



Bonhoeffer and His Political Stance

Klaas Runia



No theologian after World War II has so captivated the attention of people throughout the whole world as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both young and old, office-workers and university students, Christians and non-Christians are showing a deep interest in Bonhoeffer and his theological ideas. Why is this so? There seem to be two main reasons.

1. Here we have a theology which tries to give an *answer to the questions and problems of our modern world*. Of course, Bonhoeffer was not the only one, nor even the first one, who tried to do this. In a sense *all* of modern theology is an attempt to answer these questions. But Bonhoeffer did it in a very special way, namely, by taking the modern

world fully seriously. He was the first to accept the whole modern process of secularization positively, by defining our secular world as a "world come of age." At the same time he critically exposed the religious varnish with which our so-called Christian western world has been overlaid, and gropingly sought for a non-religious interpretation of the Christian faith in the modern world.

2. In Bonhoeffer we see a man who *was utterly committed to Jesus Christ* and who "lived" his theology in the very events of his life. His theology was not a product of the notorious ivory tower of the detached scholar, but it was the outcome of an existential struggle with the Word of God right in the midst of life. He was one of the few German theologians who consciously and actively participated in the German resistance against Hitler, even to the extent that he took part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. This participation led first to a two-year imprisonment and finally to the gallows.

In this article we shall concentrate on the second reason. Those interested in the first aspect we may refer to my article in *Themelios*, Vol. I, No. 2, entitled: "Leaders of Theological Thought: Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

Who was Bonhoeffer?

It is impossible in this short article to give even a short biography. A concise account of his life is given in the Memoir by G. Leibholz, printed in the S.C.M. edition of Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. The definitive biography is Eberhard Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, an 867-page work, also published by the S.C.M. Press. This volume is so fascinating in both content and style, that one can hardly stop reading, whatever the clock may say! In this

article we can only mention the bare facts and for this very purpose we quote the brief summary which appears on the back cover of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fontana Books):

"Born in 1906, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the son of a professor of psychiatry. He grew up in academic surroundings and in 1930 was appointed a lecturer in systematic theology at Berlin University. In 1933 he denounced Hitler and his ideas on the wireless. Two years later, after a period spent in England, he was forbidden to teach and banned from Berlin by Nazi authorities. At the outbreak of war, against the advice of all his friends, he gave up the security of the U.S.A., where he was on a lecture tour, and returned to Germany to work for the confessing church and the political opposition to Hitler. He was arrested in April, 1943 and, two years later, after imprisonment in Buchenwald, he was hanged at Flossenbürg, just a few weeks before the end of the war.

Unfortunately this summary hardly mentions Bonhoeffer's participation in the German resistance, yet it was one of the main features of the last years of his life. After his return from the U.S.A. he became more and more involved in the opposition to Hitler and his regime. Up till May 1940 it was a more passive involvement. As Bethge says, "he knew and approved of what was going on"¹ in the small resistance movement, but did not yet actively participate. From May 1940 to his arrest on April 5, 1943, he was actively involved, even in the plot to assassinate Hitler.

From our perspective after the events, this may seem to be a natural development. In reality, however, it is nothing less than amazing that Bonhoeffer ever came to such an active resistance. This is so mainly for two reasons.

a. *His Lutheran background.* The traditional attitude of Lutheran theo-

logians toward the State was based on a sharp division between the government of the church and that of the state. Each acts according to its own order, the church "spiritually" and the state "secularly."² As late as 1940 the Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus wrote: "Christianity has no political program, and has no right to exercise control or censorship over political life in the name of Jesus and the Gospel . . . In reality, politics follows its own laws and necessities."³ Parallel to this division was the distinction between the Christian as a person and as the bearer of an office⁴. In his personal life he has to act as a Christian by living a life of love and forgiveness, but as an official he has to work within the given structures of the state and uphold the laws of the state. Against this background it is quite understandable that so many Christians in Germany never thought of active resistance. On the contrary, they simply obeyed the government, even when under Hitler it assumed an anti-Christian form.

Undoubtedly Bonhoeffer was in many ways influenced by this tradition. He too had a very high view of the state. In his *Ethics*⁵ he has a long section on the state and speaks of the "Divine Character of Government," (a) in its being; (b) in its task; (c) in its claim. Under the last heading he writes, "Government demands obedience 'for conscience sake' (Rom. 13:5)."⁶ The duty of obedience is binding on the Christian, "until the government directly compels him to offend against the divine commandment, that is to say, until the government openly denies its divine commission and thereby forfeits its claim."⁷ He even adds that "in cases of doubt obedience is required." Only in the case of the government clearly exceeding its God-given mandate, is obedience to be refused. For a man who has such a high view of the state and who, in addition, is burdened

with the legacy of the Lutheran "dichotomy," it is almost unthinkable to come to an active plotting of the assassination of the ruler, even if he is a Hitler. Yet Bonhoeffer broke through all these barriers and acted.

b. *His own advocacy of non-violence.* This is the second, and perhaps an even stronger, reason why one would never have expected to see Bonhoeffer among the active conspirators. In the early thirties Bonhoeffer openly and strongly propagated *pacifism*. At the great ecumenical World Alliance Conference at Fano, Denmark, in 1934, he stated: "Peace on earth is not a problem, but a commandment given at Christ's coming . . . Peace means to give oneself altogether to the law of God, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God, not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God."⁸ The Youth Conference of Fano, which met under the chairmanship of Bonhoeffer, adopted among others the following proposition: "They ask the Christian churches not to scorn those of their members who in obedience to the Gospel as they understand it refuse to bear weapons; but to treat them as their true children and to bear with them with motherly love in their attempt to be obedient."⁹

It is evident that for Bonhoeffer himself all this was a matter of obedience to Christ. True, there were also other influences, such as the deep impact Gandhi and his movement of non-violence had made on him (he even planned a trip to India!), but the real reason was Christ's admonition, especially in the Sermon on the Mount.

No absolute pacifism. How could a man with such views become involved in active resistance, including even such a violent action as an attempt at assas-

sination? There are two factors that we have to take into account here. In the first place, Bonhoeffer never was an *absolute* pacifist. He certainly believed that peace was a commandment of Christ himself, and therefore he did his utmost to promote peace through all means available (in particular through his ecumenical contacts), but at the same time he also recognised the right of the state to call young men into military service. His personal problem was that he might be called by *this particular government*, of which Hitler was the representative and leader. To George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, he wrote in 1939: "Perhaps the worst thing of all is the military oath which I should have to swear. So I am rather puzzled in this situation, and perhaps even more because I feel, it is really only on Christian grounds that I find it difficult to do military service *under the present conditions*, and yet there are only very few friends who would approve of my attitude. In spite of much reading and thinking concerning this matter I have not yet made up my mind what I would do *under different circumstances*. But actually as things are I should have done violence to my Christian conviction, if I would take up arms 'here and now'."¹⁰ We have underlined some phrases, which clearly show that Bonhoeffer did not absolutize his pacifist stance, but that it was determined by obedience in these particular circumstances.¹¹

Passion for involvement. The second reason why Bonhoeffer went the road to active resistance is to be found in his passion for involvement. He could not stand apart from what was happening in Germany, but *as a Christian* (rather than as a German, although this element was present too) he *had to be involved*. That is why from the beginning he participated in the witness and struggle of the Confessing Church. That is why in 1939

he returned from the security of the U.S.A. to Germany. That is why in 1940 he decided to join the resistance movement and participate actively in it. This passion for involvement was not merely a matter of character (although this certainly played a part in it), but it was a conscious, Christian, yes, we may even say: theological choice. For Bonhoeffer this was simply the consequence of "being there for the world."¹² In the essay "After Ten Years," which he wrote for his fellow conspirators at Christmas 1942, he said: "Of course, we are not Christs, but if we want to be Christians we must show something of Christ's breath of sympathy by acting responsibly, by grasping our 'hour,' by facing danger like free men, by displaying a real sympathy which springs not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer. To look on without lifting a helping hand is most un-Christian. The Christian does not have to wait until he suffers himself; the sufferings of his brethren for whom Christ died are enough to awaken his active sympathy."¹³ In the biography by Bethge, the last sentence reads: "The Christian is called to sympathy and action . . ."¹⁴

"*Putting a spoke in the wheel . . . Called to action!*" Indeed, in such a situation it is not enough to see others take action and approve of it, but one has to join in and share the responsibility. Bethge somewhere tells us that shortly after the collapse of France in 1940 he asked Bonhoeffer, whether he would, if given the opportunity, assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer thought for a moment and then said, "Yes, I would."

For those who regard Bonhoeffer's pacifism as "absolute", this statement is incredible and amounts to an abandonment of principle for the sake of expediency. But as we have seen before, Bonhoeffer never advocated such an absolute

form of pacifism. Already in 1933, in connection with the introduction of the so-called Aryan Clauses by Hitler's government, he wrote that there are three possible ways of action open for the church. (1) To ask the state whether its actions are legitimate. (2) To aid the victims of state action. (3) Not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to *put a spoke in the wheel itself!*¹⁵ Here we have the principle of active resistance! Already in 1933! That is, in the same period in which he still actively propagated non-violence. Even then he allowed for the possibility that active resistance would become necessary. Of course, it would be necessary only in an extreme situation. In 1933 he added to the words about "the spoke in the wheel": "Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and desirable when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order, i. e., when it sees the state unrestrainedly bring about too much or too little law and order." In the following years, especially after 1939, it became increasingly clear to him that such an action was indeed necessary in Germany, and so he assisted in "putting a spoke in the wheel." Unfortunately, the attempt failed, but the fact remains that he joined the attempt.

Existential decisions. In thus coldly analysing the various statements of Bonhoeffer we are obviously rationalizing decisions which for Bonhoeffer himself were deeply personal and thoroughly existential. For him these decisions were not merely theological conclusions from certain biblical premises (although they were definitely theological in nature too!), but they were all related to and resulting from his deep commitment to Christ, whose commandment is final in *all* circumstances. But the circumstances may change and therefore the obedience to the commandment may take different

forms. Yet in all circumstances it must be obedience to *his* call.

At the same time his call is always a call *into the world*. William Kuhns, a Roman Catholic interpreter of Bonhoeffer, has pointed out that "Bonhoeffer's work with the resistance in Germany may well be his clearest suggestion as to what 'religionless Christianity,' when taken to its completion, will finally mean: men of responsibility and action, making their own moral decisions and making them with a deep understanding of the world . . . Bonhoeffer wanted above all to interpret Christ to the present world—not be a chief agent in exorcising it of an anti-christ. But he was forced by historical conditions to purge rather than to build—and in purging revealed how far, finally, Christ's demands could lead a Christian in a secular world."¹⁶

Bonhoeffer's message for us today.

Does Bonhoeffer's attitude have anything to say to us in our situation, that is, in a world that is twenty-six long and difficult years older and that is facing situations which in many ways are different from that in which Bonhoeffer found himself? We believe that the answer is Yes, and we would submit the following suggestions.

1. Today too a Christian should be *deeply involved* in what is going on in the world, in particular also in social and political actions. To be a Christian is to live and work for Christ in *this* world for which he died. Or perhaps we should put it more à la Bonhoeffer: To be a Christian is to suffer with Christ in this world, by being fully involved in its struggles, its sufferings, its gropings for justice and righteousness and peace, etc, and all this for the sake of helping one's fellow-men. In one of his last preserved letters (August 10, 1944,) Bonhoeffer wrote: "People are more important in life than anything else."¹⁷

2. Such an involvement is Christian involvement only when it results from *radical commitment to God in Christ*. For Bonhoeffer God was utterly real. Major Payne Best, who shared the last weeks of Bonhoeffer's life, gives the following testimony: "Bonhoeffer was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him."¹⁸ The camp doctor who watched his last moments later on testified: "Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."¹⁹ In his letter of July 21, 1944, he himself wrote: "One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a converted sinner, a churchman (the priestly type, so-called!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. This is what I mean by wordliness—taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is *metanoia* (repentance), and that is what makes a man and a Christian (cf. Jeremiah 45)."²⁰

3. Such a commitment is always a commitment *hic and nunc*, here and now, in the very situation in which we find ourselves. Bonhoeffer did not deve-

lop a complete Christian program of action, which he absolutized as the will of God for everyone and for always. Take his attitude toward pacifism. At some stage he was a pacifist, because he believed that this was the best way to serve God *in the circumstances*. But when the circumstances changed, he followed God on a different road. The absolutizing of a program, even a Christian program, means that we change it into an ideology, which after a while begins to live its own life and carries us along on its own paths. Bonhoeffer never developed such a program. This does not mean that he did not believe in fixed norms which have been laid down by God Himself in his Word. His *Ethics* clearly shows us the opposite. Bonhoeffer was definitely not a "situationist." But at the same time he was well aware of the facts that we always have to obey God *in the concrete situation*. In certain circumstances it may mean active resistance, even participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler. In other words, commitment to Christ, on the one hand, *absolutizes our attitude* in the "here and now." Yet, on the other hand, it at the same time brings an *element of relativity* into our absolutism. We do not know what action we may be called to take at some other juncture.

I believe that in particular this aspect of Bonhoeffer's attitude is of great significance for us today. There is in the heart of many people a strong cry for an attitude of *Christian radicalism*, not only in personal affairs, but also in social and political matters. One can only be grateful for this desire for radicalism and for those who are willing thus to suffer with Christ in the world. But too often there also seems to be present an absolutism which tends to change the action of radical commitment into an ideology. Personally I find this

in much of present-day Christian pacifism. It appears in particular from the fact that its advocates not only take their position as a decision of personal commitment, but at the same time put a new "law" on their fellow Christians, judging and condemning them if they do not take a similar decision. In addition, they seem to lose sight of the fact that their own decision is one in the "here and now" of their present situation. I respect their decision; in fact, I deeply respect it. But I also refuse to accept their decision as a new ideology that binds all their fellow Christians. In these matters each Christian has to take his own decision *coram Deo*, before God.

Bonhoeffer, who took *his* decision and was asked to carry it out to the bitter end, also wrote: "The Christian is neither obliged nor able to examine the rightfulness of the demand of the government in each particular case. His duty of obedience is binding on him until the government directly compels him to offend against the divine commandment . . . In cases of doubt obedience is required; for the Christian does not bear the responsibility of government."²¹

4. For these very reasons Bonhoeffer never could and never did develop a "*theology of revolution*." In his *Ethics* he even wrote: "According to Holy Scripture, there is no right to revolution." This too is in the section, in which he is dealing with the task of the State and our personal responsibility within the "polis." But even apart from this particular statement, Bonhoeffer could not develop a "theology" of revolution, because it would have meant another ideology, which begins to live its own, independent life. Our personal responsibility in the concrete situation is ossified into another "program," now a program of constant resistance against and reversal of the structures of society. The Christian *as a Christian has only one absolute commit-*

ment, namely, that to Christ, and living in this commitment he has to go his way through the world, serving his Master in final obedience to his call, whatever this call may be.

NOTES

¹ Eberhard Bethge, *op. cit.*, 526. Bethge actually distinguishes five periods.

² Cf. Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, 1957, 393.

³ Quoted from Bethge, *op. cit.*, 680.

⁴ Luther, with whom this distinction originates, never meant to say that as an office-bearer the Christian had not to act in obedience to God's Word. But naturally this distinction could easily lead to a dichotomy, in which political life follows its own autonomous laws. Cf. W. Elert, *op. cit.*, 410f. Bonhoeffer himself rejected this distinction in his book on the Sermon on the Mount, *The Cost of Discipleship*, E. T., 1959. "This distinction between person and office is wholly alien to the teaching of Jesus," 128 f.

⁵ Only fragments of a book on Ethics were left after his death. They were published posthumously by his friend Bethge, and later on published in English under the title *Ethics*, 1955 (S.C.M. Press).

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 306.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 307.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 1965, 289, 291.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 1966, 206.

¹¹ Cf. also G. Th. Rothuizen, *Aristocratisch Christendom - Over Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 1969, 106ff., especially 123ff.

¹² These words were written on one of the notes which was lying on Bonhoeffer's desk when he was arrested in April 1943. He was working on a chapter of his *Ethics*, and the words in the text were meant as the heading of one of the sections of this chapter. Cf. Bethge, *op. cit.*, 625.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 145.

¹⁴ Bethge, *op. cit.*, 625.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 225.

¹⁶ W. Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 1967, 232.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters, etc.*, 129.

¹⁸ Bethge, *op. cit.*, 823.

¹⁹ Bethge, *op. cit.*, 830 f.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters, etc.*, 125.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 307.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 314.