

Mixing Philosophy and Religion: Using Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Role Model for Church Organization

A word is in order about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom Rev. Slayton has publically admitted he admires, and, according to him, has read most of his books; *whom he believes has the right idea about what the church should be*. Yes, Bonhoeffer stood against the Nazi regime, but he had liberal ideas about how the church should be organized and run.

Remember that noble actions do not equal Christian behavior. Many noble people are not believers. Just because people perform noble deeds does not mean we ought to assume they are Christians. Rather, remember that while Bonhoeffer did courageously resist the Nazis, he also said some shocking things that people from various theological perspectives have taken to support their own positions. An examination of how Bonhoeffer used and interpreted Scripture reveals the true nature of his theology.

In an article, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer Rejected Classical Christianity,” David Becker investigates the writing of Bonhoeffer and states:

“I don’t mean to be critical of people, but I do want to speak the truth in love, and one of my pet peeves is when I see people, especially those who consider themselves to be, and present themselves as, theologically conservative, praise Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer espoused a so-called religion-less Christianity, and expressed doubt about God as a working hypothesis. He was a father of the so-called ‘death of God’ ‘fad’ of a few years ago. He wrote a lot and also wrote some things that sounded orthodox but he consistently had a low view of the Bible, considering a lot of it myth.”
[1]

In reviewing one of Bonhoeffer’s books, Becker writes:
“In his book, Christ the Center (1960, Harper & Row), Bonhoeffer wrote: ‘So if we speak of Jesus Christ as God, we may not speak of him as the representative of an idea of God who possesses the properties of omniscience and omnipotence (there is no such thing as this abstract divine nature!)’ (p. 108). **So Bonhoeffer didn’t really believe that Jesus is God. ... Bonhoeffer didn’t think that Jesus is sinless either.** ‘The assertion of the sinlessness of Jesus fails if it has in mind observable acts of Jesus. His deeds are done in the likeness of flesh. They are not sinless, but ambiguous. One can and should see good and bad in them’ (p. 113). ... So Bonhoeffer

rejected classical Christology, had a low view of the Bible, denied the deity of Christ, doubted the virgin birth of Christ, denied the sinlessness of Christ, and doubted the physical resurrection of Christ.” [2]

Endnotes: [1] David Becker, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer Rejected Classic Christology,” *The Christian News*, June 5, 2000, pg. 7.
[2] Ibid.

This is why I made earlier reference to Rev. Slayton’s sermon, “What Are You Doing Here?” that his praise for Bonhoeffer is misguided. [Bonhoeffer did espouse heresy; and Rev. Slayton should never hold him up as an example](#), although put into a Nazi prison, etc., (yes it is high sounding to talk about suffering for Christ’s sake), but Bonhoeffer’s philosophy is not the way to organize a church body.

Let’s explore “The Cost of Discipleship” book, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer, who died because of his principles in a Germany concentration camp in 1945, is one of the most frequently quoted individuals by evangelical leaders. This has always surprised me given the fact that Bonhoeffer was a Christian humanist with neo-orthodox leanings. Nevertheless, I decided to read for myself this, his most well known book.

Bonhoeffer's greatest contribution to the Christian community is his teachings on what he calls "cheap grace." "Cheap grace," he writes, "means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner" (p.46). In a statement that would strike a great blow against easy-believism of our day he says, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate" (p.47). To these thoughts, and the theology behind them, we say a hardy "amen."

On the other hand, in addition to his humanistic and neo-orthodox tendencies mentioned above, *The Cost of Discipleship* clearly revealed other major problems. Most disturbing of which is his belief concerning sacramental regeneration. Bonhoeffer takes the traditional Lutheran view that grace is dispensed through the sacraments of baptism (most often infant baptism) (pp. 254-262) and the Lord's supper (pp. 263-276). In other words, it is through these means that one is born again. Additionally he believes that

a true Christian can lose his salvation (p. 329). These are grave errors that must be factored into any understanding of Bonhoeffer's teachings.

While Bonhoeffer supplies some thoughts worth considering, his false teachings are too many and too real to ignore.

Because Rev. Slayton has taken Bonhoeffer as his guide on how to "do church," it will be instructive, for the next few pages of this introduction, to examine further what the man believes.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a neo-orthodox German theologian, pastor, preacher, radio broadcaster, and prolific writer in the 1930s and early-1940s, during the rise, rule, and downfall of Adolph Hitler. He was greatly fascinated with neo-orthodox thought, theology, and terminology, and was greatly influenced by the major theologian of neo-orthodoxy, Karl Barth (1886-1968). Bonhoeffer's writings are credited with helping to father the "Death of God" theology which was popularized by the Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson in the decade of the 1960s. **Bonhoeffer was in reality a practical atheist and a religious humanist who denied virtually every cardinal doctrine of the historic Christian faith** (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, New York: Macmillan Co., 1972, pp. 9-12).

Bonhoeffer readily acknowledged "the debt he owes to liberal theology." Declaring that it was impossible to know the objective truth about Christ's real nature and essence, Bonhoeffer proclaimed that God was dead. Moreover, Bonhoeffer believed that the true Christian was the confessing believer who totally immersed his life in the secular world, becoming a secular Christian. Rejecting the objective unalterable moral standards of the Bible, Bonhoeffer proclaimed a situational ethics -- that right and wrong are determined solely by the "loving obligations of the moment" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, New York: Macmillan Co., 1972, pp. 9-12, 378; *Ethics*, pp. 38, 186; *No Rusty Swords*, pp. 44-45).

The son of a Berlin professor of psychiatry, Bonhoeffer studied theology at Tübingen, Berlin and at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer, student chaplain and lecturer at the University of Berlin, joined the anti-Nazi pastors in the German "church struggle." In 1935, he was appointed head of the Finkenwalde Confessing Church Seminary, which was closed by the

government in 1937. In 1939, Bonhoeffer rejected the possibility of a job in America, safe from the impending European war. He was convinced that he had to face the difficulties ahead with the Christians in Germany.

Back in Germany during World War II, Bonhoeffer was forbidden to preach or to publish. Though claiming to be a disciple of Gandhi and his credo of non-violence, Bonhoeffer worked as a double agent in the anti-Nazi resistance movement and in the German military office, and eventually joined the wartime conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. His arrest in 1943, however, arose from his direct involvement in smuggling fourteen Jews to Switzerland. He was hanged by the Nazis at Flossenbug on April 9, 1945.

Although only 39 when executed, Bonhoeffer left a rich legacy of books, some of his best known being *Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and *Life Together*, as well as letters, papers, and notes published by his close friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge. These include *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Ethics*, and six volumes of collected writings (Dr. Ruth Zerner, City University of New York, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Eerdmans' Handbook To The History of Christianity*, 1977, p. 603).

Although Bonhoeffer presented his own strain of neo-orthodox existentialism, many evangelicals have been taken in by his warm-hearted piety and by his high sounding devotion to Christ and call to suffer for His sake. His religious terminology may appear to be evangelical, but its substance was existential. Yet, there are those today who continue to present Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a genuine Christian hero (e.g., [Don Matzat](#), [Chuck Colson](#), and the editorial board of *Christianity Today*). Grand Rapids Baptist College ([GARBC](#) -- now Cornerstone College) scheduled a play in the fall of 1991 which extolled Bonhoeffer's memory.

The following is a summary of beliefs and influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as taken from some of the over 14 books and documents attributed to him:

1. He believed that "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without Him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us." Bonhoeffer also believed that the concept of God as a "supreme Being, absolute in power and goodness," was a "spurious conception of transcendence," and that "God as a working hypothesis in

morals, politics, and science ... should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, S.C.M. Press edition, Great Britain: Fontana Books, 1953, pp. 122, 164, 360).

2. He believed that mankind had become of age and no longer needed religion, which was only a deceptive garment of true faith; he suggested the need for a "religionless Christianity." To Bonhoeffer, "the Christian is identified not by his beliefs, but by actions, by his participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, S.C.M. Press edition, Great Britain: Fontana Books, 1953, p. 163). Thus, Bonhoeffer's final writings have given impulse to Marxist theologians sponsoring "liberation theology" and to others wishing to promote a worldly social gospel.

3. He refused to discuss the origin of Christ, His relationship to the Father, His two natures, or even the relationship of the two natures. Bonhoeffer was adamant in his belief that it was impossible to know the objective truth about the real essence of Christ's being-nature (*Christ the Center*, pp. 30, 88, 100-101).

4. He questioned the Virgin Birth, and in reality denied it (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 215).

5. He denied the deity of Christ; he advocated that "Jesus Christ Today" is not a real person and being, but a "corporate presence" (*Testimony to Freedom*, pp. 75-76; *Christ the Center*, p. 58).

6. He denied the sinlessness of Christ's human nature and further questioned the sinlessness of His earthly behavior (*Christ the Center*, pp. 108-109).

7. He believed that Christ exists in three "revelatory forms" -- *as* Word, *as* sacrament, and *as* church. From asserting that Christ *is* the church, he followed that all persons *in* the church are *identical with* Christ (*Christ the Center*, p. 58; *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 217). This amounts to pantheism!

8. He believed that Christianity is not exclusive, i.e., that Christ is not the only way to God (*Testimony to Freedom*, pp. 55-56).

9. He was a prominent figure in the early ecumenical movement, as evidenced through his associations with the "World Alliance for International Friendship" (a forerunner of the apostate World Council of Churches [WCC]), Union Theological Seminary, and Visser 't Hooft (who later became the first General Secretary of the WCC) (*Testimony to Freedom*, pp. 22, 212, 568). Bonhoeffer also reached out to Roman Catholics, prefiguring the broader ecumenism that blossomed after Vatican II in the mid-1960s.

10. He was a practical evolutionist (*No Rusty Swords*, p. 143), and believed that the book of Genesis was scientifically naive and full of myths (*Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3*).

11. He adhered to neo-orthodox theology and terminology concerning salvation (*Testimony to Freedom*, p. 130), was a sacramentalist (*Life Together*, p. 122; *The Way to Freedom*, pp. 115, 153), believed in regenerative infant baptism (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, Macmillan, pp. 142-143) as well as adult baptismal regeneration (*The Way to Freedom*, p. 151), equated church membership with salvation (*The Way to Freedom*, p. 93), and denied a personal/individualistic salvation (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, Macmillan, p. 156).

12. He placed little or no value on the Old Testament -- "... the faith of the Old Testament is not a religion of salvation" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, S.C.M. Press edition, Great Britain: Fontana Books, 1953, p. 112).

13. He denied the verbal-plenary inspiration of Scripture, believing that the Bible was only a "witness" to the Word of God and becomes the Word of God only when it "speaks" to an individual; otherwise, it was simply the word of man/men (*Testimony to Freedom*, pp. 9, 104; *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 161). To Bonhoeffer, the Bible was meant "to be expounded as a witness, not as a book of wisdom, a teaching book, a book of eternal truth" (*No Rusty Swords*, p. 118). He also believed in the value of higher criticism/historical criticism, which is a denial of the inerrancy and authenticity of the Bible (*Christ the Center*, pp. 73-74).

14. He had no faith in the physical resurrection of Christ. Bonhoeffer believed the "historicity" of the Resurrection was in "the realm of ambiguity," and that it was one of the "mythological" elements of

Christianity that "must be interpreted in such a way as not to make religion a pre-condition of faith." He also believed that "Belief in the Resurrection is not the solution of the problem of death," and that such things as miracles and the ascension of Christ were "mythological conceptions" as well (*Christ the Center*, p. 112; *Letters and Papers from Prison*, S.C.M. Press edition, Great Britain: Fontana Books, 1953, pp. 93-94, 110).