



# From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly: Forgiveness in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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**A**t the core of the Christian gospel there is an abiding paradox; it rests on the cornerstone of a profound offering of forgiveness: Christ died for all. The scandalously good news of the gospel is this: forgiveness is inclusive. In other words, in more startling words, this paradox means that in the most horrific of circumstances, Christ died for murdered and murderer, victim and perpetrator alike. Regardless of context, scale, politics, or circumstance, whether South Africa or Croatia, L.A. or Chicago, Rwanda or Nazi Germany, New York or the Middle East, this paradoxical truth holds fast.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived this paradox; in fact, he counted on its authenticity and the steadfast hope and promise of forgiveness contained within it. A brilliant young theologian, a leader in the European ecumenical movement, and a pacifist, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in 1943 and executed in 1945 as a direct consequence of his choice to participate in a conspiracy against Hitler, a conspiracy aimed at assassinating Hitler.

Bonhoeffer lived in a context where action and inaction both incurred guilt.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that Christ died for all, murderer and murdered, victim and perpetrator. He struggled with how the Christian should respond appropriately to clear evil, given this paradox.*

Contemporary theologian and Croatian national Miroslav Volf has wrestled with the implications of this paradox and articulates the struggle clearly: “[My thoughts are torn by] the blood of the innocent crying out to God and by the blood of God’s Lamb offered the guilty,” he writes. “How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified offered to the perpetrators?”<sup>1</sup>

Volf asks this poignant question in his award-winning book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. In the preface to that book, Volf recounts an experience from the winter of 1993, at the height of the fighting between Croats and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia. He delivered a lecture arguing that we ought to embrace our enemies just as Christ has embraced us. A member of the audience challenged him, asking if he could embrace a *četnik*, notoriously wicked Serbian fighters known for destroying Croatian cities and raping Croatian women. For Volf, a *četnik* stood as the epitome of a real and concrete enemy. After some hesitation, he answered, “No, I cannot,” though added, “but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”<sup>2</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced the same challenge. Could he embrace Adolf Hitler? Could he love and forgive his enemy? Until 1939, his answer was yes; he spoke and preached pointedly about this very topic. After 1939, Bonhoeffer’s answer changed. Could he embrace his enemy, Hitler? Participating in the plot to assassinate Hitler made his answer a resounding no. At first blush, these two positions seem incongruous and contradictory. I maintain, however, that there is continuity between Bonhoeffer’s responses to the enemy. Moreover, this continuity is best understood in the paradox of the Christian gospel and grounded in the Christian concept of forgiveness. In the pages that follow, I will outline Bonhoeffer’s call to “love one’s enemies”; the tragic events of *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938, that both mark the beginning of the Holocaust and serve as a turning point in Bonhoeffer’s life and theology; and the development of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of responsible action.

#### BEFORE 1939

In Bonhoeffer’s work until 1939, “love your enemies” was a prevalent theme. In sermons from 1930 to 1938, delivered in the United States, England, and Germany, as well as in *Discipleship* (1937) and *Life Together* (1939), he underscored, without fail, the centrality of Christ and the freedom, engendered by the cross of Christ, to love God and neighbor, and stranger, and enemy. In 1930, while in New York on a one-year fellowship to Union Theological Seminary, Bonhoeffer delivered a sermon entitled, “On God’s Message of Love to Germany and the Community of Nations.” The sermon text was from 1 John: “God is love, and those who

<sup>1</sup>Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 9.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

abide in love abide in God, and God in them” (1 John 4:16b). Bonhoeffer’s purpose, as it had been in his academic work to that point, was to recognize that before God, before the cross of Christ, all external differences between people disappear. Differences, as Paul writes to the Galatians, between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female, cease to exist in Christ (Gal 3:28); so, too, claimed Bonhoeffer in his post-World War I context, the differences between Germans and the world are erased. In the cross of Jesus Christ, he continued, the cross of the suffering love of God, we know that we all belong to one another, are in the same need and hope, bound together by the same destiny. We are human beings with our suffering, joys, sorrows, desires, disappointments, and fulfillments—and most important, human beings with our sin and guilt, faith, and hope.<sup>3</sup>

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In the most simple and yet most profound of ways, Bonhoeffer’s call to “love your enemies” rests in Luther’s understanding of justification, more specifically, Luther’s understanding that all are simultaneously justified and sinner, *simul justus et peccator*. Nowhere in this sermon does Bonhoeffer say explicitly, “love your enemy,” but it is implied in every word. “[W]e are bound together in the same destiny,”<sup>4</sup> said Bonhoeffer, drawing on Paul’s words in Rom 3:23, “since *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (my emphasis). Everybody stands in need of forgiveness. The paradox is paramount.<sup>5</sup>

In other sermons of the early 1930s, Bonhoeffer continued to flesh out his thinking with regard to one’s response to an enemy: the only way to overcome an opponent, he wrote, is with love, for love bears all things. Bonhoeffer relied heavily on Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, and its familiar chapter on love, to make his “love your enemy” point clear: “Love does not allow itself to become bitter,” Bonhoeffer writes. “Not even the evil and sin of the other can make [love] bitter....It grieves over others’ evil and is saddened by it, yet for that very reason loves them all the more.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “On God’s Message of Love to Germany and the Community of Nations” (Autumn 1930), in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 187–193.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 187.

<sup>5</sup>Reverend Dave Bonde, in a sermon delivered shortly after his daughter was killed in a car accident caused by a drunk driver, wrote the following: “By law, if the emergency medical technicians try to resuscitate someone, they have to take them to the hospital. They tried to resuscitate Anna. And apparently she rode to the hospital in the same ambulance as Mr. Hurst. There is a strange irony that the murderer and the murdered should ride towards help together. To the hospital, who rides where doesn’t matter. What matters is trying to save lives. And it might also seem strange that in this cross Brandon [Hurst] and Anna should be redeemed together. But to God, also, it doesn’t matter who rides where. What matters is trying to save lives.” (Good Friday 2001).

<sup>6</sup>Bonhoeffer, “The Unbelieving Way of Love” (21 October 1934), in *A Testament to Freedom*, 246.

Bonhoeffer's strongest, and most explicit, directive to "love your enemy" came in his key text *Discipleship*, written in 1935–1936 and first published in 1937:

Is it a few, or many, who belong with Jesus? Jesus died on the cross alone, abandoned by his disciples. It was not two of his faithful followers who hung beside him, but two murderers. But they all stood beneath the cross: enemies and the faithful, doubters and the fearful, the scornful and the converted, and all of them and their sin were included in this hour in Jesus' prayer for forgiveness. God's merciful love lives in the midst of its foes. It is the same Jesus Christ who by grace calls us to follow him and whose grace saves the thief on the cross in his last hour.<sup>7</sup>

Also worthy of note is the attention Bonhoeffer gave in *Discipleship* to the text of the Sermon on the Mount, including the text from Matt 5 that reads, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (v. 44). To appreciate fully his explication of Jesus' sermon, Bonhoeffer's 1930–1931 academic year in New York comes into play once again.

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Bonhoeffer's friendship with Jean Lassere, a Frenchman, pacifist, and fellow student at Union Theological Seminary, was instrumental in his consideration of and turn to pacifism. Lassere presented to Bonhoeffer the possibility of *living* the Sermon on the Mount. Prior to Bonhoeffer's year at Union, he stood firmly in the Lutheran tradition of two kingdoms; Karl Barth's influence secured his understanding of the separation between the kingdom of God and all human causes. The Sermon on the Mount, then, was simply a hope for an ideal future, not a goal for a lived reality. But Bonhoeffer's year at Union changed his mind.

When Bonhoeffer arrived in the United States, Eberhard Bethge—Bonhoeffer's best friend and biographer—reports, the chasm in his thinking between "thought" and "reality" was one that drew criticism from his professors. Bonhoeffer's concerns were, utmost, theological concerns and he was somewhat dismayed that the Union curriculum was focused primarily on ethics and social analysis. Union Professor Reinhold Niebuhr, famous among other things for his mandate to preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, described Bonhoeffer as "seemingly unpolitical," but Niebuhr was unwilling to allow him to divorce theological inquiry from ethical applications and consequences.<sup>8</sup>

Keith Clements, former Secretary of the Conference of European Churches, agrees that Bonhoeffer's year at Union Seminary was decisive. Certain concrete, social problems, Bonhoeffer came to realize, could be ignored only at the expense of

<sup>7</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 40.

<sup>8</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times; A Biography*, rev. and ed. Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 160.

ignoring the gospel message. This realization wholly recast his reading of the Sermon on the Mount. “He was deeply challenged,” writes Clements, “by the pacifism of Lassere...[which was] centred on how to receive Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus quite clearly enjoins non-violence to his disciples.”<sup>9</sup>

Nowhere is Bonhoeffer more explicit on his newfound commitment to peace and pacifism than in a sermon titled “The Church and the People of the World,” delivered four years later at the ecumenical conference in Fanø, Denmark: “Peace on earth is not a problem, but a commandment given at Christ’s coming.”<sup>10</sup> By August of 1934, when Bonhoeffer presented this powerful sermon, Hitler and the National Socialists had already been in power for a year and a half and the Confessing Church had already broken ties with the German Christians. Bonhoeffer’s, indeed the world’s, context had fundamentally changed, though Bonhoeffer’s position had, fundamentally, stayed the same. Bonhoeffer preached:

There shall be peace because of the church of Christ, for the sake of whom the world exists. And this church of Christ lives at one and the same time in all peoples, yet beyond all boundaries, whether national, political, social, or racial. And the Christians who make up this church are bound together, through the commandments of the one Lord Christ, whose Word they hear, more inseparably than people are bound by all the ties of common history, of blood, of class, and of language...in the presence of Christ they are not ultimate bonds.<sup>11</sup>

As before, the language of “love your enemy” is not explicit in this passage, but implied: “Even in anguish and distress of conscience there is for them no escape from the commandment of Christ that there shall be peace.”<sup>12</sup> Put differently, there is no escape from the commandment of Christ to love one another; this command includes loving (and forgiving) those who are beyond one’s national, political, social, and racial bounds; it includes loving those who might, by virtue of being outside those parameters, be your enemies.

### 1938 AND AFTER

Bonhoeffer’s choice to participate in the conspiracy was seemingly far removed from his own convictions, expressed in a sermon delivered as late as 1938, on Rom 12:17–21. “Our text today,” Bonhoeffer proclaimed, “speaks of the Christians’ conduct toward their enemies....” “The best wisdom is recognizing the cross of Jesus Christ as the insuperable love of God for all people, for us as well as for our enemies.”<sup>13</sup> We overcome evil “by forgiving it without end,” and, he continued, we forgive without end by “seeing our enemies as they really are as those for whom

<sup>9</sup>Keith Clements, “Ecumenical Witness for Peace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 155.

<sup>10</sup>Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the People of the World” (28 August 1934), in *A Testament to Freedom*, 227.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 228.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Bonhoeffer, “Christ’s Love and Our Enemies” (23 January 1938), in *ibid.*, 285.

Christ died, whom Christ loves.”<sup>14</sup> Victory over enemies, in Bonhoeffer’s 1938 estimation, comes by allowing Christ’s love to be victorious over them, not by killing them.

By 1942, which marked three years of working as a double agent for the *Abwehr* and brought to light the third draft of the *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer no longer understood the call to “love your enemies” as primary.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he dropped the language of “love your enemy” from his writing almost entirely. He realized that the structure of a responsible Christian life, in which one lives with and for others, includes, necessarily, the readiness to take on guilt. Repentant for the failure on the part of the church to speak out against the systematic annihilation of the Jews, and freed in the forgiveness of Christ to act responsibly on behalf of those who were weak and voiceless and suffering, Bonhoeffer boldly took his place among the conspirators, no matter the cost.

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The shift in Bonhoeffer’s thinking and writing, from 1938 to 1942, on the subject of loving one’s enemies, had close ties to two events: *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 and his brief return to the United States in June 1939. In brief, *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night, so named for the sound of breaking glass), that horrific night that storm troopers garnered the aid of civilians in the destruction of synagogues, stores, and homes of Jews across Germany, provoked Bonhoeffer’s anger; it was an anger leveled not only at the participants, the marauders and destroyers, but at those, especially those in the church, leaders and pastors, who kept silent.

Eberhard Bethge supports the idea that *Kristallnacht* was a crucial turning point for Bonhoeffer. Bethge writes, “My life after 1935 brought me close to this man [Dietrich Bonhoeffer] who, particularly after 9 November 1938, was struggling to understand his life in opposition [to Nazism] as that of exercising responsibility to overcome the evil and thereby to accept this as a life worth living.”<sup>16</sup> According to Geoffrey Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, editors of *A Testament to Freedom*, this “dishonorable silence” of the churches was one reason, among several, that Bonhoeffer began to consider emigrating to the United States. It was also at

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>15</sup>For this date (1942) and the more general concept that textual shifts (insofar as “love your enemies” language is dropped after 1942) correlate to Bonhoeffer’s biographical choices (namely to participate in the conspiracy), I am indebted to Wayne Whitson Floyd’s presentation at the conference “Bonhoeffer’s Dilemma: The Ethics of Violence,” sponsored by Penn State’s Institute for Arts and Humanistic Studies on 28–31 October 1999. (Available online at <http://www.rps.psu.edu/0005/bonhoeffer.html> [accessed 8 October 2006]).

<sup>16</sup>Eberhard Bethge, “Living in Opposition,” in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago: Covenant, 1999) 28.

this time, they continue, that Bonhoeffer, influenced by his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, “began to see the wisdom of amassing enough power to topple the regime.”<sup>17</sup>

For myriad reasons and at the urging of friends and colleagues such as Paul Lehmann and Reinhold Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation to begin lecturing at Union Theological Seminary in New York in the summer of 1939. In the United States less than a month, Bonhoeffer decided that he must return to Germany. Bethge surmised that Bonhoeffer’s decision to return included an acceptance of his role, as a German, to take on both responsibility and guilt. His now-famous letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, outlining his reasons for leaving the safety of American shores, bears witness to the shift in his thinking described above.

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 the trials of this time with my people....Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.<sup>18</sup>

Upon his return to Germany and during the first year of the war, Bonhoeffer, along with all ecumenical conferences and synods, advocated peace. However, by May 1940, Bonhoeffer, in Bethge’s words, “had already taken his stand on the one condition for peace that could not be discussed in any church body inside Germany—the removal of Hitler.”<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer’s return to Germany came with the recognition that protesting National Socialism, the takeover of the church, and the suffering of the Jews on ideological grounds alone was no longer sufficient. Bonhoeffer returned to Germany with a new understanding that his profound freedom as a Christian carried with it an equally profound sense of responsibility.

Bonhoeffer does not mean, here, some vague notion of responsibility; rather, he means responsibility specifically as it is tied to his understanding of ethics as conformation, being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ in the world.<sup>20</sup> Taking responsible action in the world starts with an inquiry into the form Christ is taking in the world and is predicated on the understanding that the one taking such action does not presume to be Christ but responds to Christ’s own participations in church, world, and humanity.

The christological reality, for Bonhoeffer, is that those relationships, between one person and another as well as between humanity and God, are mediated by Christ. And Christ, as the one who became incarnate, was crucified, and rose again,

<sup>17</sup>Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *A Testament to Freedom*, 32.

<sup>18</sup>Bonhoeffer, quoted in *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>19</sup>Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 670.

<sup>20</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 80.

who suffered for love of a broken and suffering humanity, is the “responsible person *par excellence*.”<sup>21</sup> Responsible action, for Bonhoeffer, is never formulaic or programmatic. There is no abstract, ideal ethic good for all times and for all places. The human conformed to Christ Jesus lives firmly in the real world; Christ was not interested in action that might be deemed universally valid, rather, “that which is of help to the real and concrete human being.”<sup>22</sup>

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In 1939 Bonhoeffer entered the difficult world of assessing what was expedient—of success and failure, tactics and camouflage. The certainty of his calling in 1932 now became an acceptance of the uncertain, the incomplete, and the provisional. The new turning point demanded an entirely different sacrifice: the sacrifice of his Christian reputation.<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer’s ethical position, his embrace of “righteous action” over against his previous “love one’s enemies” directive, is rooted in his understanding that righteous or responsible action corresponds with reality. “[A]ction which is in accordance with Christ is action which is in accordance with reality.”<sup>24</sup> “The responsible [hu]man is dependent on the [hu]man who is concretely his neighbor in his concrete possibility. His conduct is not established in advance, once and for all, that is to say, as a matter of principle, but it arises with the given situation.”<sup>25</sup>

In an essay entitled “After Ten Years,” written at the turn of the New Year 1943, Bonhoeffer offered encouragement and support to those engaged in the dangerous resistance with him. After ten years of Hitler’s rule, ten years struggling to resist the all-encompassing tide of National Socialist ideology, Bonhoeffer knew his family and friends needed to hear words that would strengthen their resolve and persistence. “Who stands fast?” he wrote. “Only the [one] whose final standard is not his [or her] reason, ...principles, ...conscience, ...freedom, or ...virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when...called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive obedience to God—the responsible [person], who tries to make his [or her] whole life an answer to the question and call of God.”<sup>26</sup> More to the point, he continued, “[c]ivil courage, in fact, can grow only out of the free responsibility of free men [and women]. Only now are the Germans beginning to discover the meaning of free responsibility. It depends on a God who demands responsible

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 225.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>23</sup>Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 678.

<sup>24</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 229.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 227.

<sup>26</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 5.

action in a bold venture of faith, and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man [or woman] who becomes a sinner in that venture.<sup>27</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer embraced the paradox; he allowed the gift of redemption, that profound gift of forgiveness, to free him to act on behalf of those who were suffering, who were victims, who were voiceless. I wonder how Bonhoeffer's story informs us, his twenty-first-century readers, to live out the scandalous good news that Christ died for all?<sup>28</sup> ⊕

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>28</sup>I would like to thank Paul Lutter for his conversations with me about this essay.

2 Misattributed. 3 Quotes about Bonhoeffer. 4 External links. Quotes[edit].<sup>^</sup> It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, ipso facto a part of that grace.<sup>^</sup> The antithesis between the Christian life and the life of bourgeois respectability is at an end. The Christian life comes to mean nothing more than living in the world and as the world, in being no different from the world, in fact, in being prohibited from being different from the world for the sake of grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer never gave up. His writings will continue to provide inspiration to everyone.<sup>^</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent the first eighteen months of his confinement in the military section of Tegel Prison in Berlin. This was from April 5th 1943 until October 8th 1944. After a certain amount of quibbling he was given permission to write to his parents. The first part of this book consists of selections from the letters he wrote to them.<sup>^</sup> pain. In time to come it will be better appreciated how this second act of dedication justifies the first and sealed it as an undying heritage. This heritage may lie dormant, but it can never be lost. In the Prinz Albert Strasse opportunities of contact were much reduced.