

Justice Powered by Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Jewish Question

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If the Reformed Church had saints and martyrs, certainly Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be among them. Too few Christians living in the Third Reich placed themselves willingly and knowingly in harm's way for the sake of the neighbor as he did. The pursuit of justice for the sake of the one who is not a part of one's immediate community is a rare thing in the best of times, but it astonishes us in the worst of times. After a lengthy time in a Berlin prison, after being offered a way of escape and refusing it, after the loss of a future with his fiancée, Bonhoeffer was led to a hangman, stripped naked in the cold morning air of April 9th, 1945. The young pastor and theologian left this world with these words to a fellow prisoner: "This is the end. For me the beginning of life" (Schlingensiegen, 390).

Where did the road that ended for Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the last days of the Second World War in a Nazi concentration camp have its beginning? What was the first step that led to the second step and on and on until he was hanged by direct orders from Hitler as the Third Reich was collapsing on all sides? If we can locate the start, perhaps we can better appreciate the path. And appreciating the path is essential for reflecting on justice as a virtue in a world that has not witnessed the end of injustice with the close of one century and the start of the next.

Perhaps the paper trail begins with a document that Bonhoeffer wrote when he was twenty seven years old. In April 1933 he wrote the essay "The Church and the Jewish Question" (*Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage*) in response to both the Aryan Clauses, which were laws enacted on April 7, 1933, and to the nation-wide boycott of Jewish

shops that had taken place six days prior. Discrimination against German-Jewish citizens in the Reich was intensifying and hatred was being legalized by the state. Some Christians welcomed these measures and were advocating their imitation in the Church. The Aryan clauses made it illegal for anyone of Jewish heritage to serve as an official in the Third Reich. The question was then asked about the status of Jewish-Christians. Does Christian baptism make all Christians the same, or does it fail to wash away the Jewishness of the believer? Is Christianity spiritual or racial? That was the Jewish question of the day that the churchy in Germany had to answer.

For Bonhoeffer it was clear that racial considerations had no place in Christian congregations, but in the essay he goes beyond this question to address the Christian virtue of justice on behalf of the victims of injustice.

Bonhoeffer's complete essay on the Church and the Jewish Question was published in the June edition of the journal *Vormarsch*, but the principles on which he based his thoughts were discussed at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memory Church in Berlin with a small group of pastors. Bonhoeffer's thoughts at this early stage of the persecution of Jews in German proved to be so radical that a number of pastors left the gathering in anger (Schlingensiegen, 143). Certainly in their eyes, the Christian virtue of justice did not place the moral obligation on them that Bonhoeffer thought basic to Christian life in the new Reich.

Bonhoeffer had crossed an important line in his thinking that many Protestant Christians in the land of Luther could not cross. In his statement Bonhoeffer joined theology and politics, and, even more, he had done so in the service of Jews. For 400 years the two Empire doctrine had grown ever deeper roots in the hearts and minds of

Reformed Germans. For better or for worse, and most Germans thought for the better, Hitler controlled politics and the state, while the church ruled heart and soul. For the one to reach into the domain of the other was to invite the other to reach into one's own sphere. But Bonhoeffer was now insisting that there are urgent circumstances that compel the church to do just that. According to Bonhoeffer's recent biographer, Ferdiand Schlingensiefen, the thought that "the state could become a state of injustice (*Unrechtsstaat*) cannot even be expressed in German reformed theology as a theoretical discussion point" (143). In this regard, Bonhoeffer was light years ahead of other German theologians and pastors in 1933.

I want to list the steps that Bonhoeffer presented that day for ethical action on the part of Christians in Nazi Germany and in doing so wish to imply that these guidelines might serve the contemporary church as well. Then I want to end by speculating where a conservative Christian like Bonhoeffer might have found the spirit of justice to advocate such radical Christian action.

In "the Church and the Jewish Question (*Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage*)", Bonhoeffer viewed the church as "compelled to speak" to the state when there was either "too much law and order or too little law and order" (Kelly, 132). Too little law and order permits lawlessness while too much law and order means that the "state develops its power to such an extent that it deprives Christian preaching and Christian faith of their rights." For Bonhoeffer, preaching is essential to the state's well being because the state receives its authority from God and must not "enthroned itself" (Kelly, 132). Since the state's origin is divine, Bonhoeffer asserts that the church knows better than the state what the state's legitimate actions are. Strange as it sounds to us here, Bonhoeffer looks

at the Jewish Question from the perspective that the church knows better than the state how to apply justice, and it is in the state's interest not to limit the church's freedom to preach and practice Christianity. The gospel is the state's life blood and if the state cuts this off, then the state dies and become grotesque. The state needs the church to correct it when it practices injustice. Bonhoeffer maintains that "the state which endangers the Christian proclamation negates itself" (Kelly, 132).

The conclusions that Bonhoeffer reaches from this is that there are three ways in which the church can act toward the state when the church finds that the state is acting unjustly First, the church can ask the state to examine its actions in light of justice. In so doing, the church simply reminds the state of its moral responsibility to provide justice for those living within it boarder. If the state continues to act unjustly, then secondly, the church must aid the victims of injustice because Christians have "an unconditional obligation to the victims, even if they do not belong to the Christian community" (Kelley, 132). Here the church places itself in harm's way by demonstrating love in action (justice toward the neighbor). But if the injustice continues, then the third and final step for the church is "not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself" (Kelley, 132). The German original is even more graphic: "*dem Rad in die Speichen fallen*" or "to fall into the spokes of the wheels." This implies throwing oneself into the wheel of injustice to clog it and stop it, even at the cost of one's life.

The church then becomes a political actor and enters the struggle for justice in a confrontational manner. This, says Bonhoeffer, can happen when there is too little law and order so that a group of citizens has its rights destroyed and when there is too much law and order so that the state interferes with the church's proclamation of the gospel.

Thus it is in the best interest of the state for the Christian faith to be proclaimed radically and for Christians to act on behalf of the victims of state persecution.

In Nazi Germany in 1933 there was both too little law and order so that Jews were being persecuted without mercy and there was too much law and order so that the Nazi state was seeking to control Christian proclamation. It was clear to Dietrich Bonhoeffer that Christians had to act on behalf of the victims of Nazism.

With each passing day, Bonhoeffer moved closer and closer to the final step of action until his steps ended with his involvement in the plot to overthrow Hitler and this lead first to his imprisonment and then to his execution.

In April 1933, just a few months after Hitler had become Chancellor, the injustice done to German Jews had become the church's business and the injustice done by Hitler in every area of life had made it imperative that Christians not only bandage the victims of Nazism but jam a spoke in the wheel itself.

In Bonhoeffer's case, he himself would be the spoke and the wheel would crush him in April 1945. But even in prison, he always wondered why Christians in Germany were not throwing themselves into the Nazi wheel along with him..

But while I can understand the reluctance of most Christians in Germany to follow Bonhoeffer's path of radical discipleship, I am intrigued by Bonhoeffer's practice of faith that compelled him to practice justice in such a self-sacrificing way. Where did this man get this courage?

Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge suggests that the young Bonhoeffer had undergone a experience shortly before the Church Struggle began that changed his life . It was a conversion experience that Bethge describes as the "turning

from being merely a theologian to Christian” (246). It was a spiritual experience that Bonhoeffer kept to himself, but later he did address himself to this notable change in a letter to his brother Karl,-Friedrich who had told him of his mother’s concern for her son’s safety as the opposition to Hitler began to intensify. Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother:

When I began to study theology, I had imagined something much different- maybe a far more academic affair. But now something far different has come about. But I believe I know now that I have come upon the right track- for the first time in my life. And that often makes me very happy. I just always have this fear that I might not keep going because of fear of what people might think and then I would get stuck. I am convinced that I would become inwardly clear and really honest if I really began to deal honestly with the Sermon on the Mount. Here rests the only power source that can explode the whole magic and intimidation of National Socialism. There are after all things for which it pays to engage yourself without compromise. To me peace and social justice, or simply Christ, appears to be such a thing (Schlingensiegen, 112. Stroud translation).

To a friend, Elizabeth Zinn, Bonhoeffer related how he had “become a Christian.”

At that time I was terribly alone and left to myself. That was very bad. But then something else came along, something that has changed my life down to this very moment. I came for the first time to the Bible. That is a horrible thing to say. I had preached so often, I had seen so much of the church then and had spoken and written so much – and I had still not even become a Christian, but instead I was my own master in a wild and unruly way. I know that I had made an advantage

for myself out of this matter of Jesus Christ... I ask God that I never do this again. I had prayed only little and seldom. I was completely pleased with myself. But the Bible freed me from all that, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Since then everything has been different (Schlingensiegen,, 113. Stroud translation).

People had noticed this difference shortly after Bonhoeffer returned from his America trip in 1932. As you know, it was there in New York that he had been introduced to the faith of the black church with its gospel message and music of joy and liberation. And it was in New York that he became familiar with the Civil Rights movement. He even began to collect materials from the NAACP and read black literature (Schlingensiegen, 84-85). He loved worshipping in black churches and later, at Finkenwalde, the illegal, underground seminary of the Confessing Church, he would play his records of spirituals for the young German students preparing to serve congregations in Hitler's Germany. The connection between the plight of African Americans in the United States and the Jews in Hitler's Germany was not lost on the class of seminarians preparing for service in the opposition congregations (Doblmeier). Perhaps their teacher was hoping that they too might catch a little of the gospel fire in those spirituals.

From New York Bonhoeffer wrote a friend of "new views (*neue Anschauungen*) that were changing his philosophy and theology"(Bethge, 250). Maybe it was there with those Christians in New York that the German theologian began the most important spiritual journey of his life, one that would expand his faith to include his heart as well as his head.

And when he saw the Jews in Hitler's Germany, perhaps he could not help but think about Sundays in Harlem with those others who faced persecution. When he

returned to Berlin, he began to speak of the Bible as God's love letter to every Christian and to insist that confession was a real act before God and not just a theological term. He began to talk of a community of believers who would be bound by obedience and prayer to a "life together" through which the privileged and isolated office of pastor might find renewal and authenticity. In this time of transformation, Bonhoeffer was being pulled deeper and deeper into the Sermon on the Mount, not as a text to be studied and exegeted but as a way of living in the world face to face with Jesus Christ. (Bethge, 247-248).

His Christian rhetoric sounded out of place to many Berlin students, and he began to read scripture in a meditative manner. Because he was never drawn to the pietistic recounting of conversion experiences, he never made this process clear (Schlingensiegen, 250). But his conversion experience was real and it certainly enabled him to write one of the few radical Christian documents ever written in the Third Reich, and the years from 1933 to April 1945 show that the author of those words to the church was ready to throw himself into the wheel of injustice as an act of justice for the persecuted neighbor.

Becoming a Christian rather than just a theologian enabled Bonhoeffer to follow the radical path for Christians that he had outlined in his essay at the beginning of the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer's journey from scholar to martyr, from the university classroom to concentration camp, was fueled by the faith that has enabled martyrs in many times to model justice in the darkest of times.

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