bonhoeffer and Dohnanyi were linked to Operation 7 and later arrested.

More controversial is the other part of Bonhoeffer's work in the resistance movement, the plot to assassinate Hitler. During his participation in the assassination plot, he was arrested for his involvement in Operation 7. Not until the end of 1944 does the Gestapo link Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi, and the Abwehr to the assassination plot. All of this information was revealed shortly before he left Tegel Prison. While he was in prison, many people watched out for him and he was allowed to have visitors and receive things such as books and letters. The guards also helped to get his letters out to people. As the war moved toward an end and more information came out against Bonhoeffer, he was moved to different concentration camps. Finally, he was executed at Flossenburg on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer took extraordinary action by smuggling people out of a country, defying the government, and participating in a plot to kill Hitler. The actions that Bonhoeffer took were possible because of his faith in Christ. Bonhoeffer lived in the freedom that he was granted through Christ. He never worried about sinning or doing the right or wrong thing. He was acting on behalf of his neighbor in love and service. His neighbors, the Jews, were in danger of losing their lives and were stripped of all basic human rights, and Bonhoeffer tried to do something about that through the grace that he was given.

⁶³ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson eds., Introduction to A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 39.

Other Concrete Examples of Responsible Action

During the Holocaust, other people acted responsibly in hopes of saving people from persecution. These people helped to hide Jews as they were fleeing Nazi ruled territories. Now, many years later, Yad Vashem, a Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, is recognizing these people with the title, "Righteous among the Nations." Maimonides "defined this term as referring to non-Jews who followed certain minimal norms of just behavior...which included the prohibition against shedding innocent blood."⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer and Dohnanyi have still not been recognized with the title of "Righteous among the Nations" for their involvement with Operation 7. These people hid Jews and are a remarkable example of doing something on behalf of another person and meeting a need of survival that was not being met.

There was great risk in hiding Jews in one's home. If caught, people would often be persecuted alongside the Jews they were harboring. If one person made the choice to hide people, the entire family was put at risk. Hiding people changed one's entire life. One was often on the edge. Paldiel writes, "Hiding a fugitive Jew was anything but an easy undertaking. It required more than willingness, courage, and readiness to imperil the lives of one's family."⁶⁶ Space to hide people was often the biggest issue, because many people did not have enough for their own family. One had to be careful not to attract attention by buying more food than normal for their family, changing normal behavior and activity patterns, or drawing attention with noise or activities at night. Paldiel writes,

⁶⁴ Bethge, 687.

⁶⁵ Mordecai Paldiel, Sheltering the Jews: Stories of Holocaust Rescuers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 2.

⁶⁶ Paldiel, 15.

Challenged with the call for help, they [the rescuers] tried their best to live up to the dictates of their conscience in the worst of times imaginable...They claim they were simply fulfilling a basic and common human obligation--of helping others in great need, persons whose lives were unjustly threatened by a criminal regime.⁶⁷

All of these factors are important in seeing that it is a form of responsible action. What follows are specific stories that bring to life responsible action.

People who were willing to hide others would have a secret room, a barn with a loft, a cellar, or some small place that could be used for hiding. Some dug crawl spaces under barns and houses for people to stay in. The conditions were often horrible with not enough room to sit up, extreme temperatures, and no place to relieve themselves.

However, many Jews were thankful for whatever was offered, because it was essential for their survival. Paldiel tells these stories:

In Zeborow, southern Poland (now Ukraine), the Ukrainian Anton Suchinski hid six Jews for nine months in a pit measuring 2.5 meters wide by 1.2 meters long and 0.8 meter high. The persons inside could hardly move, except to sit up, and they shared one kerosene lamp. . Izydor Wolosianski, of Drohobycz, Poland in one of the few cases of the rescue of a large group of Jews, hid 39 persons in an unfinished, partly underground home, on top of which he had built his own home. . In another episode, 14 persons were cooped up in total darkness in a tiny shaft under the master bedroom of the home of Maria Szczecinska in Staszow (near Kielce, Poland) for 21 months. A bed was placed above the entrance to the hole, which was large enough for a skinny person to squeeze through.⁶⁸

These are only a few of the many stories of people who took a stand and tried to save the Jews. Unfortunately, too many people were silent.

Those who took a public stand were even fewer than those who privately hid Jews. The church as an institution was one of the most silent places in that people did not speak out against the war and accompanying actions in Germany. However, there were a few who tried to fight. Paldiel explains,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20-21.

Julius van Jan, a pastor in the Wurttemberg region, delivered a ringing sermon in which he denounced the events of Kristallnacht of November 1938 (during which the government staged mass riots against Jews and their property, including houses of worship, across Germany).⁶⁹

He was later killed in a concentration camp.⁷⁰ Another incident:

On March 7, 1943, some six thousand Gentile women staged a demonstration in Berlin, demanding the release of their Jewish spouses. The Nazi leadership hesitated at opening fire on German women (they would have acted otherwise against a conquered population), and the Jewish men were promptly released. It was the only public anti-Nazi manifestation during the entire period of Nazi rule, and was spearheaded by women acting on the spur of the moment.⁷¹

This demonstration was successful. One wonders how things could have been different if people had stood up and spoken out against Hitler.

All of the people who acted in some way to help those who were being persecuted were acting on behalf of another. They were aware of the concrete situation surrounding them, and they took the necessary action to do the will of God. They were helping to eliminate someone's pain and suffering.

The situations that have been discussed vary in the level of involvement and risk. It is evident that in our society, action needs to be taken. Bonhoeffer took seriously his obligation to God, and it is necessary for people today to accept their obligation. These few examples paint a clear picture about what needs to be done. What does this mean for people today? What sorts of implications follow from a theology such as this?

⁶⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

Conclusion

Implications of Responsibility

This paper has grown out of my own struggle with what it means to be a Christian and what is required if someone calls themselves a Christian. This process has allowed me to reflect on what I think is important and at the heart of Christianity. I see as the essence Jesus Christ, and with Jesus Christ at the center a responsibility to love and serve one's neighbor. Work with Bonhoeffer's writings has introduced me to a man who was passionate about God and was in love with his country and with all people. Bonhoeffer understood his obligation as a Christian to love and serve his neighbor. He did this until his death. What would it mean if everyone today loved and served his or her neighbor?

All people are given the gift of grace, which demands a response from the individual. This response comes in the form of discipleship to Jesus Christ. Being a disciple of Christ means living a life fulfilling the will of God. The will of God is that all people love and serve their God and neighbor, so that all people's needs are met. The fulfilling of the will of God can be called responsible action. It is everyone's obligation to act responsibly in this world. Responsible action can be seen in the selfless example of Jesus Christ.

A theology of responsible action would mean a radical change in behavior for people. If everyone were acting responsibly toward their neighbor, we would eliminate hate and injustices. No longer could someone feel comfortable being a Christian if he or she were not taking daily action to act on behalf of those that are in need.

It is not hard to look around our world and see people who are starving and losing their life to war and violence. Responsible action demands that these people are given food and safety. The requirement of responsible action for a Christian is extremely important.

As I have tried to clarify the will of God and responsible action, I have found some problems. This paper is a reflection of my understanding not only of Bonhoeffer but also Christianity. However, I do not think that it is merely an opinion. When defining responsible action and the will of God, there is room for personal interpretation. Some people will disagree with the conclusions I have come to, but I believe the ideas in this paper are accurate and theologically grounded.

Bonhoeffer was the first to acknowledge that responsible action cannot be anticipated before the need arises. Responsible action can only be taken in concrete situations and is dependent on the circumstances and present moment. The need for rescuers during the Holocaust was not anticipated but arose out of a specific situation. It is for every person to take the selfless model of Christ and the will of God into the concrete situation and take the best action that they are able. One can see that the needs of neighbors are not being met and one can tell another person what responsible action they are supposed to take. However, each individual has to decide and act on his or her own.

This paper and argument deal mainly with the Christian's responsibility for action. I believe that there is room for future discussion and research in this area. The idea of grace and who receives grace would be the first place to start. In my opinion, all people receive the gift of grace. However, all people do not understand that gift to be grace. Does everyone have to accept the gift of grace? If not, does that mean that a person

who does not accept the grace not have a responsibility to their neighbor? I also wonder if grace is the best place to start when working towards responsible action. Other places could serve as the starting point. If grace is eliminated it would help clarify the issue of who receives grace and if it has to be received to partake in responsible action. These ideas need further examination and clarification, but it is a starting ground to address the issue of Christianity in Bonhoeffer's writings and responsible action.

Larry Rasmussen addresses the issue of Bonhoeffer's language and whether it is inclusive of non-Christians. Rasmussen writes, "The striking advantage of this method consists in its potential applicability for both the Christian and the non-Christian, a consideration that in my judgment cannot be separated from Bonhoeffer's resistance work with non-Christians."⁷² When Rasmussen refers to method he is referring to an earlier comment stating, "With this methodology moral action is action that conforms to Christ's form in the world (that accords with reality)..."⁷³ If a person is working towards an action that is concurrent with reality then one does not have to specifically be a Christian. This idea leaves more room for inclusion in who should be participating in responsible action. While I believe that every human being should participate in responsible action, only the argument for a Christian's involvement in responsible action is made in this paper. This idea has significant importance to me and it would be good to address in future work.

With the recognition of areas for future improvement and work, this paper addresses my concern with the lack of action on behalf of Christians. The argument is based on the theology of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. These theologies are

⁷² Rasmussen, Dietrich..., 23.

⁷³ Ibid.

used to claim that Christians have an obligation to responsible action based on the gift of grace, which calls the Christian into discipleship and obedience to Christ to fulfill the will of God. Ultimately, the fulfilling of the will of God is addressing and meeting the needs of the neighbor. This action towards the neighbor is responsible action. A Christian has the obligation to responsible action in society today.

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