

Bonhoeffer: Pacifism and Resistance Revisited with help from Karl Barth

How do we reconcile the fact that the same Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose pacifist sympathies are well known and whose intention to travel to India and visit Gandhi are well documented, joined the Resistance conspiracy to assassinate the German head of state? In two recent books, Mennonite scholar Mark Thiessen Nation and fellow minded colleagues cut the Gordian knot by insisting that if contemporary readers are to encounter the real Bonhoeffer, his role in the Resistance must be significantly calibrated downward, amounting to a ruse crafted by his brother-in-law to keep him from military service. In the process, he served as a pastoral counselor to a few of the conspirators.¹ Whether we end up agreeing or disagreeing, Nation raises important questions that invite fresh consideration of Bonhoeffer's path. This essay will look at some details of Bonhoeffer's reflections on pacifism and resistance, with special attention to the influence of Karl Barth on his path. I will also look at the implications for our own troubled times as the Church again responds to war in Europe.

Nation's thesis entails two claims. First, he insists that a close examination of Bonhoeffer's writings reveals a thoroughgoing commitment to pacifism from which he never departed. Consistent in his reflections on pacifism from 1932, Bonhoeffer made an unequivocal call to peacemaking along with a denunciation of participation in war on the part of Christians. "This sort of witness is typically referred to as pacifism; and Bonhoeffer so labels his own approach."² The implication is that any serious participation in the Resistance conspiracy would have amounted to a betrayal of his beliefs. Nation ascribes the usual view of Bonhoeffer the conspirator to reading him through the filter of Reinhold Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer's American teacher. According to Niebuhr's Christian Realism, a morally honest confrontation with the horrors of Hitler would compel one to do whatever it takes to stop the perpetrator, assassination included.³ However, if, as Nation gradually came to do, one holds the Niebuhr paradigm lightly and weighs far more heavily Bonhoeffer's own writings, his role in the Resistance amounts to naught. Nation's other argument (to be discussed later) is that when it comes to the conspiracy and Bonhoeffer's role, the historiography of Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, is unreliable.

How shall we assess this reappraisal? Straightaway we should note Nation's alignment with the across-the-board consensus that the Sermon on the Mount was at the center of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian faith. In letters to family and friends, he repeatedly asserts the Sermon's centrality to discipleship. He writes his brother, Karl-Friedrich, "But I do believe I am on the right track, for the first time in my life....I think I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously... The restoration of the church must surely depend on . . . a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount."⁴ It was not by chance his

¹ Mark Thiessen Nation, et al., *Discipleship in a World Full of Nazis. Recovering the True Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2022), 174, 187. The book includes essays by Stanley Hauerwas and Scot McNight. Cf. also Nation, et al., *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* (Baker, 2013)

² *Ibid.*, 85.

³ *Ibid.*, 3. Here Nation follows Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory*, (NY: Knopf, 2014), 108. Marsh admits, however, that Bonhoeffer himself never acknowledged any serious theological debt to Niebuhr.

⁴ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Collected Works*, Vol. 13, London: 1933-1935, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, Jan. 14, 1935, 284.

best-known popular work, *Discipleship*, consists largely of an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. After the war, when Karl Barth took up discipleship as a theme in his *Church Dogmatics*, he praised Bonhoeffer's work as "easily the best that has been written on this subject... I cannot hope to say anything better on the subject than what is said here by a man who, having written on discipleship, was ready to achieve it in his own life, and did in his own way achieve it even to the point of death."⁵ Nation and Barth are agreed that Bonhoeffer's was a witness faithful unto death.

The Evidence from Bonhoeffer's Writings

However, there are problems with Nation's solution to the Bonhoeffer paradox. In her review of Nation's earlier book, Victoria Barnett, editor of the English edition of Bonhoeffer's *Collected Works*, finds Bonhoeffer's views on pacifism more complicated than Nation admits.⁶ For instance, Nation highlights a 1936 letter to Elizabeth Zinn where Bonhoeffer says the dramatic events of 1933 led him to reconsider "Christian pacifism" which "suddenly came into focus as something utterly self-evident."⁷ Why distinguish an endorsement of "pacifism" in such a precise way? Meanwhile in the same year he writes a letter to Karl Barth which expresses a desire to further explore what he calls a "silent dispute" with Barth about "questions concerning the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and the Pauline doctrine of justification and sanctification. . . And would very much have liked to ask your views on so many things."⁸ Might it be possible to imaginatively reconstruct this "silent dispute"? Also in the same volume, and same time period are notes from a lecture Bonhoeffer gave his Finkenwalde students which mention tyrannicide and Aquinas's permission for a tyrant to be deposed. The notes also reference the Scottish Calvinists' challenge to a tyrant's claim to authority.⁹ There follows further student notes on the new life and discipleship, and a question raised by Bonhoeffer: How can one love one's enemies with weapons? But what follows is not a simple answer. "And yet one can sin without weapons as well." The notes end even more provocatively by saying the last and much more difficult possibility for faith to judge is whether one may kill in faith and love because one must proceed against Jesus's explicit commandment. However, following an ethical program is no guarantee either of avoiding sin or acting responsibly. What is ultimately determinative is "being bound to Jesus."¹⁰

Later that year in a "Memorial Day lecture" Bonhoeffer warns that "Christian pacifism" may cease to be specifically Christian and become an idealist pacifism if it sits in judgment on others and past wars.¹¹ Next comes a "War memorial sermon" in which Bonhoeffer asserts that, though war contradicts God's commandment, a final answer to the question of whether or not a Christian may participate must be rejected, "for both answers are possible." In a striking

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Volume IV, part 2, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 533-534.

⁶ Victoria J. Barnett, Review Essay, "Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Post-Bethge." *Contemporary Church History Quarterly*, 20, 3, September, 2014. <https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2014/09/interpreting-bonhoeffer-post-bethge/>

⁷ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Collected Works, Vol. 14, Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935-1937*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). Zinn letter, 134-135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Barth letter, 252-253.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 624.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 761.

sentence, he balances the “threat” of “militarism” on one hand with that of “doctrinaire pacifism” on the other.¹² The volume ends with a catechism Bonhoeffer wrote for young people in which he addresses the Christian’s responsibility in war. While his answer contains a clear endorsement of peacemaking, it does not include a similar endorsement of pacifism *per se*. He writes:

“How are Christians to act in War?”

“There is no revealed commandment of God here. The church can never give its blessing to war and weapons. The Christian can never participate in unjust wars. If the Christian takes up arms he must daily ask God for forgiveness for this sin and pray for peace.”¹³

Beyond this survey from the Finkenwalde period, other writings add further witness to a complex view of pacifism. Earlier, in speaking to an ecumenical youth event (1935) Bonhoeffer says “It is not pacifism that is the victory which overcomes the world (I Jn 5:30) but faith, which expects everything from God and hopes in the coming of Christ and his kingdom.”¹⁴ Earlier still, there is his essay, ‘The Church and the Jewish Question (1933) where he famously declares that if the State abuses vulnerable members of its citizenry, *then as a last resort*, the Church should not only bind the wounds of the injured but take the further step to “seize the wheel” of the State itself.¹⁵ How does a pacifist seize the wheel of State? In brief, between 1932-1936 Bonhoeffer’s response to pacifism is far more complex than a simple embrace.

In fact, if we keep in mind his early insistence (1933) that as a last resort, it may be necessary to “seize the wheel” of the State, we are already on the threshold of participation in the Conspiracy. As it happened, Bonhoeffer’s way into the Conspiracy was through personal acquaintance with damning inside information concerning the brutal criminality of the Nazis. Unlike most Germans with their daily immersion of Joseph Goebbels’ propaganda, Bonhoeffer, through his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, head of the political department in Major General Oster’s office in the Armed Forces High, had an insider’s knowledge of recurrent and flagrant criminal behavior. He was secretly assembling a list of crimes, intending to present it in a court of law as soon as the regime could be held to public account. Given such knowledge, Bonhoeffer no doubt believed he was facing the long-anticipated situation, viz. the responsible action of seizing the wheel of State from a criminal inner ring.

Close relations with the highest levels of military leadership remind us Bonhoeffer was not an isolated thinker living in an ivory theological tower. He wrestled with the question of discipleship in a totalitarian society with his family, with his students, with his fellow pastors and scholars, and yes, with the highest level of the German military’s high command. We should also bear in mind the importance he placed on ecumenical relationships as his friendship with Anglican Bishop George Bell, and the future founding director the World Council of Churches, the Dutch ecumenist, Willam Visser’t Hooft both testify. Quite unlike theologians of the German *Volk* who elevated patriotic nationalism to an order of creation, for Bonhoeffer ecumenical

¹² *Ibid.*, 766.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 791.

¹⁴ *DBCW*, vol. 13, London, 1933-1935, 306.

¹⁵ *DBCW*, vol. 12, Berlin, 1932-1933, 365-366.

relations were at the heart of what it means to be the Church. If ever an activist weighed and reflected in solidarity with the ecumenical church *before* acting, it was Bonhoeffer.¹⁶

Conversations with Barth

Nation is probably right to set aside Niebuhr as a primary influence on Bonhoeffer. However apart from noting a passing reference in which Barth describes Bonhoeffer as a pacifist *according to his understanding of the gospel*, (my italics)¹⁷ Nation doesn't explore the connection with Barth in any detail. Yet amongst all his ecumenical connections, it is Barth, the Swiss Reformed pastor and theologian, who anticipates both Bonhoeffer's sympathy for pacifism *and* a willingness to engage in political resistance. A look at Barth's view of political resistance as service to the gospel may help us better understand why Bonhoeffer viewed "doctrinaire pacifism" to be militarism's equal but opposite error and a rival to what he calls 'Christian pacifism.'

Let us recall Barth's journey to political resistance started when as a young pastor he became disenchanted with the cultural Protestantism of his theological training. The spark was reading the 'Manifesto of the 93' in which his most admired teachers offered their signatures in support of Kaiser Wilhelm's launch of World War I.¹⁸ If this was the fruit of European Protestantism, Barth reckoned either it was time to rethink Protestant theology from the bottom up or become an atheist. Watching in dismay as Europe's national churches eagerly signed on as chaplains for the war, Barth sought to recover the church's ancient witness to peacemaking, one grounded not in absolute principles but in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For if the cross is the great sign that Christ has loved his enemies how can his disciples hate theirs? Moreover, the use of force based on the ancient friend-foe dichotomy has been abolished for when we love our enemies they cease to be enemies. Of course, the use of force does not begin with killing; it begins when we are angry with our brother, when we call him a fool, when there are judicial proceedings. (Mt. 5:21)¹⁹ From this christological and eschatological grounding Barth asks "Is it not inevitable that Christian ethics should keep company with pacifism for a good part of the way?"²⁰ Nevertheless Barth insists that cross and christology are the living context of our relations to the enemy, not to be absorbed into a general rule or a philosophical system. "According to the sense of the NT we cannot be pacifists in principle, only in practice. But we have to consider very closely whether, if we are called to discipleship, we can avoid being practical pacifists, or fail to be so."²¹

As a theologian trained in Berlin's highest academic culture, Bonhoeffer was well aware that a theology centered in the cross and resurrection of Jesus seemed "truly a strange thing for a modern and intelligent man to concentrate his thoughts and his whole life to. But when you see Barth you know at once—even if you come entirely from outside—that there is something

¹⁶ For those familiar with the Enneagram, one can see why the Franciscan theologian, Fr. Richard Rohr, categorizes Bonhoeffer as a 5, that is, one whose priority before acting is intellectual clarity. However Bonhoeffer's search for clarity was never in isolation, but through community. Cf. Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram. A Christian Perspective*, cf. chapter 5, Holy Transparency: The Need to Perceive.

¹⁷ *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, 449. See page 8 of the current essay. (My italics.)

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 263-264.

¹⁹ *CD*, IV/2, 549.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 548.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 550.

worthwhile to risk one's life for."²² Upon his return from a study year at Union Seminary in New York in the summer of 1931, Bonhoeffer set himself to explore this 'strange thing' by going straight to Bonn, where he spent three weeks attending a series of Barth's lectures, remaining in regular contact thereafter. He tells his friend Erwin Sutz, "I now regret I did not go to hear Barth sooner."²³ In the years that followed and as the principal author of the Barmen Declaration, Barth's theology became the backbone of the Confessing Church. Yet only a year after this highwater of resistance to the Nazi juggernaut, Barth was deported to his native Switzerland for refusing the required civil servant's oath of unconditional loyalty to the Führer. Thereafter for the remainder of his life he lived and taught in Basel. Deportation, however, was by no means the end of his dialogue with Bonhoeffer. Between 1940-42 Bonhoeffer made six visits to Barth in Basel as he travelled in Europe on behalf of Military Intelligence. At a time of war between the allied nations and Germany, it is unlikely their conversations avoided discussing the Church's responsibility to help bring that war to an end.

Barth: Pre-war Writings on Resisting Tyranny

Barth's Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen, Scotland, 1937, are especially relevant regarding Bonhoeffer's situation. Barth offered these lectures, which consist of a running commentary on the 1560 Scot's Confession, as a clear contrast from the natural theology model championed and endowed by Lord Gifford. The last two lectures pay special attention to Church and State relations, specifically the Scottish Reformers' response to a tyrannous State.

Published the year Germany annexed Austria and invaded and occupied the Czech *Sudetenland*, Barth insists the Church has a political role to play precisely because its inner order of faith, love and freedom are designed to cast an anticipatory shadow upon the public order of our still chaotic world and the outward forms of justice, peace, and freedom we currently inhabit. This anticipation of the future is a foretaste of the promised kingdom Jesus declares has come and is coming. In a key passage, Barth reminds us these outward forms of justice, peace and freedom exist "only when recourse is made to physical force." (One thinks of the unarmed British Bobby who, even with his gentlemanly demeanor, wields a truncheon). Yet the Church rightly claims this order for the service of God, summoning both rulers and ruled to obedience and hence thankfulness and penitence in a preliminary way appropriate to this sphere.²⁴ In other words, the State's use of force does not in its essence oppose that which is coming. It may play its own role in preparing the way towards the coming future.

But what is the Church's responsibility when a nation's ruler misuses force, when it invades its neighbor, when domestically it violates its own outer forms of justice, freedom and peace, the very things government is intended to safeguard? A State that behaves in such a manner, has made a mockery of its political service of God.²⁵ It remind us, says Barth, that every State is on a journey either to becoming God's representative and priest as described in Romans 13 or becoming the Beast out of the sea depicted in Revelation 13. "It is either one or the other."²⁶ In

²² DBCW, vol. 11, *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work, 1931-1932*, Letter to Paul Lehman, 42.

²³ *Ibid.*, Letter to Erwin Sutz, 37.

²⁴ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938, 221-222.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

Barth's assessment, a State that deliberately turns towards Revelation 13 forfeits any positive cooperation from Christians. It was thus appropriate, even necessary for the Scots Confession to distinguish lawful from unlawful authority. Indeed, when the State does not fulfill its God-ordained responsibilities, a decision of faith and love may require the Christian to take up an active position within the political order and not merely endure it. The Scots Confession goes further. It insists that when a tyrant sheds innocent blood there may be not only passive resistance to political power, but an active opposing of force with force.²⁷ In anticipation of German tanks trampling national boundaries and subjugating sovereign European nations, Barth describes a stark choice facing disciples of Jesus.

It could well be that we had to do with a Government of liars, murderers and incendiaries, with a Government which wished to usurp the place of God, to fetter the conscience, to suppress the Church and become itself the Church of Antichrist. ... In such a case must not God be obeyed rather than men? ... Must not the prayer for this Government, without ceasing to be intercession for them personally before God, for their conversion and their eternal salvation become quite plainly the prayer that as political rulers they may be set aside? And in such a case would we not have to act in accordance with our prayer? ... can we and have we the right as Christians to take part in the use of force in certain circumstances? ... We are here as we deal with Church and State, so to speak, on the edge of the Church in the sphere of the world not yet redeemed. To live in this world and to obey God in it is to take part in the use of force directly or indirectly.²⁸

Of course, the decision to actively resist is fraught from all sides. It can neither be elected nor excluded in advance. It can only be a lived response as a part of the life of faith.²⁹ Again Barth reminds us that even the best forms of outward justice, freedom and peace entail the use of force and coercion. Thus, whether by acquiescing or resisting governing powers, disciples must ask whether in either response they run the risk of "leaving the service of Jesus Christ and our entering the service of other masters? That is the questionableness and the danger of the State's service of God."³⁰ Whether or not Bonhoeffer had opportunity to read these lectures, the themes would have been likely aspects of his conversations with Barth in these crisis years.

Barth: Active Resistance

As it happened, the year the Gifford lectures were published saw a marked increase in Barth's active resistance. When the newsreels showed Neville Chamberlain returning from Munich waving a celebratory piece of paper in the air, and despite the ringing of church bells throughout Europe, Barth did not see 'peace in our time'; he saw an act of complicity with a State in thrall to the beast of Revelation 13. He unsettled his former colleagues in the Confessing Church by

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 224, 226, 228.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 230, 231.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 235. Even prisoners may face unwanted decisions regarding active resistance. When Corrie Ten Boom was imprisoned in Ravensbruck for sheltering Jews in her Haarlem home, her watch making skills were put to use assembling radios for German warplanes. At first her love for quality workmanship made her a model worker. But when her supervisor pointed out that her labors were enabling the German war effort, she had to decide whether to use her skills to create subtle flaws, insuring the radios would fail. Cf. Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*. (New York: Guideposts, 1971) 163.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 235, 236.

publicly urging every Czech soldier to take up arms to resist the Nazi invasion.³¹ The following year, with Germany's invasion of Poland imminent, he exhorted his Dutch friend, Visser't Hooft, to use his access to radio broadcasting to plea for Christians in Germany to do everything in their power to prevent a war or a German victory, whether by refusing to take part in military service, by sabotage or by other actions.³² Worried by rumors that Barth's words were angering the Nazi leadership, the officially neutral Swiss government forbade him to speak in public regarding political matters and had his phone tapped (illegally).³³ Barth continued his political resistance nevertheless. In 1940 he co-founded the (anti-Nazi) National Resistance Movement and in April, at age fifty-four, he reported for armed military service. His bedroom now contained a helmet, a complete uniform, a rifle and a bayonet. Though he confessed he was "probably not a very good or dangerous fighter," he was ready "to go out at any hour of the day or night to decide the issue." In all, he would serve actively for 104 days.³⁴ Such was the intense level of Barth's political engagement during Bonhoeffer's visits to Basel.

Barth: Post-war Writings on Bonhoeffer's Pacifism and Resistance

After the war it is well known Barth invested himself in helping the church on both sides of the East-West division re-root its identity in Christ and his gospel instead of various false marriages between religion (including Marxism as religion) and nationalism. He steadfastly refused to be a partisan in the emerging Cold War, seeking instead a third way between communism and the free market individualism of the West. This was the cultural climate in which he revisited Bonhoeffer's involvement in the German Resistance, in volume III/4 of the *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of Creation*. In the context of the command *thou shalt not kill*, Barth reflected on tyrannicide in light of the Sermon on the Mount. First Barth acknowledges the modern impact of Tolstoy and Gandhi on the reading of Matthew 5:39 ("resist not evil" and "turn the other cheek"). While rejecting their tendency to turn our Lord's words into an absolute system of non-violence and non-resistance, who can doubt, he asks, that history would have been far better had it known more of their "exaggeration"? "For to hit back when I am struck is a very dubious defense." Even at the mundane level of response to an unfriendly word spoken, in what way am I better off by responding in kind? Realistically, I only degrade myself. "I ought therefore to restrain myself even to protect my life." If I hit back when struck, I may only provoke an even greater injustice.³⁵ Here on the one hand Barth affirms as a *practical strategy* the "exaggeration" of non-violence. But also he issues a warning: if Christ's path is the way of freedom for service, then Tolstoy and Gandhi have turned a permission to serve into a law.³⁶

In other words, Barth refuses to grant non-resistance an absolute status as a defining principle for every human contingency in its conflict with evil, any more than does Paul in Ephesians 6:13 "take up the full armor of God that you may be able to stand your ground on the evil day" or Peter in I Peter 5:8 'your adversary the devil prowls around...resist him' or James 4:7 "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Once the Semitic idiom of Mt. 5:39 has awakened our dull imaginations from the futile spiral of revenge and offered a glimpse of the coming Kingdom, it

³¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, (London: SCM, 1976, 289.

³² W. A. Visser't Hooft, *Memoirs*. (London: SCM Press, 1973), 114.

³³ Busch, 319.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 305-306.

³⁵ *CD, III/4, The Doctrine of Creation*, 430-431.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 433.

has done its job.³⁷ Though we can only apply this to Bonhoeffer in a speculative way, the mention of Gandhi and Tolstoy raises the possibility that earlier Bonhoeffer was liable to turn Mt. 5:39 into an absolute principle. This may explain Bonhoeffer's comment to Sutz that Barth had accused him of turning grace "into a principle with which he was bludgeoning everything else to death!"³⁸ Bonhoeffer reports this anecdote in the context, not of a grumble but of appreciation for Barth's capacity for dialogue.

After warning against absolutizing Mt. 5:39, Barth asks a string of questions regarding a disciple's response to criminal behavior. Might it be God's will not to allow our neighbor to be "insulted, robbed, or killed by a third party" even at the cost of injuring the assailant? Might God even will that we should resist and prevent the attack and do so "with pure hands and a clear conscience?" This need not be dismissed as meeting evil with evil but rather as participation in "the divine resistance" entrusted to us; part of "God's conflict with the disorder. . . performed for the sake of and in the genuine interest of the troublesome fellow-man himself."³⁹ Important here is the context: not business as usual but an absolute emergency, an *ultima ratio*. If the life of the community is threatened from within as well as without by an evil individual "thrusting himself into the limelight under the pretense and pretext of being an instrument of lawful government" perhaps the only mercy possible for such a person is "the will and command of God that they should be killed."⁴⁰ Further, let us suppose, says Barth, the nearest responsible authorities which can and should restore law and order are broken at the highest level and are unable and unwilling to act. In such a scenario, is it really murder or an act of loyalty commanded *in extremis*, and therefore not murder? "Might it not be that on occasion certain men not only may but must undertake it?" Listing well known examples of tyrannicide ranging from Jael and Judith, to Brutus and the Swiss hero, William Tell, Barth now comes to the recent past when "the situation was faced by very many seriously minded and even Christian Germans in relation to Adolf Hitler. . . The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer belonged to these circles. He was really a pacifist on the basis of his understanding of the Gospel. But the fact remains he did not give a negative answer to this question."⁴¹ In these sentences Barth has framed and summarized Bonhoeffer's dilemma. Not a doctrinaire pacifist of an absolute type, but a pacifist 'on the basis of his understanding of the Gospel,' he faced a dilemma that could not be solved by applying an absolute ethical principle.

Barth concludes by mentioning the same words of Aquinas noted by Bonhoeffer in his 1935 Finkenwalde lecture. Of Bonhoeffer's involvement in the Conspiracy Barth writes: "This might well have been the obedience commanded *ad liberationem patriae tyrannum occidere*. (He that kills the tyrant for the liberation of the country, is praised and rewarded.) Though by its nature, such an act is performed in "almost oppressive solitude, nevertheless it may well be the command of God, and thus in reality, occur "within the *communio sanctorum*"⁴² Despite the

³⁷ Regarding the Semitic habit of thinking in absolutes, and Jesus's use of hyperbole, cf. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. (London: Duckworth, 1980), 110-111. Caird sees a similar Semitic absoluteness in the dominical saying, "Unless you hate your parents, you cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:26)

³⁸ *DBCW*, 11, 37. Bonhoeffer went on to tell Sutz, "Naturally I disagree with him on the first point and would like to know why all the rest should not be bludgeoned to death."

³⁹ *CD*, III/4, 435.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 450.

secrecy required of such an endeavor and the controversy it entailed, Barth does not exclude Bonhoeffer's action from the *communio sanctorum*. This is not a minor point. Inverting the title of Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation, (*Sanctorum Communio*), Barth has set Bonhoeffer's witness alongside Aquinas and Reformers like Calvin and Luther, as human agents loyal to the command of God.

Bethge's historiography

Nation's other main argument is to question Bethge's reliability as a historian; hence the 'myth' of Bonhoeffer presented in his biography must be de-mythologized. But this method raises red flags. Anyone unconvinced by Bultmann's New Testament project to separate the historical kernel from the mythical chaff, will find it similarly strained to set aside the testimony of Bonhoeffer's closest friend and contemporary in order to see Bonhoeffer accurately only eighty years later. In fact, Bethge's claim that Bonhoeffer was an active conspirator is not as singular as Nation suggests. Barnett has noted that corroborative testimony for Bethge's account includes recent studies on von Dohanyi, as well as the testimony of Bishop George Bell.⁴³ To these I would add the memoir of Visser't Hooft, in which he discusses his conversation with Bonhoeffer regarding the plans to remove Hitler⁴⁴ as well as the testimony of the historian Karl Dietrich Bracher, who married the daughter of co-conspirator Rüdiger Schleicher. Schleicher's wife, Ursula, was Bonhoeffer's sister.⁴⁵ Nor ought we ignore Barth's witness from 1955 that during the September 1941 visit, he asked Bonhoeffer directly the reason for his frequent travels outside Germany and in reply Bonhoeffer spoke openly and confidentially about plans to remove Hitler.⁴⁶ These sources all independently corroborate Bethge's claim that Bonhoeffer was a full and active member of the conspiracy.

Yet suppose Nation is correct; that Bonhoeffer lived and died a consistent pacifist who was misrepresented as an active member of the Resistance by his close friend, one who ought to have known better. This raises many questions, including how to account for Bethge's complete misunderstanding and misrepresentation of his friend, as well as the confirming testimony of other close associates and family noted above?

There is a further jarring implication. Why, if Bonhoeffer was an unwavering pacifist, did he not distance himself clearly for the sake of witness to his misguided family members, who were putting themselves in enormous danger both to their own souls as well as personal danger from their wrongful path of tyrannicide? Did he lack the requisite courage to confront his family circle, so much so that he quietly stuffed his convictions in his pocket to become a chaplain in a conspiracy he didn't believe in? To this reader, the historical and psychological reconstruction of Bonhoeffer as an unqualified pacifist creates more difficulties than it solves.

Ongoing Relevance: Another War in Europe

Writing in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, the questions Bonhoeffer wrestled with are once again unavoidable for the ecumenical church family. While

⁴³ Barnett, <https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2014/09/interpreting-bonhoeffer-post-bethge/>.

⁴⁴ Visser't Hooft, 153.

⁴⁵ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970), 390.

⁴⁶ According to Jørgen Glenthøj. *DBCW*, v. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 194-1945*, 278. Cf. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (London: Collins, 1970), 632.

all historical analogies are imperfect, and we should avoid simplistic identifications between one era and another, it would be dishonest not to acknowledge basic parallels. One is the distinction between a larger nation whose tanks trespass internationally accepted boundaries and a smaller nation that resists subjugation. Once again a large European nation, having undergone internal collapse, loss of empire, and global prestige, has birthed a leader with a deep sense of grievance over perceived mistreatment from both neighbors and adversaries. Following a brief experiment with more democratic, representative institutions, (reminiscent of the Weimar Republic), today's Russia has fused a romantic sense of its past with a civil religion dressed in the vestments of Orthodox Christianity, united in the belief that military self-assertion will restore cultural greatness. Moreover, in the wake of the 1930s, one cannot ignore the coincidence that the elected President of the country under attack is a Jew.

At the time of writing, most Christians within Russia prefer to quietly pursue their faith in private, accepting the government's claim to be protecting ethnic Russians from hostile foreigners (even Nazis) and gather them safely together into a Greater Russia.⁴⁷ The parallel here to the 1930s rationale for invading and annexing neighboring German-speaking nations is not subtle. At some point for some at least, the question may arise whether the time has come to move from defending individuals wounded by the State to "seizing the wheel" of a State being driven towards Revelation 13.

Meanwhile in Ukraine, there are parallel questions. What does it mean for Christians in Ukraine to pray for peace in their land, now invaded, occupied, and intended as a colony for a greater Russian project? Not long ago I read an interview with a pastor and president of the Evangelical Protestant seminary in Ukraine, Dr. Ivan Ruslyn, about his attempts to live in faithful solidarity with his church and community in the wake of the attack on Kiev and the nearby suburb where his seminary is located. He tells of riding his bicycle in and out of neighborhoods controlled by two warring armies, attempting to provide pastoral support to neighbors along with personal hygienic supplies.

I try to be authentic and honest. I used to be a pacifist. When I was called up for military service, I chose alternative service. Now I believe that only the nation that has known the horror of war has the right to speak about pacifism. I used to be involved in mission projects in Azerbaijan and many Azeri people asked me what I thought about their war with Armenia. I was quick to teach them about forgiveness and pacifism because I had no clue.

What does pacifism mean when your loved ones are killed? I am so embarrassed about my speeches. So I think now Ukraine can think and speak about pacifism or not pacifism because we know what it means. My theology has been changed. For me, peacemaking is not a passive thing anymore, an ability to absorb and embrace everything. No, it is very active – action in order to stop violence.

⁴⁷ A rare critic within the Russian church is Father Ioann Burdin, now removed from his parish and threatened with the loss of his ordination for preaching a sermon criticizing the war. Cf. "Putin vs. the Priest", <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/opinion/putin-russia-ukraine-church-sermon.html>.

*I have huge anger toward Russians, but also pity, because one day they will find out what was going on. I don't know how they will absorb that information because it seems like they're living in a different world. But this bubble will blow up; they will be exposed to reality.*⁴⁸

Ethics: Discerning the Will of God

Reading Ruslyn's interview, one senses a transition, akin to Bonhoeffer's, from viewing peacemaking simply as applying a moral or spiritual technique or principle, for example, the passive absorption of evil.⁴⁹ Much of this boils down to discernment: how shall a disciple know the right path in the present moment? To this question Bonhoeffer gave considerable attention in his *Ethics*, often regarded as his most significant theological work.⁵⁰ As one reads the text, one can't but notice that Bonhoeffer often writes in a semi-cryptic style, knowing the manuscript could be used against him should it fall into Nazis hands.⁵¹

Clearly by the time he was writing *Ethics* (1940-1943) Bonhoeffer's thinking about the Sermon on the Mount had evolved. Writing from prison, he sums up his earlier approach in *Discipleship* as oriented too much around holy living or "a saintly life" instead of "living by faith" and a sense of being for others.⁵² In *Ethics* he writes, the "conscience freed in Jesus Christ" will see even the laws described in the Sermon on the Mount no longer as absolute, for "Jesus Christ rather than the law is now the ultimate."⁵³ In a section entitled 'Natural Life,' Bonhoeffer distinguishes the last resort situation of killing an enemy in war from arbitrary killing such as the taking of innocent life of the permanently disabled.⁵⁴ In extraordinary, borderline cases, such as war or intervention in criminal behavior, he states that non-arbitrary killing may be necessary. Such discernments, however, should not be "captured by any law and can never become laws themselves."⁵⁵

Not only should discerning the will of God not be confused with applying laws or "any kind of absolute principle," it ought never be glibly identified with the voice of the heart, nor with a sense of inspiration, "since it reveals itself anew only to those discerning it in each particular case" by way of the very human faculties each of us are granted, as heart, intellect, observation and experience work together.⁵⁶ In boundary situations all we can do is set aside the wish to justify ourselves, gather up our very human faculties in prayer to God, and seek his will for the concrete situation we find ourselves here and now. Bonhoeffer surely had his own situation in mind when he writes that in certain extraordinary situations, responsible action may involve a willingness to become guilty, which

⁴⁸ Ivan Ruslyn interview. Plough May 6, 2022. <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/in-the-ukraine-war-the-church-is-there>

⁴⁹ Cf. the early Bonhoeffer: "Evil becomes a spent force when we put up no resistance." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995 (1937), 142.

⁵⁰ "The Ethics is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's magnum opus." So writes the English editor of *Ethics*, Clifford J. Green. *DBCW*, vol. 6, *Ethics*, 2005, 1.

⁵¹ Heinz Tödt, *Authentic Faith: Bonhoeffer's Theological Ethics in Context*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 161.

⁵² *DBCW*, v. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 486, 500-501.

⁵³ *DBCW*, vol. 6, *Ethics*, 282.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 189-190. 273.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 321.

renounces any knowledge about its ultimate justification. The deed ... is completely surrendered to God the moment it is carried out. Ultimate ignorance of one's own goodness or evil, together with dependence on grace, is an essential characteristic of responsible historical action."⁵⁷

The willingness to become guilty is also not to be thought of as a timeless principle or an ethical obligation. This would extract and exalt our human action from its proper 'dependence on grace.' For Bonhoeffer, a life of responsible living is not a living in accordance with eternal principles; it is to live a life in response to Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ And our response is a response to love and grace. "It is his love alone, mind you, that leads him to become guilty. Out of his selfless love, out of his sinlessness, Jesus enters into human guilt, taking it upon himself."⁵⁹ Any willingness on our part to bear guilt for the sake of others is not something we initiate. It is part of our response to Jesus himself and his love for real human beings.⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer's foundational theological belief here is that for a disciple, the basis of all truly responsible historical action is the real human Jesus and his love for real human beings. He is the one who calls us personally and calls us to personal responsibility. "Christ is not a new concept of God or a new moral teaching. Christ is, instead, God's Word personally addressed to the human being, calling him to responsibility."⁶¹

If, with Bonhoeffer, we ask, 'when one is living under a tyranny that is destroying justice at home and invading its neighbors, what does responsible action look like?' we are asking for discernment in an "extraordinary situation of ultimate necessities."⁶² Yet even to discern we are in a last resort situation will always entail freedom to make a real decision about what responsible action entails. Of course, there will be anxiety about whether we have made the right decision. This cannot be overcome except "in the knowledge of Jesus Christ who alone exercises gracious judgment; this will allow one's own goodness to remain hidden in the knowledge and grace of the judge until the proper time."⁶³ Meanwhile, even our most conscientious self-examination ought not set itself on some immodest pedestal nor keep itself isolated. Always it must include "surrendering ourselves completely to the judgment of Jesus Christ. It is the Lord who judges me. I Cor. 4:4."⁶⁴

By 1938 Bonhoeffer was convinced that the arsonist who had incinerated justice in Germany was now loosed upon Europe. Yet to Bonhoeffer's frustration and sense of shared guilt, the Church, apart from the brief moment of the Barmen Declaration, was unable to rouse itself to implement any real public resistance. This only increased his sense of responsibility to stand in solidarity with those persecuted by the State, especially the Jews. This was the context in which he accepted his brother in law's invitation to participate in the Conspiracy. With that discernment made, the attempt to seize the wheel of State was taken. Neither the lateness of the hour nor the guilt of conspiring for Hitler's violent removal, were sufficient reasons not to try.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁶¹ Lectures on Christology, *DBCW*, vol. 12, 317.

⁶² *DBCW, Ethics*, vol. 6., 272-274.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 325-326.

By 1939 Barth would write a series of public letters to Christians in France and Great Britain exhorting the Church to resist the Nazi assault on norms of justice and its brute invasions of neighbors--if necessary by means of war. Yet this could never be considered a crusade "because it knows that its Lord died on the cross for Hitler too, and all those who serve under his banner."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the Church must resist because a Church that knows about justification cannot remain neutral when justice is at stake against flagrant injustice. It would be deeply regrettable, Barth exhorted the French Protestants, if the Church which in previous wars so often and thoughtlessly spoke the language of nationalism and militarism should just in this war equally thoughtlessly decide to adopt the silence of neutrality and pacifism.⁶⁶ One can find little daylight between such words and Bonhoeffer's earlier warning about militarism and absolute pacifism as the twin dangers between which the church must steer.

We are left then to ponder Bonhoeffer's reply to Visser't Hooft when asked how he prayed about the war. In answering that he prayed for the defeat of his country, did he suppose himself praying that allied soldiers in their thousands might risk their lives to stop the German war machine while he kept his own conscience clean by avoiding the risk of forcibly removing a tyrant? The testimony of Bethge—and also Bracher, Visser't Hooft, von Dohnanyi, Bell and Barth all suggest otherwise.

Postscript: On Guilt and Solidarity

Apart from the brief moment of the Barmen Declaration, (May, 1934) the Confessing Church offered little or no public resistance to the tragic chain of events whereby National Socialism subjugated Germany and threatened to dominate Europe. Though Barmen insured the Church would not be assimilated into a bureau of the Nazi State, it avoided standing in public solidarity with the persecuted. Even after the dramatic destruction of Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues on *Kristallnacht* (November 9, 1938), apart from a handful of sermons the following Sunday, the Confessing Church was silent.⁶⁷ Indeed, there were individual acts of aiding the persecuted. As with Niemöller, a pastor here, a pastor there, might defy the government, for instance, by reading the names of those arrested that week during public prayers. More clandestinely, some, like Bonhoeffer himself, engaged in personal acts of mercy towards "the least of these" as when he joined with von Dohnanyi to alter travel and financial documents that enabled an extended Jewish family to cross the Swiss border into safety (Operation 7). But it was easy enough for the Gestapo to pick off individual resisters one by one. Niemöller, a nationally known pastor and decorated WWI veteran, was trundled off to a concentration camp. Bonhoeffer and von Dohnanyi, though from highly respected and influential families, were arrested for their intervention months before their involvement in the Conspiracy was discovered.⁶⁸

Yet almost from the beginning of Hitler's rise to power, Bonhoeffer had a sense that some kind of collective resistance in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, should be attempted. Why else make plans to visit India and inquire into Gandhi's efforts to resist British colonial rule? Might

⁶⁵ Karl Barth, *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*. Appendix 1 A Letter to French Protestants, (London: Sheldon, 1941), 34.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁷ Cf. Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 142.

⁶⁸ *DBCW*, vol. 16, 13.

they be adaptable to his homeland? Might there not be a way to confound the Nazi regime before it had gone too far? In retrospect, the few recorded attempts at public dissent within Germany seem to have had ambiguous results. For example, on August 8, 1937, when the Gestapo cordoned off Niemöller's Church in Dahlem in order to shut down a prayer service for their recently arrested pastor and others, a considerable crowd gathered outside in protest. But when efforts to disperse the congregation failed, the police quickly arrested over 250 demonstrators and drove them away in trucks to a downtown prison, where they were temporarily detained and later released. The matter was ended.⁶⁹ A more positive outcome of public resistance came in August 1941, when Roman Catholic Bishop Galen's sermons of outrage over euthanasia of the elderly and disabled were printed and distributed widely. In response, not only was Galen left un-arrested but a few weeks later Hitler signed an order ending the euthanasia program.⁷⁰ By contrast, a brutal response met the courageous non-violent efforts of a small student group from Munich, The White Rose, centered around brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholls and Alex Schmorell. Within days of being caught distributing anti-war, anti-Nazi leaflets, they were summarily executed in 1943.⁷¹ But in a further contrast, evidence of positive outcomes for non-violent resistance has been noted by Hannah Arendt, who reckons the 1943 events in Denmark should be required reading in political science for any who wish to learn "about the enormous power potential inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence."⁷² In brief, from the King on down the Danes insisted they would all wear yellow stars, rendering any and all bureaucratic preparations for murder inoperable. Befuddled German officials abandoned plans for Jewish deportation as hopeless due to non-cooperation by the entire society. Arendt also mentions the witness of the Orthodox church in Bulgaria, whose tenacious advocacy (also in 1943) inspired the country's parliament to suspend the deportation of 48,000 Jews to Auschwitz.⁷³

However one assesses the scattered attempts at public resistance, there remains a lingering sense of guilt and regret over both the Church's failure, and more generally Germany's civil society, to interrupt Germany's descent into tyranny and terrorism. After the war a 'solidarity of guilt' was memorably expressed by the Confessing Church in the Stuttgart Declaration.⁷⁴ One of its authors, Martin Niemöller, later asked with typical candor, what if 14,000 evangelical ministers had defended the truth with their lives in 1933? Perhaps they would have died, but such an act might have kept alive 30 or 40 million people.⁷⁵ Sharing both guilt and this sense of lost opportunity was Pastor Kurt Scharf, as reflected in his 1981 interview with Barnett.

⁶⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (London: Collins, 1985) 486.

⁷⁰ Barnett interprets Hitler's order more as a ploy to placate public opinion than a genuine end of the program. Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*. (New York: Oxford Press, 1992), 118. A more positive assessment comes from Nathan Stoltzfus who sees Galen's intervention as having forced Hitler to compromise. Stoltzfus, *Hitler's Compromises*. (New Haven: Yale, 2016) 204. Stoltzfus includes a chapter on the Rosenstrasse protests, in which the claim is made that the protest of German wives secured the release of hundreds of non-Aryan husbands. (244-260). However, the US Holocaust Museum assesses the event in much more modest terms. Cf. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-rosenstrasse-demonstration-1943>

⁷¹ Cf. Inge Scholl, *The White Rose*. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983.

⁷² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. (London: Penguin, 1992) 171-173.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 186-188. cf. <https://en.gariwo.net/righteous/shoah-and-nazism/metropolitan-stephan-7661.html>

⁷⁴ Roger J. Newell, *Keine Gewalt! No Violence!* cf. chapter 5, 'Guilt, Forgiveness and Foreign Policy: The Stuttgart Declaration of 1945,' (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 78-106.

⁷⁵ Martin Niemöller, *Of Guilt and Hope*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 14.

If we had shown our protest more powerfully and more publicly! If we had brought it forward not only in sermons or in synodal decisions . . .but if we had gone into the streets, arm in arm, with the Jews! . . .If we had had the experience of the effectiveness of public demonstrations like those at the end of the 1960s, then in 1933 and even in 1934, the disaster could have been held off.⁷⁶

Inevitably the Church's failure is seen in sharp relief, as in Scharf's lament, by its contrast with the later successes of public non-violent protests, such as the civil rights movement led by the Baptist pastor, Dr. King, which ended Jim Crow segregation in the United States. As it happens, Scarf lived long enough to see the dramatic success of the peace prayers (*Friedensgebet*) begun in Leipzig which helped end the communist dictatorship in East Germany. One of the pastors at the Nikolai Church, Christian Führer, has testified to Bonhoeffer's influence in the Church's decision to be "open for all," (*Offen für alle*) to include in their prayers and planning the most vulnerable and marginalized in East German society; to conduct their vigils in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. The Nikolai Church had internalized Bonhoeffer's critique that under Hitler the Church had focused too narrowly on preserving its own freedoms while failing to grasp that a Church which simply circles the wagons, withdraws and protect itself has lost its essential identity, which is to stand in solidarity with its neighbors, especially 'the least of these' because in so doing, it reflects its Lord. Repeatedly Führer would quote Bonhoeffer's dictum "The Church is only Church when it is there for others."⁷⁷

Though it's attractive to identify Bonhoeffer exclusively with the success of these later non-violent achievements, it would be more accurate to see him as holding non-violent resistance in tension with an openness to active resistance *as a last resort*. As Barth might have put it, though a practical pacifist based on his understanding of the gospel, Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the persecuted meant he refused to turn non-violence into an absolute, especially when European society was under brutal assault by a toxic marriage of religious nationalism and the belief in military aggression as virtue. Against this he set himself to live faithfully in a way that was free to stand with the most vulnerable, act to interrupt the violence, and accept his personal share in the guilt of Germany's church and civil society, even at the risk of his reputation and life. Given today's resurgent religious nationalism, not least in Europe and the United States, may Bonhoeffer's witness continue to disturb our complacency and summon us to faithful living.

⁷⁶ Barnett, 72.

⁷⁷ *DBCW*, vol. 8, 503. Christian Führer, *Und Wir sind dabei gewesen*. (Berlin: Ullstein, 2009) 264.