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Surrendering Autonomy in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology

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**SURRENDERING AUTONOMY
IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY**

**A thesis presented for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Theology at Whitworth University**

Corey Tuttle

**B.A., Moody Bible Institute
May, 2020**

Summary of Salient Points

This project demonstrates the centrality of surrendering autonomy in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology. The project begins by demonstrating that Bonhoeffer read his Bible along the theme of autonomy. After establishing Bonhoeffer's view of autonomy in the biblical story, I detail Bonhoeffer's two-fold understanding of the autonomy to be surrendered. Bonhoeffer saw the autonomy as both practical (being self-directed in practical life) and cognitive (being self-directed in thought). After gathering a thorough understanding of Bonhoeffer's view of autonomy, I apply this understanding to Bonhoeffer's prison letters. In doing so, I demonstrate that viewing Bonhoeffer's work through the lens of surrendering autonomy provides a continuity in Bonhoeffer's work that has been questioned by other Bonhoeffer scholars. Bonhoeffer suggests that human beings should surrender their autonomy in obedience to the will of God. As this is the case, I provide the practical ways that Bonhoeffer says humans can hear the will of God. I conclude this project by providing a critique of Bonhoeffer's view of surrendering autonomy.

Statement of Integrity

I have composed this thesis and carried out the research which it represents. This thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

Corey Tuttle

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Abbreviations

- DBWE 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 1: Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.
- DBWE 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 2: Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.
- DBWE 3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 3: Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy; trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.
- DBWE 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 4: Discipleship*, trans. From the German edition ed. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt; English edition ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey; trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- DBWE 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 5: Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*; ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly; trans Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- DBWE 6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 6: Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans, Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- DBWE 8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best [et al.], Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- DBWE 9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 9: The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927*, ed. Paul Duane Matheny, Clifford J Green, and Marshall D. Johnson, trans. Mary C. Nebelsick with the assistance of Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.
- DBWE 10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 10: Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928- 1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.
- DBWE 11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 11: Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker and Michael B. Lukens; trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange [et al.], Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

- DBWE 12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 12: Berlin: 1932-1933*, ed. Larry R. Rasmussen; trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- DBWE 13 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 13: London: 1933-1935* ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best, supplementary material trans. Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.
- DBWE 14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, ed. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, trans. Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- DBWE 15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 15: Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940* ed. Victoria J. Barnett; trans. Victoria J. Barnett [et al.], supplementary material trans. Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

Introduction

On a Sunday morning in October 1925, Dietrich Bonhoeffer entered the pulpit at the Church of Stahndorf to preach his first recorded sermon. With the planned absence of the congregation's pastor, Bonhoeffer was invited to preach as a guest on Luke 17:7-10. Opening his Bible and looking out to the congregation, Bonhoeffer began to read the words of Jesus:

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (Luke 17:7-10)

After reading his text, Bonhoeffer went on to exposit its meaning for his hearers.

If human beings are servants, then God is all-powerful, almighty, and the sublime Lord. As such, God should be acknowledged and believed in, not understood and proved. This also means that humans do not have their own will or their own life and that everything that they own belongs to God—their property, their life, their will, their reputation, and their honor.¹

Anyone familiar with Bonhoeffer's works will notice familiar themes in Bonhoeffer's first sermon. It is clear from this text and, as will be demonstrated, the rest of Bonhoeffer's works, that Bonhoeffer began his ministry as he intended to go on. One does not have to look long through Bonhoeffer's works to find his continual use of words like duty, responsibility, service, and obedience. At the core of these topics lies the question: “Who decides one's duty?” In other words, who is the starting point or origin for duty or responsibility?

¹ DBWE 9: 453.

Starting points are extremely important to Bonhoeffer. He goes so far as to write a book on the origin of history—*Creation and Fall*. In this book, he not only covers the events of Genesis 1-3 but he does so by demonstrating the effects of the events in Genesis on the origin of human beings' thoughts and actions. As a result of the Fall, human beings gained autonomy; they became self-directed. Human beings became their own starting point for their thoughts and actions instead of God.

According to Bonhoeffer, the origin of human thought and action should be God and not human beings. As we shall see, human beings relating to God as their starting point isn't simple after the Fall. In fact, Bonhoeffer believes that it was impossible for a large period of history. This is one of the conflicts that Jesus came to resolve.

Bonhoeffer's life and work proceeds from this basic assumption. He spent his entire life attempting to convince others through sermons, letters, papers, and books to return to God as the starting point for their lives.

The central theme in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work is human beings surrendering their autonomy in obedience to the will of God. Bonhoeffer is against human beings using the self as a compass for navigating both thought and deed. He is against human beings acting as their own starting point. The goal of this project is to demonstrate this claim – to show the centrality of surrendering autonomy in Bonhoeffer's thought.

Ever since the Enlightenment, the question of autonomy has been one of the controlling questions in all of modern western society and thought. The Enlightenment's emphasis on autonomous inquiry through reason has shaped society up until today. Naturally, such a strong emphasis on inquiry leads to inquiry about inquiry. Is this development in history good? If you are a theologian and pastor like Bonhoeffer, you ask

how God relates to this development. Or, as Bonhoeffer puts it, “Who is Jesus Christ actually for us, today?”² We find in Bonhoeffer not only a cultural commentator providing critique of modernity, but also a theologian who interacts with the implications of autonomy in all of his writings.

Bonhoeffer is not allergic to the tools that modernity has given him. He interacts extensively with philosophers, even employing Heidegger in his second book, *Act and Being*. However, his approach toward modernity, for the most part, is not to offer broad critiques of its influence on the world or Christianity.³ His approach is almost entirely practical. How should human beings live in light of autonomy? In the following chapters I will demonstrate what Bonhoeffer meant by surrendering autonomy and its centrality in his work.

This thesis will be divided into six chapters. In Chapter 1, “Autonomy in the Biblical Narrative According to Bonhoeffer,” I will detail Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s description of the biblical narrative. In Bonhoeffer’s books *Creation and Fall* and *Ethics*, he describes the creation of the world, the fall of human beings, and the reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ through the lens of autonomy. By understanding what Bonhoeffer sees when he reads the Bible, we will be able to make sense of Bonhoeffer’s goal when he ministers to his readers and hearers.

In Chapter 2, “Surrendering Cognitive Autonomy,” I will develop Bonhoeffer’s understanding of autonomy. Bonhoeffer understands autonomy in terms of cognitive

² DBWE 8:5.

³ Bonhoeffer does provide this critique at the end of his life in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but it is not his central focus in relation to autonomy.

autonomy and practical autonomy.⁴ In this chapter I will detail Bonhoeffer's understanding of cognitive autonomy through his analysis of self-reflection. According to Bonhoeffer, a human being's ability to view oneself is a result of the Fall. In *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer juxtaposes viewing the self with unreflective obedience and allowing Christ to be the judge over one's self.

In Chapter 3, "Surrendering Practical Autonomy," I will detail Bonhoeffer's understanding of practical autonomy. In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer emphasizes acting only according to the commandments of Jesus without any input from the self. In *Ethics*, he argues that human beings return to hearing and doing, as it was before the Fall. In these writings Bonhoeffer emphasizes a surrender of all practical life to hearing and doing the will of God.

In Chapter 4, "Autonomy in a World Come of Age," I will further elucidate the centrality of autonomy in Bonhoeffer's thought by using the collective understanding gathered through chapters 1-3 to illuminate Bonhoeffer's phrase "the world come of age" in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In light of the understanding from chapters 1-3, the world come of age will be revealed to be a world that has embraced autonomy.

In Chapter 5, "Bonhoeffer's Practical Theology," I will use the knowledge gathered in the previous chapters to explain Bonhoeffer's practical theology. If Bonhoeffer is advocating for a return to "hearing and doing," then Bonhoeffer's practical

⁴ These terms have been adapted from Jacob Phillips in *Human Subjectivity 'in Christ' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology*. Phillips describes the loci of the simple obedience Jesus requires as being in the "cognitive domain" and "practical domain." Jacob Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology: Integrating Simplicity and Wisdom* (London, United Kingdom: T&T Clark, 2020), 27.

theology is primarily discovering the various places in his work where he says human beings can hear the will of God in order to do the will of God.

In Chapter 6, “An Analysis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s View of Autonomy,” I will provide an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on surrendering autonomy. I will conclude this thesis with a summary of the argument of the preceding chapters, and I will offer a reflection on Bonhoeffer’s surrendering of his own autonomy in the account of his final moments alive.

Chapter One

Autonomy in the Metanarrative of Scripture

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a biblical theologian. His life, writings, and ministerial practices were inspired by his interpretation of Scripture. In order to understand how surrendering autonomy is central in Bonhoeffer's thought, one must understand how Bonhoeffer understood autonomy in Scripture. His work as a pastor, professor, and author is filled with expositions of biblical texts. In his exposition of the various biblical texts, Bonhoeffer continually saw the story of the Bible through the lens of autonomy.

Bonhoeffer interpreted the Bible as dividing human history into three categories: primal human beings, human beings in Adam, and human beings in Christ.¹ These categories are present at the very beginning of Bonhoeffer's writings. In his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, he provided a chapter on each category in a theological study of the sociology of the church. He continued to develop these categories in all of his books.² Each category is defined by a theological event in the biblical storyline. Primal human beings are newly created human beings before the Fall, human beings in Adam are human beings after the Fall, and human beings in Christ are human beings after the reconciliation of the world in Christ. In order to understand the centrality of autonomy in Bonhoeffer's thought, we must first understand how Bonhoeffer saw autonomy as being at the center of the biblical story of Creation, Fall, and Reconciliation.

Creation

¹ Michael Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 57.

² DBWE 2:139; DBWE 3: Kindle Location 400; DBWE 6: 277; DBWE 4:214.

Bonhoeffer's description of the biblical narrative occurs primarily in his books *Creation and Fall* and *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer begins his commentary on Genesis 1-3 where the text begins, with God creating the world in freedom. "In the beginning – that is out of freedom, out of nothing – God created heaven and earth."³ God created the world and filled it with life—plants, animals, and human beings. After each act of creation, God says that his creation is good. After creating primal human beings, God began making his will known to them. He tells humans to fill the earth and subdue it, to be fruitful and multiply. "The Creator wills that the creation should itself, in obedience, endorse and carry on the Creator's work – wills that creatures should live and should in turn themselves create life."⁴

Bonhoeffer describes the relationship between God and human beings in the beginning as one of unity. "Living in the origin, human beings know nothing but God alone. They know other human beings, things, and themselves only in the unity of their knowledge of God; they know everything only in God, and God in all things."⁵ In the beginning human beings were undivided, knowing themselves only in their knowledge of God. They never looked at themselves. As a result of knowing only God, human beings did not have a conscience.⁶ "In the relation of human beings to God...there [were] no possibilities: there [was] only reality. There [was] no 'let me first...' there [was] only the

³ DBWE 3: Kindle Location 410.

⁴ Ibid., Kindle Location 604.

⁵ DBWE 6: 300.

⁶ DBWE 3: Kindle Location 1312.

commandment and obedience.”⁷ There was only “hearing and doing.”⁸ There was only “unbroken obedience to God.”⁹

It was in this primal state, Bonhoeffer writes, that human beings were truly free. “Freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free.”¹⁰ This was the state of Adam and Eve in the garden with God. Human beings were free for God and free for each other which resulted in obedience to the will of God. “The life that human beings have happens in an obedience that issues from freedom.”¹¹

Along with the relational dynamic between God and human beings, God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the center of human existence as a boundary. “Knowledge of the boundary at the center means knowing that the whole of existence, human existence in every possible way that it may comport itself, has its limit.”¹² God’s creation of the boundary not only reminds Adam of his limitations but also reminds Adam of who he is.

The prohibition addresses Adam concerning Adam's freedom and creatureliness and binds Adam to this existence, the existence that belongs to Adam's own being. The prohibition means nothing other than this: Adam, you are who you are because of me, your Creator; so now be what you are. You are a free creature, so now be that.¹³

According to Bonhoeffer, this was the beginning. God was the origin, the starting point for all of human life. Human beings related to God in freedom which resulted in

⁷ Ibid., Kindle Location 1126.

⁸ DBWE 6: 328.

⁹ DBWE 3: Kindle Location 890.

¹⁰ Ibid., Kindle Location 664.

¹¹ Ibid., Kindle Location 874.

¹² Ibid., Kindle Locations 892-893.

¹³ Ibid., Kindle Locations 885-887.

unbroken obedience. Human beings heard the will of God and did it, without question. Human beings were undivided, without a conscience. God is their guide in both thought and action. Bonhoeffer understands human beings in their primal state as human beings without self-direction, without autonomy.

Fall

In Bonhoeffer's account of the creation narrative, all of this changed with a single question. "Did God really say...? – that is the utterly godless question."¹⁴ For Bonhoeffer, when Adam and Eve heard this question, "the Creator [came] under attack. It [required] humankind to sit in judgment on God's word instead of simply listening and doing it."¹⁵ Upon eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, human beings' knowledge was completely altered. "Instead, the knowledge of good and evil means a complete inversion of their knowledge, which before had consisted solely in knowing God as their origin."¹⁶

In the beginning, human beings were defined by God as their judge and guide in life. After the Fall humans now navigate life according to their own compass, without God. "Bonhoeffer...points to a connection between the dividedness of knowing good and evil with self-centered autonomy, claiming that with the knowledge of good and evil, humankind is 'acting out of its own resources' and is 'lord of its own world.'"¹⁷ He says that humans who know themselves beside and outside of God do not know God at all. "For they can only know God by knowing God alone. The knowledge of good and evil is

¹⁴ Ibid., Kindle Location 1117.

¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle Location 1126.

¹⁶ DBWE 6: 301.

¹⁷ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity 'in Christ'*, 42.

thus disunion with God. Human beings can know about good and evil only in opposition to God.”¹⁸

Bonhoeffer indicates that Adam hiding in the garden is the first evidence of human beings having a conscience after the Fall. “This flight, Adam's hiding away from God, we call conscience. Before the fall there was no conscience. Only since humankind has become divided from the Creator are human beings divided within themselves.”¹⁹ He goes on to describe the newly acquired conscience as “the voice of fallen life that seeks to preserve unity at least within itself... [It] is not concerned with a person’s relationship to God and other people, but with the relationship to one’s own self.”²⁰ Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Fall “connects ethical decision making with... a fallen desire for self-validation.”²¹ This pursuit of self-validation, in relating to one’s own self, has shaped the goal of life ever since the Fall.

Bearing the knowledge of good and evil within themselves, human beings have now become the judge of God and others, just as they are their own judge. Knowing good and evil in disunion with the origin, human beings become self-reflective. Their life now consists in understanding themselves, just as in the origin it was knowing God. Gaining self-knowledge is the essence and goal of life. This is so even where human beings seek to push beyond the limits of their own selves. Seeking self-knowledge is the never-ending attempt of human beings to overcome their disunion with themselves through thought, and, through unceasing self-differentiation, to find unity with themselves.”²²

As a result of the Fall, human beings were handed over to death.²³ Bonhoeffer details what is meant by death when he writes, “Being dead in this sense means to have

¹⁸ DBWE 6: 300-301.

¹⁹ DBWE 3: Kindle Location 1312.

²⁰ DBWE 6, 307.

²¹ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 5.

²² DBWE 6, 308.

²³ *Ibid.*, 302.

life not as a gift but as a commandment...to-have-to-live...[it] is not deliverance, salvation, or the final possibility of fleeing; instead flight into death is flight into the most terrible bondage to life.”²⁴

On December 3, 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave an advent sermon with a vivid illustration for his congregation that describes life as a result of the Fall.

You all know about accidents in mines. In the last few weeks we have had to read over and over in the papers about such men who have to go down every day into the mine shafts, deep into the earth, to do their work are constantly in danger that some day one of the tunnels will collapse or that they will be buried alive by an underground explosion. Then they are down there in the earth, where it is dark as night, left all alone. Their fate has caught up with them. This is the moment that even the bravest miner has dreaded all his life. Shouting can do no good, no more than raving and running head-on into the wall. Neither will it help to exhaust his strength in efforts to get out. But the more a human being realizes that he is totally helpless, the more he rages, while around him all remains silent. He knows that up above people have come running, that women and children are crying-but the way is blocked; he cannot reach them. Nothing is left for him but his final moments. He knows that people are working feverishly up there. His mates are digging with dogged energy through the rock toward the ones who are trapped. Perhaps here and there some will still be found and rescued, but down here in the depths of the farthest shaft there is no hope anymore. All that remains now is torment, waiting for death.²⁵

This is the state of human beings after the Fall. They are “in bondage and in chains... trapped underground... watching and waiting for freedom.”²⁶ They are doomed to judge themselves and act in the world according to their own knowledge of good and evil, perpetually self-reflective and self-guided in life. Human beings have become their own starting point with no way to return back to God as their origin. In the Fall, human beings became trapped in their own autonomy.

Reconciliation

²⁴ DBWE 3: Kindle Locations 943-944.

²⁵ DBWE 13: Kindle Locations 3634-3638.

²⁶ Ibid., Kindle Locations 3662-3663.

Human beings would not remain trapped forever. Bonhoeffer continues in his advent sermon to provide good news for all human beings trapped in themselves like miners whose mine has fallen in.

But then, suppose [the miner] should suddenly hear a faint sound, as if of knocking, of hammering, of rocks breaking, and then of faraway voices calling, calling into the emptiness and darkness; and this banging and digging gradually gets louder, until suddenly, with a mighty blow, the hammering comes close by, echoing back, and at last a friend's deep voice, one of his mates, shouts his name: Where are you? Help is coming! Then all at once the despairing man leaps up, his heart almost bursting with excitement and waiting, and screams with all his might: "I'm here, here, help me!-I can't get through, I can't help, but I'm waiting, I'm waiting, I can hold on till you come. Just come soon ... And he listens, beside himself with concentration, as each blow comes nearer. Each passing second seems like an hour. He can't see anything at all, but he can hear the voices of his helpers. Then a last, wild, desperate hammer blow rings in his ear. Rescue is at hand, only one more step and he will be free ... You know, don't you, why I am talking about this on this first of Advent? What we have been talking about here is Advent itself. This is the way it is; this is God coming near to humankind, the coming of salvation, the arrival of Christ.²⁷

In Jesus Christ, God has broken through the mine to all trapped human beings.

Through his life, death, and resurrection, God has pronounced his judgment on all human beings. The judgment of God “is the love of God for the world, for human beings. What happened to and in Christ has happened to us. Only as judged by God can human beings live before God; only the crucified human being is at peace with God.”²⁸

All human beings who are trapped in themselves in opposition to God have been forgiven of their sins. God has declared himself once again to be the judge of all human beings and his judgment is forgiveness. He reconciles the world to himself. The crime that trapped human beings in their autonomy has now been forgiven. The chains have been broken, the rescue for the miners has come.

²⁷ Ibid., Kindle Locations 3643-3646.

²⁸ DBWE 6: 88.

In contrast to human beings after the Fall, Jesus Christ lives not according to his knowledge of good and evil, but out of the will of God.

The freedom of Jesus is not the arbitrary choice of one among countless possibilities. Instead, it consists precisely in the complete simplicity of his action, for which there are never several possibilities, conflicts, or alternatives, but always only one. Jesus calls this one option the will of God. He calls it his food to do this will. This will of God is his life. He lives and acts not out of knowledge of good and evil, but out of the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it, the origin has been regained. It is the source of freedom and simplicity in everything that is done.²⁹

Notice, even here, Bonhoeffer is speaking of Jesus's life in terms of autonomy. Jesus is the human being who lives his life in a return to God as the origin. Bonhoeffer believes that Jesus continually explains his life through the lens of autonomy: "Jesus gave them this answer: 'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does'" (John 5:19).

Decision

Creation, Fall, and Reconciliation is the biblical storyline according to Bonhoeffer. It is this storyline that guides Bonhoeffer in all of his writing. Bonhoeffer uses this storyline to direct his hearers and readers towards a decision. To continue on with Bonhoeffer's analogy of the miners, Jesus doesn't remove everyone from the mine when he breaks in to rescue the miners. The mine is being trapped in opposition to humanity's origin, trapped in autonomy apart from God. Instead, Jesus forgives the miners' sins and tells them to follow him out of the mine. For Bonhoeffer, most people

²⁹ Ibid., 313.

are still stuck in their own autonomy. They are no longer trapped in the mine, but they still refuse to leave, all the while being loved and forgiven by God.

It is not as if reconciling the world has suddenly returned the world back to the hearing and doing or unbroken obedience. What is left for human beings, in light of being reconciled to God, is the decision to follow their rescuer out of the mine, surrendering the autonomy they have been trapped in. Only in this decision to follow Jesus is hearing and doing possible again. “Discerning the will of God is possible only on the basis of knowing the will of God in Jesus Christ. Only on the basis of Jesus Christ, only within the realm defined by Jesus Christ, only ‘in’ Jesus Christ is it possible to discern the will of God.”³⁰

Summary

Bonhoeffer not only sees the world through the lens of the dilemma of being self-directed or directed by God, he also believes it is what the Bible communicates. In the beginning there was no self-direction, no autonomy. Human beings had no conscience and lived in unbroken obedience, hearing and doing the will of God. In the Fall, human beings became trapped in their autonomy, forced into disunity with themselves, thinking and acting according to their own knowledge of good and evil. In the Incarnation, God reconciled the world to himself. In forgiving the sins of all people, he has offered the opportunity for human beings to surrender their autonomy and live according to the will of God again. Now that I have shown the centrality of autonomy in Bonhoeffer’s biblical worldview, I will detail Bonhoeffer’s two-fold understanding of autonomy: cognitive autonomy and practical autonomy.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

Chapter Two

Surrendering Cognitive Autonomy

Bonhoeffer describes two different ways that human beings exercise autonomy. They are either operating from the self in order to view the self or operating from the self to act in the world. This chapter will be dedicated to the former understanding of autonomy—cognitive autonomy.

As seen in chapter one, cognitive autonomy began with the Fall. In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer describes how human beings were once in unity within themselves, never looking at themselves but only hearing and doing the will of God. In the Fall, human beings fell into disunity, began viewing themselves according to their own knowledge of good and evil, and gained a conscience. They became trapped in this state. In practicing cognitive autonomy, human beings create a “self-made world.”¹ The self-made world is “emblematic of the human desire for self-orientated mastery and all-encompassing jurisdiction.”²

Actus Reflexus

Bonhoeffer begins his critique of cognitive autonomy in his second dissertation, *Act and Being*. In *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer critiques what he calls “post-Kantian German idealism.”³ He seeks to show the folly of post-Kantian German idealism’s attempt to bring the self back into unity through its own cognitive autonomy without the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer describes *actus reflexus* in *Act and Being* as

¹ DBWE 10: 120.

² Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 30.

³ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 30-31.

“I reflect on myself; I and myself move apart.”⁴ Jacob Phillips summarizes Bonhoeffer’s critique of post-Kantian idealism in Bonhoeffer’s lecture “The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology.”

In his inaugural lecture in Berlin, he criticizes philosophers for whom ‘the I becomes an object to itself by thinking its I,’ and in a lecture in New York he connects this with idealism, where ‘man knows himself immediately by the act of the coming of the ego to itself and knows through himself essentially everything’ for then ‘the ego stands in the center of the world’ which is created and ruled by it...[for the idealist philosophers] there is no ‘hiddenness’ of the subject, that they claim to fully grasp the subject in self-reflection and posit an ‘absolutely identity’ between subject and object, or ‘I or myself.’⁵

Bonhoeffer asks of post-Kantian idealism, “When I reflect on myself, which one is me, the I or myself? Is it a combination of the two as some sort of ‘absolute identity?’”

Bonhoeffer goes on to say that the forming of an absolute identity within the self is impossible. He says “there is a boundary to self-reflection... and so there is always a dimension of subjectivity preserved in ‘hiddenness from the reflecting I.’”⁶ According to Bonhoeffer there is no way for I and myself to form an ‘absolute identity’ because there is a boundary to self-reflection in my subjectivity. I can never look at myself objectively.

For example, I am currently writing this thesis. Six months ago, I was excited to write this thesis, confident that the concepts in my mind would travel seamlessly from my mind to this page. In self-reflection, I viewed myself as a good writer who was going to produce a clear thesis right away. Six months later, as I reflect now, I see myself as a remarkably ungifted writer who just might be in over his head. Which view of myself is

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 30.

⁶ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 30-31.

objective? Am I an average of the two? Or is my perception of myself in self-reflection greatly influenced by my responsibilities, deadlines, successes, and failures?

Regardless of how objective human beings try to be, practicing their cognitive autonomy in self-reflection will always result in disunity. Bonhoeffer says this is the result of the Fall. Self-reflection “is to see oneself ‘out of one’s own power and ‘out of the flesh.’”⁷

Human reason is “imprisoned in itself, it sees only itself, even when it sees another, even when it wants to see God’ (DBWE 2:45). To the extent that such reason does think and speak of ‘God’ it can only do so as an epiphenomenon of its own religious ambitions, as an idea firmly resident in and subservient to its own self-reflection (DBWE 2:44, 50, 51). Since, as Bonhoeffer explains, ‘Thinking is as little able as good works to deliver the *cor curvum in se* from itself’ (DBWE 2:80), the truth of God must come upon reason ‘from beyond’ and break in upon it in such a way that one is placed ‘into the truth by Christ in judgement and grace’ (DBWE 2:96).⁸

Human-logos vs Counter-logos

Bonhoeffer’s view of sin is that the self is curved into itself. Human beings are trapped within themselves. The only way out of this state is for the truth of God to break in from beyond. Bonhoeffer explains the truth of God breaking into human reason in a similar fashion to the mine illustration mentioned in chapter one. In his Christology lectures Bonhoeffer introduces the concept of human-logos and counter-logos. The human-logos “stands for those human systems of classification that provide a structure

⁷ DBWE 4: 150 in Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 4.

⁸ Philip Ziegler, “God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Philip Ziegler and Michael Mawson (London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), 140.

into which Christ is placed.”⁹ With the self curved into itself, the human mind no longer understands the world through God, as it did in the beginning.

Bonhoeffer’s description of cognitive autonomy as a self-made world is helpful. In understanding reality, the self-made world is a population of one. The self, and no one else, perceives reality and categorizes it as one would an in-home library. In my library at home there are many sections: fiction, nonfiction, sports, psychology, health, etc. There is even a Jesus / theology section. Bonhoeffer says the human-logos is like this. The human mind categorizes its understanding of everything, including Christ.

In revelation, the truth of God breaks in and Jesus—the counter-logos—walks into the self-made world. The human-logos looks to Christ the intruder, and asks “Who are you?”

In our everyday speech, the question, “Who are you?” does exist. But it can always be dissolved into the ‘how question.’ Tell me *how* you exist, tell me *how* you think, and I’ll tell you who you are. The ‘who question’ is the quintessential religious question. It is the question that asks about the other person, the other being, the other authority. It is the question about love for one’s neighbor. The question of transcendence, of existence, is the question about the neighbor; it is the question about [being] a person. That we are always asking the “how” question shows how we are chained to our own authority. It is the *cor curvum in se* (Luther).¹⁰

The human-logos normally perceives reality by the question of “How?” Once the human logos has the explanation, it can categorize this new information accordingly in the in-home library. However, the counter-logos has broken into a self-made world that has only ever been a population of one. Instead of asking “How did you get here?” the

⁹ David Robinson, *Christ and Revelatory Community in Bonhoeffer's Reception of Hegel* (Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 117.

¹⁰ DBWE 12: 303.

human-logos asks “Who are you?”¹¹ The counter-logos responds to this question: “I am the Christ and this world belongs to me.”

The human-logos has two responses to the counter-logos. First, the human-logos looks to the Christ and says “you cannot be the Christ, you do not correspond to the “Christ” section in my library. You do not fit into my category.” Bonhoeffer says this is what happened in many of Jesus’ encounters during his earthly ministry. The people’s human-logoi were encountered by the counter-logos and did not have a category for a Christ that looked like Jesus.¹² The second response from the human-logos is against the counter-logos’ claim on the human-logos’ self-made world. The self-made world isn’t big enough for the two of them. The human-logos clings desperately to its cognitive autonomy. The human-logos sees that its autonomy is being threatened from outside and kills the counter-logos.¹³

Human beings destroy the Who standing over against them. Who are you? People ask Jesus. Silence is his reply. Human beings cannot wait for the answer. They kill him. The [human] logos cannot bear the presence of the counter Logos, because it knows that one of them must die. So the human logos kills the Jesus Christ Logos who has appeared before it and challenged it, and goes on living with the unanswered question of existence and transcendence. But the counter Logos, which has risen from the dead, can no longer be killed by human beings. They either are not aware of him at all, or they are aware of him as the one who asks them, Who are you? Since Christ is the Son, the question of Christ, Who are you? has been answered.¹⁴

In light of this encounter, human beings are once again left with a decision. Will they surrender their self-made world—their cognitive autonomy?

The Hidden Disciple and Cognitive Simplicity

¹¹ Ibid., 304.

¹² Ibid., 305-306.

¹³ Ibid., 301.

¹⁴ Ibid., 306.

The challenge in this decision to surrender cognitive autonomy is that human beings cannot be self-reflective in considering their decisions. Bonhoeffer “claims that if one reflectively evaluates one’s practical options about how to follow Jesus, one is torn away: ‘the only required reflection for disciples is to be completely unreflective in obedience.’”¹⁵ In contrast to the self-reflection described as the *actus reflexus* in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer describes a different understanding of the cognitive life of human beings: the *actus directus*. In the *actus directus* “the subject ‘sees’ only that object and has no explicit awareness of him or herself.”¹⁶ Or, as Bonhoeffer puts it in *Act and Being*: “the eye does not see itself.”¹⁷

The actus reflexus differs from the *actus directus* in that the “straightforward directedness to the original object of the *actus directus* is lost, and the acting subject becomes ‘objectively conscious of itself in reflection’; the subject sees itself as ‘object,’ and ‘moves apart’ into two.”¹⁸ In the *actus reflexus* human beings stop looking out at the object (Christ) and start looking at the self in self-reflection. “To be ‘seeing only Christ’ and remaining ‘hidden’ from oneself means not beholding oneself as ‘object’ (a reflection).”¹⁹ For Bonhoeffer, “self-reflection is...self-centered, while for a disciple, Christ should always be in the center.”²⁰

Bonhoeffer describes the life of faith and obedience as the *actus directus*.²¹ “He states that ‘the only thing [required] for us is to look away from ourselves’ and ‘to look

¹⁵ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁷ DBWE 2: 46.

¹⁸ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ DBWE 12: 221, 226.

to' Jesus Christ, whose 'image' is 'always before the disciples eyes,' for in seeing only Christ, he says, 'I no longer cast even a single glance at my own life.'"²²

In Bonhoeffer's understanding of surrendering cognitive autonomy, the self is hidden from self-reflection and beholds only Christ. Bonhoeffer "asserts the...disciple must always be hidden from [themselves], because the drive to behold oneself is a drive for self-possession...to bring one's life under one's own jurisdiction through understanding and interpreting oneself."²³ He continually writes in *Discipleship*, "I no longer cast even a single glance on my own life."²⁴ The life of a disciple must therefore be hidden, we read, because 'in the same moment I would desire to see it, I would lose it.'"²⁵

Bonhoeffer believes the whole of the Christian life is one of cognitive simplicity. Simply looking to Christ and Christ alone. One cannot look at one's own life in self-reflection and Christ at the same time. Bonhoeffer writes "if I look at the path instead of at him who is walking ahead of me, then my foot is already slipping."²⁶

Jacob Phillips in his book *Human Subjectivity 'in Christ' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology* writes about the problem of living without self-reflection while still exercising discernment. "We must ask how sustainable or realistic it is to 'always', and 'only' see Christ; to maintain a complete focus of attention on Jesus so 'no longer cast[s] even a

²² Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴ DBWE 4: 280, 281, 287.

²⁵ DBWE 4: 287-288 in Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 29.

²⁶ DBWE 4: 176.

single glance on [one's] own life.' This seems jarring because self-reflection is a natural, unavoidable and intrinsic aspect of human life."²⁷

Phillips comes to the conclusion in his book that Bonhoeffer does provide for an avenue of self-reflection but only in the strictest sense. The disciple is only to view oneself "in Christ."

Whoever confesses the reality of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God confesses in the same breath the reality of God and the reality of the world, for they find God and the world reconciled in Christ. Just for this reason the Christian is no longer the person of eternal conflict. As reality is one in Christ, so the person who belongs to this Christ-reality is also a whole.²⁸

In viewing the self as hidden in Christ, justified, reconciled, and forgiven, the self can act in self-reflection while still in unity. "Even armed with glimpses of oneself 'in Christ'; one can still only say of one's self: 'I do not know the man.' That is, the self 'crowned with glory and honour.'"²⁹

If human beings are supposed to live and act in the world without self-reflection (apart from reflecting on themselves in Christ), how are they supposed to interpret the regular experience of the conscience that judges success or failure on the basis of their actions in the world? For example, I am a husband and father. I am committed to becoming a better husband and father. But how can I become a better husband and father without responding to my conscience in moments of success or failure and without viewing myself in self-reflection? How can I grow if I never check my blind spots?

²⁷ Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 6.

²⁸ DBWE 6: 62.

²⁹ DBWE 4: 86 in Phillips, *Human Subjectivity in Christ*, 19.

During Bonhoeffer's lifetime, a man named Hermann Rausching released a book entitled *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations With Adolf Hitler On His Real Aims*.³⁰ In the book a leader of the Nazi party named Hermann Göring was quoted saying "I have no conscience. My conscience is A.H. (Adolf Hitler)."³¹ This became a motto for the National Socialist movement in Germany. Nazis were told to act on orders and not have a conscience. Whenever they had reservations or guilt about the atrocious acts they performed, they were to allow Adolf Hitler to be their conscience.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer takes the Nazi's slogan regarding conscience and turns it on its head to provide a guide for reflecting on one's actions.

The great change takes place, as we now come to understand, the moment the unity of human existence no longer consists in its own autonomy, but, by the miracle of faith, is found in Jesus Christ, beyond one's own ego and its law. This relocation of the center of unity in fact has its formal analogy in the secular domain. When the N.S. (National Socialists) says, "my conscience is A.H. (Adolf Hitler)," then this is also the attempt to ground the unity of the ego beyond one's own self. The consequence is the surrender of the self's autonomy in favor of an unconditional heteronomy.³²

Bonhoeffer says that acting in faith no longer requires a conscience. As human beings perform the will of God, they need not look at themselves to judge their actions according to their knowledge of good and evil. They can allow Christ to be their judge. In allowing Christ to be their conscience and judge, human beings can finally live in unity with themselves.

Where Christ, true God and true human being, has become the unifying center of my existence, conscience in the formal sense still remains the call, coming from my true self, into unity with myself. However, this unity can now no longer be

³⁰ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks: A Series Of Political Conversations With Adolf Hitler On His Real Aims* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³² DBWE 6: 278.

realized by returning to my autonomy that lives out of the law, but instead in community with Jesus Christ. The natural conscience, even the most scrupulous, is now exposed as the most godless self-justification. It is overcome by the conscience that has been set free in Jesus Christ, calling me to unity with myself in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has become my conscience. This means that from now on I can only find unity with myself by surrendering my ego to God and others.³³

In response to my question about becoming a better parent and husband through self-reflection, according to Bonhoeffer, the way forward is to surrender my ego to God and others, depending on Christ moment by moment and allowing Christ to be my conscience and judge.

In summary, cognitive autonomy is being self-directed in one's own mind. In the Fall, human beings became trapped in being self-directed in their thoughts and in disunity with themselves. This resulted in human beings having a conscience, becoming self-reflective, and judging themselves by their newly acquired knowledge of good and evil.

Bonhoeffer critiques the folly of self-reflection in *Act and Being* through the *actus reflexus*, showing that the self is always a moving target. Without outside intervention, the self will always be in disunity, curved in on itself. In the description of the human-logos / counter-logos dialectic, Bonhoeffer shows how Christ breaks into the trapped human mind in revelation. In response to the breaking in of Christ, human beings respond by surrendering their cognitive autonomy.

Bonhoeffer describes practical surrendering of cognitive autonomy in *Act and Being* through the *actus directus*, where the self is hidden from the object that the mind beholds. He continues with examples of surrendered cognitive autonomy in both his

³³ DBWE 6: 278.

descriptions of the hidden disciple and the cognitive simplicity of beholding Christ in *Discipleship*.

Lastly, Bonhoeffer provides his readers with the illustration of Adolf Hitler being the conscience of the Nazis as an example for how believers should surrender their cognitive autonomy by allowing Christ to be their judge and conscience. In acting in this manner, human beings can finally reach unity with themselves in faith in allowing Christ to be their judge and justifier. Now that we have covered surrendering cognitive autonomy, we shall move to Bonhoeffer's understanding of surrendering practical autonomy.

Chapter Three

Surrendering Practical Autonomy

When reflecting on Bonhoeffer's life and teachings, people most often praise his courage and obedience to God in resisting the Nazi's, which ended with his execution in 1945. It is precisely these concepts of obedience to God and the lordship of Christ that are summed up by the understanding the surrendering of practical autonomy. Practical autonomy is being self-directed in one's actions.

As mentioned in chapter two, Bonhoeffer believes that exercising the knowledge of good and evil is an attempt to understand and critique the world apart from God. When it comes to ethical living, human beings must learn to live apart from their knowledge of good and evil. "The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge."¹ How does Bonhoeffer suppose that human beings supersede the knowledge of good and evil?

In his famous essay "Christ, Reality, and the Good," Bonhoeffer begins by writing:

Those who wish even to focus on the problem of a Christian ethic are faced with an outrageous demand—from the outset they must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: "How can I be good?" and "How can I do something good?" Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God?²

When it comes to ethical living in the world, Bonhoeffer writes that the essential question is not "What is the good?" but "What is the will of God?" It is in asking this question of

¹ DBWE 6: 299.

² Ibid., 47.

God that human beings return to their origin in practical life. Bonhoeffer calls this concept “hearing and doing.”³

Hearing and Doing in the New Testament

In Bonhoeffer’s essay “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World” he writes extensively on the concept of hearing and doing. Throughout the essay it becomes clear that, for Bonhoeffer, hearing and doing are not two separate events for Bonhoeffer. After writing extensively on James 1:22 – “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” – Bonhoeffer describes the antithesis of hearing and doing: the Pharisees.

The polemic of James against the hearer of the word exactly parallels Jesus’ polemic against the Pharisees. It is not as if the eager hearers of the word, of whom James is of course speaking here, were not doing many things, just as the Pharisees were certainly not lazy when it came to doing. But this doing is something secondary to hearing, something mediated through knowing. It is something independent that joins the hearing, which is already something in and of itself. It is merely pseudo-doing, self-deception, or, to use Jesus’ term, hypocrisy. It is self-deception because those who are engaged in pseudo-doing actually understand themselves as engaged in genuine doing, and thus have to reject emphatically the accusation of hypocrisy.⁴

For Bonhoeffer, the Pharisees continually seek God in the Old Testament, but they still insist on living from themselves as the origin. They hear the Word of God and instead of simply obeying, they stop and examine what they have heard and use their own knowledge of good and evil. In doing so, they replace the will of God and act out of their own will, deceiving themselves and believing that they are still acting according to the will of God. In contrast, Bonhoeffer writes:

³ Ibid., 329.

⁴ Ibid., 329.

The doers are those who literally do not know any other behavior toward the word of God that they have heard than doing it. They thus remain strictly focused on the word itself, and do not derive a knowledge from it that lets them become judges of their brothers and sisters, of themselves, and finally even of the word of God.⁵

Bonhoeffer goes on to show the relationship between hearing and doing in the story of Mary and Martha in his exposition of Luke 10.

Here Jesus unmistakably takes the side of the hearer over against the doer. Blessed is the doer in the deed, says James; blessed are those who hear the word of God and hold it fast, says Jesus. Both of them say the same thing. For just as hearing cannot be independent of [doing], so doing must not make itself independent of hearing. The blessedness of the doer encompasses hearing, just as the blessedness of the hearer encompasses doing. Only one thing is needed—not hearing or doing as two separate things, but both of them together, that is, being and remaining in unity with Jesus Christ, being focused on Christ, receiving word and deed from Christ. The one thing necessary is that neither hearing nor doing be used to accuse and judge one’s brother or sister, or even—like Martha—to accuse Jesus Christ, but instead, in one’s hearing and doing, leaving everything up to Jesus Christ, living from him, from his grace, from his gracious judgment which he will carry out in his own time. Calling the doer and the hearer blessed means calling those blessed who are freed from the disunion of their own knowledge of good and evil to be in unity with Jesus Christ. Neither doing as such, the busyness of Martha, nor hearing as such counts with Jesus. There is a pseudo-doing as well as a pseudo-hearing. Whether our hearing and doing is genuine or merely apparent we cannot ourselves discern; whether it is genuine will be decided precisely by whether we entrust this examining completely to the knowledge and judgment of Jesus.⁶

For Bonhoeffer, any attempt to analyze or judge the Word of God before acting is not only an attempt to live from our own origin, but it is also reenacting the event that led to the Fall. “There are two ways of reacting to this command from God: the unconditional blind obedience of action, or the hypocritical question of the Serpent: ‘Did God say?’”⁷

⁵ Ibid., 330.

⁶ Ibid., 330-331.

⁷ DBWE 4: 83.

Instead of questioning the will of God, Bonhoeffer advocates for blind obedience and the literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is evident that the only appropriate attitude of human beings toward God is doing God's will. The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to do it (see the ending of Matthew 7!). Only in doing does submission to the will of God happen. In doing the will of God, human beings completely relinquish any right of their own, any justification of their own; in doing, they humbly subject themselves to the gracious judge. Holy Scripture insists so emphatically on our doing because it intends to deprive us of any self-justification before God that is grounded in our own knowledge of good and evil. It seeks to prevent human beings' own deeds from being placed side by side with God's deed, even if as thanksgiving or as sacrifice. Instead, Holy Scripture puts human beings completely within God's doing, and subjects human doing completely to the doing of God.⁸

Concerns About Surrendering Autonomy

Important questions follow from Bonhoeffer's stances on autonomy after this reflection. Surrendering cognitive autonomy means the human being never directs his mind any place other than Christ, and where Christ directs it. Surrendering practical autonomy means the human being never acts in the world apart from the will of God. The important question in light of these two statements is this: Does Bonhoeffer believe that human beings have or should have agency? In other words, does Bonhoeffer see life before the Fall and the ideal life of faith as, essentially, holy robots? While Bonhoeffer did not address this question directly, the answer is most likely yes given the context clues that have been gathered throughout Bonhoeffer's corpus. In his second recorded sermon Bonhoeffer writes:

“You only notice force when you are forced to do something you don't want to do. You see, a horse that is trotting or walking like it is supposed to doesn't even notice the reins. But if it wants to run away suddenly, then it notices that it is held tight. It is the same way with people. If people do what they are forced to do

⁸ DBWE 6: 326-227.

willingly and well, then they don't feel the reins. We call that doing our duty. They notice the reins only when they fight against them.”⁹

Bonhoeffer uses the image of God as the center and the image of God as a boundary throughout his writings to further demonstrate this point.¹⁰ As an illustration to sum up Bonhoeffer's images of God as a boundary and God as the center, allow me to explain my current parenting situation. I am the father of identical twin two-year-old daughters. Though they look alike and share genetics, their personalities could not be more different. Any given week I will interact with one daughter as a boundary and as the center and the next week it will change to the other daughter. When I am my daughter's center, she will wake up asking about me. “Is Daddy at work? Can I wake him up?” Her whole existence is about me. For the other child, when I am her boundary, she only relates to me when she bumps up against a boundary from the inside, e.g. she needs food and cannot cook for herself, or from the outside, e.g. when she disobeys and has to interact with me through discipline. In other words, she feels the reins. According to Bonhoeffer, the goal of life should be to return God to the center of our lives and to relate to him as a boundary less and less, just as the horse who travels where he is supposed to go feels the reins less and less.

Another concern that easily arises from the insistence to surrender autonomy is whether or not one can know with certainty that they are obeying God. Years after *Discipleship* had been published, Bonhoeffer would reflect on the book in a letter to Eberhard Bethge. “Today I clearly see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by

⁹ DBWE 9: 457.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 453.

it.”¹¹ What are the dangers of *Discipleship*? The danger of *Discipleship* is the forceful tone throughout the book and the “presentation of human response to Christ as entirely unreflective.”¹²

What if, instead of actually obeying God, a human being was just following their own whims and wishes while deceiving themselves? Bonhoeffer experienced this continually through the Nazis. As a result of the Aryan Paragraph, “baptized Jews, being a different race altogether, could no longer serve in the German Protestant Church, whose identity was now rooted in ethnicity, or racial sameness, rather than in the confession of Christ as Lord.”¹³ As a result of their complicity, Hitler was able to “assimilate the twenty-eight independent Protestant Landeskirchen into a unified Reich Church.”¹⁴ The German Christians would do this “in a spirit of obedience to God!”¹⁵

The Nazis acted in a spirit of obedience to God. How can human beings tell if hearing and doing is coming from God and not from the self? Bonhoeffer provides a helpful phrase that summarizes God’s action in the world in Christ and what hearing and doing will look like: vicarious representative action.

Vicarious Representative Action

Vicarious representative action is “a pivotal concept in Bonhoeffer’s work from his first dissertation to his sermons, from his lifework *Ethics* (published posthumously) to

¹¹ DBWE 8, 486.

¹² Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 3.

¹³ Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group), 162-163.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

the letters and papers written in prison.”¹⁶ The term first appears in Bonhoeffer’s first dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* as a description of the responsible action of the Church.¹⁷ He describes vicarious representative action as “the voluntary assumption of evil in another person’s stead...an act of human heroic love (for one’s country, friend, etc.).”¹⁸ For Bonhoeffer, vicarious representative action is responsible action rooted in Jesus Christ.

[Jesus’s] entire life, action, and suffering is vicarious representative action. As the one who has become human he indeed stands in the place of all human beings. All that human beings were supposed to live, do, and suffer falls on him. In this real vicarious representative action in which his human existence consists, he is the responsible human being par excellence. All human responsibility is rooted in the real vicarious representative action of Jesus Christ on behalf of all human beings. Responsible action is vicarious representative action.¹⁹

It is in vicarious representative action that human beings act as God acts. Philip Ziegler labels God’s action in Bonhoeffer’s writings as “divine promise.”²⁰ Ziegler describes divine promise as “the essence of the God of the Christian Gospel: God *is* for us.”²¹ Bonhoeffer’s view of God is not that God is a person who happens to act for human beings, but that God, in his essence, is the God who acts for human beings. The call of vicarious representative action is to live lives mirroring this truth.

For Bonhoeffer, surrendering practical autonomy looks like vicarious representative action. However, he still holds the belief that “Christ is not a principle or program; Christ does not teach an abstract ethic. Rather, Christ was really and concretely

¹⁶ Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 107.

¹⁷ DBWE 1: 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁹ DBWE 6: 231-232.

²⁰ Ziegler, “God” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 140.

²¹ *Ibid.*

human, committed to serving the needs of real humans in specific situations.”²²

Bonhoeffer is against an ethics of principles.

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ. The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world. It is not as if “our world” were something outside this God-world reality that is in Christ, as if it did not already belong to the world borne, accepted, and reconciled in Christ; it is not, therefore, as if some “principle” must first be applied to our circumstances and our time. Rather, the question is how the reality in Christ—which has long embraced us and our world within itself—works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it.²³

The question following this understanding of vicarious representative action and Bonhoeffer’s stance on principled ethics is simple: how can someone be against an ethics of principles and still describe vicarious representative action (which seems like a principle) as responsible action? There is a scene in the movie *The Matrix* that illustrates Bonhoeffer’s concern with an ethics of principles. Early in the movie, the main character, Neo, is at work and receives a mysterious phone call from a man named Morpheus. Morpheus explains to Neo that the antagonists in the story are coming for him and that Neo must do exactly what he says or the antagonists will capture him. What follows is Neo performing the exact actions that Morpheus gives in order to escape the office, instructions like “lie down, stand up, go forward—turn left now, etc.” In this scene Neo is hearing and doing the will of Morpheus. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of principled ethics is Neo asking, “Can you just give me all of the directions now?” Bonhoeffer describes the

²² Haynes and Hale, *Armchair Theologians*, 114.

²³ DBWE 6, 55.

life of faith as “participating in the being of Jesus.”²⁴ God being God for us means that the goal of hearing and doing is not only the fulfillment of the will of God but also the moment by moment dependence of human beings on God. Principled ethics takes away any moment by moment dependence. Principled ethics is not hearing and doing.

How does vicarious representative action come into play in hearing and doing? Vicarious representative action is what hearing and doing looks like. For Bonhoeffer, this doesn’t negate the primary responsibility of hearing and doing but instead offers a boundary for action. If what human beings hear from God sounds opposed to vicarious representative action, they are not hearing from God.

Hearing and Doing in Action

Bonhoeffer provides a very practical example of this in his own life when he returned to Nazi Germany in 1939.²⁵ Bonhoeffer had been required to offer his place of residence for the Military Registration Record and was given a one-year deferment as a result of his father’s intervention. It was during this time that he decided to return to America to a rather cushy situation. He was offered a salary and a teaching position at Union Seminary. He would be able to escape the perils of Nazi Germany. Shortly after his arrival in New York, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his friend Reinhold Niebuhr which stated:

Sitting here in Dr. Coffin’s garden I have had the time to think and to pray about my situation and that of my nation and to have God’s will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that 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

²⁴ DBWE 8, 501.

²⁵ Haynes and Hale, *Armchair Theologians*, 51.

life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.²⁶

Bonhoeffer, when praying and asking for the will of God, in order that he can hear and do, comes to the conclusion that he must return to Germany. What is his explanation for knowing this is the right decision? Bonhoeffer believes that he must share in the trials of his people and he acts accordingly. This hearing and doing for him was vicarious representative action. Years later, Bonhoeffer would end up in prison, ultimately waiting for his execution. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge while in prison, Bonhoeffer reflects on his decision to return to Germany.

Yesterday I heard someone say that these last years have been lost years for him. I'm glad I have never for one moment had that feeling; I've never even regretted my decision in the summer of '39. Instead, I am wholly under the impression that my life—strange as it may sound—has gone in a straight line, uninterrupted, at least with regard to how I've led it. It has been a continually enriching experience for which I can only be grateful. If my present situation were to be the conclusion of my life, that would have a meaning that I believe I could understand.²⁷

This brings us to our final question about Bonhoeffer and surrendering practical autonomy. How did Bonhoeffer, a pacifist committed to taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously, decide to participate in the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler? “During the *Kirchenkampf* of the previous decade, Bishop Theodor Heckel, head of the Reich Church's external relations, had denounced him as “a pacifist and enemy of the state.”²⁸ Was this a change of heart for Bonhoeffer? According to Charles Marsh, “Bonhoeffer moved within an inescapable paradox; he gave his blessings to those who conspired to

²⁶ DBWE 15, Kindle Location 5901.

²⁷ DBWE 8: 352.

²⁸ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 345.

murder the Führer while affirming the essential nonviolence of the gospel.”²⁹ Bonhoeffer had become convinced that to allow the atrocities of the Nazi regime to continue without action was to sin. He also knew that conspiring to commit tyrannicide was to sin. “And so sin—whether through action or inaction—was a certainty.”³⁰

This is where his understanding of the forgiveness of Christ and his Lutheran roots factored into his decision. In believing that all of his sins had been completely forgiven, and that he did not have the ability to make a decision that was not sinful, Bonhoeffer heeded Luther’s advice to “sin and sin boldly,” and he did so on the basis of vicarious representative action. As Marsh writes, “Bonhoeffer did not try to resolve the paradox by assuming moral innocence but accepted the paradox by incurring the guilt born out of responsible action.”³¹

Summary

As we have seen in this chapter, Bonhoeffer advocated for surrendering practical autonomy in a return to hearing and doing the will of God. Bonhoeffer describes hearing and doing as one action, not two, as demonstrated in his exposition of various New Testament passages. Any attempt to make hearing and doing two actions poses the risk that human beings will judge the will of God and continue to live out of their own autonomy. This led us to examine a few troubling questions that arise from Bonhoeffer’s description of surrendering autonomy.

Bonhoeffer appears to reject human agency and to affirm the surrender of any agency that human beings do have. However, his concept of “vicarious representative

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 346.

³¹ Ibid.

action” offers a guiding criterion by which human beings may discern whether or not they are hearing and doing the will of God. And as we have seen, Bonhoeffer himself used this criterion to discern the will of God when he returned to Nazi Germany to participate in the conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

In the next chapter I will address the question of the consistency of the theme of surrendering autonomy in Bonhoeffer’s works. Bonhoeffer’s prison writings have been accused of diverging from the rest of Bonhoeffer’s corpus. In light of the preceding three chapters, we will be able to discern the precise connection between Bonhoeffer’s understanding of autonomy and his description of “the world come of age” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Chapter Four

Autonomy in the World Come of Age

Throughout the history of Bonhoeffer interpretation, scholars have been divided about the consistency of his works. His closest confidant, Eberhard Bethge, saw the entire period of 1933-1939 as an “unfruitful detour.”¹ This time period includes the works of *Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and Volumes 12-15 in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer works. In 1961, Hanfried Müller also applied this term to *Life Together*.² Meanwhile, evangelicals through the years have seen *Letters and Papers from Prison* as a theological departure from the rest of Bonhoeffer’s works.³

As seen in the previous chapters, the central theme in Bonhoeffer’s work is human beings surrendering their autonomy in obedience to the will of God. With a thorough understanding of how Bonhoeffer uses this concept of autonomy, we were able to show that Bonhoeffer’s work from 1918 to 1939 has a consistent central theme. In this chapter we will look at the “problem texts” of Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* to discern if and how his teaching about autonomy fits into his writings from Tegel Prison, where he was imprisoned from 1943 to 1945.

The World Come of Age

¹ Eberhard Bethge, “The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life and Theology,” in Ronald Gregor Smith (ed.), *The World Comes of Age: A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1967), 44, 64-65 in Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 2.

² Hanfried Müller, *Von der Kirche zur Welt*, (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Reich, 1961) in Phillips, *Human Subjectivity*, 2.

³ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Battle for Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 25.

In June of 1944, Bonhoeffer first uses the term “world come of age” in a letter to Eberhard Bethge.⁴ Bonhoeffer describes the world come of age as God being “increasingly pushed out of [the] world.”⁵ He goes on to describe how the world’s coming of age has happened in his letter. “On the one hand, theology has resisted this development with apologetics and taken up arms—in vain—against Darwinism and so on; on the other hand, it has resigned itself to the way things have gone and allowed God to function only as *deus ex machina*.⁶ Bonhoeffer writes that God has been a *deus ex machina*, which means “the God from the machine.”⁷ A *deus ex machina* is “a figure [in the ancient theater] who could be made to appear ‘suddenly’ with the help of a mechanical device and to solve problems supernaturally.”⁸

According to Bonhoeffer, “following the Renaissance and the Enlightenment” the world began an unprecedented process of inquiry.⁹ In doing so, God was still a relevant topic, but little by little God became the “stop-gap” for knowledge.¹⁰ He became a *deus ex machina*, called upon only when human beings were out of answers to life’s questions. For the sake of analogy, let’s say that human beings knew around 20% of all things they could know at the time of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Questions like “How do plants grow?” were answered with “God makes them grow.” God, the *deus ex machina*, was the stop-gap for knowledge when human beings didn’t have the answers.

⁴ DBWE 8: 424.

⁵ Ibid., 450.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 367.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 405.

How does this relate to autonomy? “Bonhoeffer uses “autonomy” or “autonomous” in his early writings primarily to indicate a historical era... or as a criterion of theological self-distinction.”¹¹ Bonhoeffer describes this process of inquiry since the Renaissance and Enlightenment as “the movement toward human autonomy.”¹² He summarizes this movement as follows:

[The] discovery of the laws by which the world lives and manages its affairs in science, in society and government, in art, ethics, and religion), which began around the thirteenth century (I don’t want to get involved in disputing exactly when), has reached a certain completeness in our age. Human beings have learned to manage all important issues by themselves, without recourse to ‘Working hypothesis: God.’¹³

In a subsequent letter to Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer provides a timeline for this development and describes its ultimate goal.

Historically there is just one major development leading to the world’s autonomy. In theology it was Lord Herbert of Cherbury who first asserted that reason is sufficient for religious understanding. In moral philosophy Montaigne and Bodin substitute rules for life for the commandments. In political philosophy Macchiavelli separates politics from general morality and founds the doctrine of reason of state. Later H. Grotius, very different from Macchiavelli in content, but following the same trend toward the autonomy of human society, sets up his natural law as an international law, which is valid *etsi deus non daretur*, “as if there were no God.” Finally, the philosophical closing line: on one hand, the deism of Descartes: the world is a mechanism that keeps running by itself without God’s intervention; on the other hand, Spinoza’s pantheism: God is nature. Kant is basically a deist; Fichte and Hegel are pantheists. In every case the autonomy of human beings and the world is the goal of thought.¹⁴

Since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Bonhoeffer believes the goal of thought has been human autonomy, human self-direction, and in the world come of age, this goal

¹¹ Ibid., 484.

¹² Ibid., 425-426.

¹³ Ibid., 426.

¹⁴ Ibid., 476-477.

“has come to fruition.”¹⁵ Human beings no longer know only 20% of everything and call upon God as the *deus ex machina* for the remaining 80%. Human beings now know 80% of everything and instead of calling on God for the remaining 20%, they maintain confidence that they will eventually get to 100%. If they have come from 20% to 80% in less than a millennium, surely it is inevitable that the gap between 80% and 100% will close. The world come of age believes that there is no longer need for God as a *deus ex machina*. The God who was once a stop-gap for knowledge is no longer needed at all.

For Bonhoeffer, the way forward is not to put God back into the minds of human beings as an answer to any remaining questions. Recreating a society where God is *deus ex machina* again is “pointless.”¹⁶ Attempting to undo the world come of age is “like trying to put a person who has become an adult back into puberty, that is, to make people dependent on a lot of things on which they in fact no longer depend, to shove them into problems that in fact are no longer problems for them.”¹⁷

We should find God in what we know, not in what we don't know; God wants to be grasped by us not in unsolved questions but in those that have been solved. This is true of the relation between God and scientific knowledge, but it is also true of the universal human questions about death, suffering, and guilt. Today, even for these questions, there are human answers that can completely disregard God. Human beings cope with these questions practically without God and have done so throughout the ages, and it is simply not true that only Christianity would have a solution to them. As for the idea of a “solution,” we would have to say that the Christian answers are just as unconvincing (or just as convincing) as other possible solutions. Here too, God is not a stopgap. We must recognize God not only where we reach the limits of our possibilities. God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God is the center of life and doesn't just “turn up” when we have unsolved problems to be solved.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶ Ibid., 427.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 406-407.

Here again we see Bonhoeffer advocating for God being at the center of life. According to Lori Brandt Hale, Bonhoeffer's understanding of God at the center of life does three things: "it discloses the problematic understanding of God as a stopgap...it exposes the extent to which the world has "come of age," and it shows how the revelation of God in Jesus Christ opens the way to compassionate action in the world on behalf of others."¹⁹

Religionless Christianity

The dawning of a world come of age leads Bonhoeffer down a train of thought that is often perceived as a retreat from his previous writings. That conclusion is inaccurate. As we shall see, envisioning the world come of age as the world celebrating and embracing autonomy is consistent with the rest of Bonhoeffer's writings.

Bonhoeffer sees the world come of age as the beginning of a religionless age:

We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" aren't really practicing that at all; they presumably mean something quite different by "religious." But our entire nineteen hundred years of Christian preaching and theology are built on the "religious a priori" in human beings.²⁰

For Bonhoeffer, religion has been "a priori" for the past nineteen hundred years. It has been a given that human beings were religious. In evaluating the world come of age, Bonhoeffer draws the conclusion that this is no longer the case. In thinking that a completely religionless period of history is imminent, Bonhoeffer begins asking questions about what this would mean for Christianity. "What does a church, a

¹⁹ Haynes and Hale, *Armchair Theologians*, 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

congregation, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life, mean in a religionless world?”²¹ What will it look like to practice Christianity when society is no longer religious? The concrete form of Christian faith in society has always looked like a physical church congregation going through several biblical actions such as preaching, taking of Lord’s Supper, etc. What would happen to the Christian church if this is no longer an option? If these concrete forms are just religious understandings of Christianity and are only temporary, what does it mean to live in a society without this religious understanding?

[Our] coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us.²²

According to Bonhoeffer, specific concrete Christian activities will disappear in the world coming of age. Thus, Bonhoeffer is forced to think further about the very meaning of Christian faith. If faith is “participation in the being of Jesus,” what would this mean in a world come of age?

One only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself— whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader (a so-called priestly figure!), a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person—then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world.²³

²¹ Ibid., 364.

²² Ibid., 479.

²³ Ibid., 486.

Thus, while Bonhoeffer's analysis of the world come of age and religionless Christianity caused him to reevaluate the essence of the Christian life, he nevertheless continued to affirm the crucial necessity of renunciation or surrender of the self. Now, rather than tying this concept to the specific religious forms that Christianity has taken in society, he envisions the life of faith as a surrender of autonomy in everyday life, regardless of the present circumstances and reception of the Christian message.

Summary

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings have been accused by several scholars of being inconsistent in their message. Reading Bonhoeffer's works through the theme of surrendering autonomy demonstrates the internal consistency of his thought.

Bonhoeffer's work up until his prison writings have consistently highlighted the life of faith and the biblical narrative as a call to human beings to surrender their autonomy in obedience to the will of God, and he continued to affirm this theme in his late writings.

In his prison writings, Bonhoeffer argued that the world is now abandoning its long-held religious roots and is forsaking God. Bonhoeffer indicates that this development in history began in the Enlightenment, which always had autonomy as its goal. Now that this goal has been achieved, Bonhoeffer asks what the Christian life will look like in a world that no longer acknowledges religion? He doesn't encourage the embrace of autonomy. Instead, the world's loss of religion leads him to a clearer picture of the form of surrendering autonomy in practical life. With or without the local church, sermons, and congregations, faith will continue to mean participating in the being of Jesus and surrendering autonomy to the will of God. Now that we have demonstrated how surrendering autonomy showcases the consistency of Bonhoeffer's message, we will

now turn to a chapter on the crux of Bonhoeffer's practical theology: hearing and doing in a world come of age.

Chapter Five

Bonhoeffer's Practical Theology

As we have seen, Bonhoeffer believed that human beings should surrender their autonomy and return to hearing and doing the will of God – that is, to “hearing and doing” as it was before the Fall. If practical life for human beings is to hear and do, then it follows that Bonhoeffer’s practical theology is simply “doing” what one “hears” from God. The obvious question for human beings then is how we hear from God so that we can do his will and live according to this vision of life. What are the concrete actions that human beings can take to hear from God? How does God speak? This chapter will describe the various ways that Bonhoeffer thinks human beings can hear from God. Bonhoeffer provides several concrete options for hearing from God in his sermons, writings, and in his life. In each of these contexts, he includes a description of how a particular action relates to autonomy.

First, in order to understand hearing and doing properly, Bonhoeffer describes that the message that believers hear is not just a list of to-dos.

The word of the church is the word of the present Christ; it is gospel and commandment. It is not one thing alone, and it can be understood as the one only when it is also understood as the other. The church would revert back to the synagogue if its proclamation were only command; it would be a falling away of the church into Enthusiasm if it were to deny the command of God for the sake of the gospel.¹

For Bonhoeffer, the gospel and the commandment are always heard together. God’s message is never one or the other. God is for human beings. God became a human being in Christ and died on the cross and reconciled the world to himself. Therefore, human

¹ DBWE 11:359.

beings should surrender their autonomy and obey the concrete commandments of God. As we look further into Bonhoeffer's practical theology, he could not be clearer that the message of the gospel must be coupled with the concrete commandments of God or else human beings are not "hearing" and therefore not "doing." Here, Bonhoeffer offers a principle to "hearing" - the gospel must be coupled with concrete commandments. How does this claim about commandments differ from Bonhoeffer's view of an ethics of principles? In examining Bonhoeffer's practical theology, we find that Bonhoeffer is principled about *the form* and *the location* in which hearing takes place. Its form is always the gospel and the commandment. Bonhoeffer offers several locations as to where we can hear the will of God, which will be discussed below. Though the format and location are principled, this does not come into conflict with Bonhoeffer's view of an ethics of principles in that the content of the concrete commandments are not based on principles, but on hearing directly from God.

Along with his understanding of the gospel, we must also remember Bonhoeffer's understanding of God's freedom. While he thinks there are concrete ways to "hear from God," Bonhoeffer is against the idea that human beings can control God through their actions. "God is always the One who is to come; that is God's transcendence. One can only have God by expecting God."² The God who is for human beings will not be controlled by human beings. As such, human beings are to perform concrete actions in ways that God has revealed and hope that they hear from him. God alone is the Lord. God can speak of himself whenever he wishes. However, God's loving-kindness

² Ibid., 230.

encounters us in earthly forms, and that is where he is to be found. That is God's revelation in Christ and in his church.³

Scripture

Bonhoeffer provides several concrete options for hearing from God in his writings. In all the avenues that Bonhoeffer provides, he also includes a description of how each action relates to autonomy. The first action that Bonhoeffer suggests for hearing the will of God is reading Scripture. In a catechism created for the seminary that Bonhoeffer led at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer provides a question and answer format for his understanding of Scripture.

“Why then do we need the Holy Scriptures for sermons, for every worship service, and for daily reading and prayer? a. It is God's own word and will. b. Only thus can we be sure we are not just thinking up something ourselves.”⁴

Here again, Bonhoeffer seems concerned with humans acting as our own starting point. In a description of why humans need Scripture, Bonhoeffer claims that we need it because it is where we hear the will of God. Hearing the will of God in Scripture, we are assured that we are not acting out of our own autonomy. In an address at the International Youth Conference for the World Alliance of Churches in Gland, Switzerland in 1932, Bonhoeffer spoke candidly about this topic.

This is how Christ encounters us at such conferences, in that brethren encounter one another in all openness and truthfulness and need and ask to be heard by the others. Not as the community of those who know but rather as the community of those who are looking for the words of their Lord and look everywhere to see whether they might hear it, not as the knowledgeable, but as those who are seeking; we are here as the starving ones, the waiting ones, as the needy, the hopeful, and so are we bound together. We encounter Christ in the brother, the

³ Ibid., 260.

⁴ DBWE 14:655.

German in the Englishman, the Frenchman in the German. And should a few among us now have to say honestly: we have heard nothing, and should others perhaps just as honestly have to say: we have heard infinitely much—so let me express over against both groups a great apprehension that has forced itself upon me during the entire conference, with increasing gravity: has it not become terribly clear, again and again, in all that we have discussed with one another here, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We prefer our own thoughts to those of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously. We read it no longer against ourselves but only for ourselves. If this entire conference is to have had a great meaning, it would perhaps be to show us that we must read the Bible in an entirely different way by the time we meet again.⁵

Once again Bonhoeffer describes reading Scripture as an act against autonomy (reading the Bible against ourselves). In the reading of Scripture, humans are not just confronted with a list of commandments, but with the words of the living God. Thus, in reading Scripture, human beings are not just met with static commandments but by the dynamic life of relating to God and hearing his concrete will. Bonhoeffer describes how believers encounter the commandment of God when reading Scripture.

The knowledge of the commandment of God is an act of the revelation of God. Where does the church hear this revelation? The biblical law, the Sermon on the Mount is the absolute norm for our actions. We must simply take the Sermon on the Mount seriously and realize it. That is our obedience toward the divine commandment. Over against this, it must be said: even the Sermon on the Mount may not become a literal law for us. In its commandments it is the illustration of that which God's commandment can be, but not exactly what it is today and especially for us. No one can hear this except we ourselves, and God himself must say it to us. The commandment is not there once and for all; rather it must be always given anew. Thus alone are we free from the law that stands between us and God, and thus do we listen to God alone.⁶

Preaching

⁵ DBWE 11:377-378.

⁶ DBWE 11: 362.

The second action through which Bonhoeffer suggests that humans can hear the will of God is in preaching. Bonhoeffer has a very high view of preaching. He writes, “The struggle here is no less decisive than that of the war; it is a fight between God and the devil; the pulpit is the strangest place in the world.”⁷ He goes on to acknowledge that the proclamation of Scripture through preaching in the church is absolutely done through humans.

But it should come to the speaking of God. I am to speak, yet it is not I, but God—I have to confess that I am not capable of it. Thus I can do nothing but speak about God, in the knowledge that it is God who must speak; I can only wait and pray for this.[305] Talking about God is a different thing from speaking from God. [These are] two different spheres. Our preaching may be boring, or may not be; what happens in church is what has to happen there; otherwise nothing happens in church. It is God who must speak on Sundays at ten o’clock if anything is to happen at all, [no matter] whether the sermon is stupid or wise. My words [are] like the spokes of a wheel; the hole in the middle stays empty. Where God comes, human beings know that terrifying things happen. It is so easy for our words to cover up God’s word.⁸

In providing instructions for how to prepare a sermon, Bonhoeffer writes that the main goal should be to make listeners “face the situation of faith or not listening. [One] must make [the] expression so concrete that the listener has to decide...[We] place individuals before [the] decision. [The] pastor as the voice of the church should speak concretely of the will of God!”⁹

Bonhoeffer believes that when preaching occurs in the church community, hearers begin to hear concretely. “[The] commandment [becomes] concrete through the one who proclaims it.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 227.

⁸ Ibid., 227-228.

⁹ Ibid., 339.

¹⁰ Ibid., 340.

Bonhoeffer demonstrates this time and time again in his sermons recorded in the *DBWE*. For example, Bonhoeffer gave a sermon in October 1931 on Psalm 63:3. The text reads, “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.” In his sermon, Bonhoeffer describes the life of the psalmist: “Once, in the life of our psalmist, something crucial had happened. God himself had stepped into his life.”¹¹ When God stepped into the life of the psalmist, the psalmist’s life was “ripped open.”¹² He realizes that his life cannot be his own anymore. He must lose it. He realizes “the more he loses, the harder and more greedily he tries to hold on to whatever he still has, but the tighter he holds on to these possessions, the harder God must strike at him and the greater the pain when they are torn away.”¹³ The psalmist is continually at war with himself and with God about the decision to surrender his autonomy and give his life to God.

God speaks: If you want my mercy, let me triumph over you. If you want my life, let me hate and destroy your evil. If you want my loving-kindness, let me take your life. And now his life is at stake. Everything has been given away; the human being has been able to keep only one thing. And he wants to hold on to it, his life. But God cannot halt the battle; he attacks this last fortification. And the battle rages for all that is left. The human being defends himself like a madman. God cannot want that. He cannot want to take the only thing I have left. God is not cruel. God is kind. And he is given the answer: If you want my loving-kindness, give me the last thing you have, your life. Choose!¹⁴

Bonhoeffer described preaching as an opportunity for hearers to be confronted by God. He demonstrates this through his preaching in multiple ways. First, he demonstrates that the psalmist hears from God and has to surrender his autonomy. Second, Bonhoeffer demonstrates a hermeneutic of surrendering autonomy through his biblical interpretation

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 402.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 403.

as he expounds the text. Third, his directing of the meaning of the text to his hearers is a provocation to surrender autonomy. In other words, the psalmist sees his situation as one of surrendering autonomy, Bonhoeffer sees the psalmist situation as one of surrendering autonomy (Choose!), and in light of both of these truths, Bonhoeffer directs the question towards his audience. “We still have responsibility, and again and again God asks us anew: What is my love worth to you? But the more deeply we recognize what God’s loving-kindness is, the more filled with life our answer will be.”¹⁵

Prayer

Bonhoeffer writes about prayer throughout his corpus, but his most thorough examination of prayer is found in *Life Together*. As Bonhoeffer was training students in the Finkenwalde seminary, he instilled in them a regular discipline of prayer, worship, and Scripture reading. In his explanation to his students about the nature of prayer, Bonhoeffer writes:

First, we learn here what prayer means: it means praying on the basis of the Word of God, on the basis of promises. Christian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word and has nothing to do with vague, self-seeking desires. We pray on the basis of the prayer of the truly human Jesus Christ. This is what the Scripture means when it says that the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us, that Christ prays for us, that we can pray to God in the right way only in the name of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of prayer is thoroughly rooted in Scripture. He teaches his students that the Psalms teach human beings how to pray. In repeating the words of Scripture in community with other believers, human beings both learn how to pray and what to pray through the Scriptures.

¹⁵ Ibid., 407-408.

¹⁶ DBWE 5:55-56.

In the repetition of the same subject, which is heightened in Psalm 119 to such a degree that it seems it does not want to end and becomes so simple that it is virtually impervious to our exegetical analysis, is there not the suggestion that every word of prayer must penetrate to a depth of the heart which can be reached only by unceasing repetition? And in the end not even in that way! Is that not an indication that prayer is not a matter of a unique pouring out of the human heart in need or joy, but an unbroken, indeed continuous, process of learning, appropriating and impressing God's will in Jesus Christ on the mind?¹⁷

For Bonhoeffer, prayer impresses the will of God on the mind. His understanding of prayer is also consistent with the rest of his work in that it is an ongoing participation in Christ through hearing and doing the will of God.

The Other

While Bonhoeffer writes about the global Church throughout his works, his primary focus is the church-community—the local church. For Bonhoeffer, this is where all of the possibilities of hearing from God in order to do the will of God come together. In community, the church prays together, reads Scripture together, and listens to preaching together. The final way that Bonhoeffer says human beings can hear from God also occurs in the church-community: the other.

[Christians] are directed outward to the Word coming to them. Christians live entirely by the truth of God's Word in Jesus Christ. If they are asked "where is your salvation, your blessedness, your righteousness?," they can never point to themselves. Instead, they point to the Word of God in Jesus Christ that grants them salvation, blessedness, and righteousness. They watch for this Word wherever they can. Because they daily hunger and thirst for righteousness, they long for the redeeming Word again and again. It can only come from the outside. Themselves they are destitute and dead. Help must come from the outside; and it has come and comes daily and anew in the Word of Jesus Christ, bringing us redemption, righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. But God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others. When people are deeply affected by the Word, they tell it to other people. God has willed that we should seek and find God's living Word in the testimony of

¹⁷ Ibid., 57-59.

other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God's Word to them.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer sees most of these options as available on an individual basis. He has an entire section in *Life Together* entitled "The Day Alone," which covers the life of a Christian during the day by themselves. During such a day Christians still seek to hear from God through Scripture and prayer. It is in the communal gathering of the saints where Bonhoeffer says all four possibilities of hearing from God come together. In the church-community human beings can hear from God through Scripture, preaching, prayer, and through the Word of God spoken by others.

Summary

The central theme in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work is human beings surrendering their autonomy in obedience to the will of God. In the beginning, human beings did not have autonomy. There was only hearing and doing the will of God. After the Fall, human beings in Adam gained autonomy but lost the ability to hear and do the will of God. In Christ, God has reconciled the world, making it possible for human beings to return to hearing and doing the will of God. Bonhoeffer details four possibilities for hearing the will of God: reading Scripture, prayer, preaching, and hearing the Word of God from the other. Now that we have covered the possible avenues of hearing from God in order to do the will of God, we will cover the strengths and weaknesses of Bonhoeffer's view of autonomy that has been discussed in the previous chapters.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

Chapter Six

An Analysis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's View of Autonomy

Since I have demonstrated the centrality of surrendering autonomy in Bonhoeffer's work, it is only appropriate to provide an analysis of Bonhoeffer's position. The interesting thing about researching Bonhoeffer's thought posthumously from the abundance of his writings is that we often have enough evidence to harbor guesses as to how Bonhoeffer might respond to the questions he left unanswered. However, such speculation must be based on Bonhoeffer's own words. In this chapter, I will analyze Bonhoeffer's teaching on a few important topics as they relate to the theme of surrendering autonomy, noting strengths, weaknesses, and further questions for each topic.

Autonomy in History

As demonstrated in chapter four, Bonhoeffer believes that ever since the Enlightenment, the world has been on a one-way train towards autonomy. With the birth of modernity, it is clear that human beings began to depend on their own rationality in a way that had never happened before in human history. A key strength of Bonhoeffer's view on autonomy is how present the pursuit of autonomy is throughout human history. History bears this out. Year after year, nation after nation, person after person, pursues autonomy. History tends to applaud heroes who appear to go against the grain and act on behalf of others. However, these individuals are clearly the exception rather than the rule.

What's surprising about Bonhoeffer's July 1944 letter to Eberhard Bethge is that he starts the timeline for autonomy being "the goal of thought" with the birth of

modernity.¹ In *Creation and Fall, Ethics*, and countless sermons, Bonhoeffer teaches that autonomy began at the Fall in Genesis 3 and continues throughout the story of Scripture. This means that a weakness of Bonhoeffer's view would be the inconsistency of where the human pursuit of autonomy began. This is likely due to time constraints and the focus of his writing. A clear follow up question for Bonhoeffer would be how the Enlightenment made the pursuit of autonomy distinct from the autonomy that started with the Fall in Scripture. In other words, why did Bonhoeffer start his timeline for autonomy in the Enlightenment, when he had clearly written about autonomy post-Fall elsewhere?

Autonomy in the Mind

Bonhoeffer's view of cognition is especially controversial. Bonhoeffer is thoroughly Lutheran. As such, like Luther, he often speaks in binaries. He advocates for completely surrendering autonomy. He often refers to surrendering autonomy as self-denial. "Self-denial means knowing only Christ, no longer knowing oneself. It means no longer seeing oneself, only him who is going ahead, no longer seeing the way which is too difficult for us. Self-denial says only: he is going ahead; hold fast to him."² The clear weakness of Bonhoeffer's view of autonomy is how impossible surrendering cognitive autonomy seems in practical life. It is clear that this occurs throughout Scripture as human beings are converted to Christianity. They surrender their lives. Practically, they say "I am no longer going to look at myself or act in the world according to my own will, but according to God's." But while this is clearly the commitment of faith, the day to day practice of living this commitment experientially is more often failure than success.

¹ DBWE 8:595.

² DBWE 4:86.

If autonomy is using the self as the origin and starting point for life, how is it possible to practice originality and creativity in life? How did Bonhoeffer write a book about no longer looking at himself and only looking to Christ without ever stopping to ask, “What is the point I am trying to make? How should I organize this chapter?” Bonhoeffer’s absolute statements seem to leave little room for the free thinking that would be needed to write such a book.

A possible answer to this would be Bonhoeffer’s insistence that human beings view themselves in Christ, though even here, Bonhoeffer tends to only speak of viewing oneself with the positive benefits of being in Christ, such as being reconciled and redeemed. However, several passages in the Bible include a command of self-examination in light of sinfulness. “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5). If we are using Bonhoeffer’s terms here, it appears that the apostle Paul is advising *actus reflexus* (self reflection) instead of *actus directus* before participating in Communion. How can one be convicted of sin, without looking inwardly?

1 John also appears to encourage believers to examine themselves. John writes an entire letter to provide assurance of salvation and continually provides evidence of whether or not someone is in the truth. The epistle reads like a checklist for believers to walk through to seek comfort and assurance that they may know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). This also seems to contradict Bonhoeffer’s view of surrendering cognitive autonomy.

Bonhoeffer's position on cognitive autonomy does have strengths. Though autonomy does not seem possible to practice continually, the practice in general of looking to Christ instead of the self can be helpful for human beings trapped in introspection. I often wonder what Bonhoeffer would think of the rise of mental illness in society and its relation to cognitive autonomy. Bonhoeffer wrote briefly in *Ethics* on the topic of "self-murder" or suicide. He writes, "hatred of the imperfections of one's own life, the experience of the contrariness of earthly life in general to being fulfilled by God, and the resulting sorrow and doubt about any meaning in life at all—these can lead to dangerous hours."³ Here Bonhoeffer relates mental illness to self-reflection and judging oneself continually according to one's own knowledge of good and evil.

One does not have faith that God can give even a failed life meaning and make it right again, in fact that a life may come to its real fulfillment precisely through failure. Therefore making an end of life remains the final human possibility for giving one's life meaning and making it right again, even though this happens in the moment of its annihilation.⁴

It seems that Bonhoeffer is saying that suicide is the final result of a human's mind seeking to find unity within itself. He suggests that the way out is not to continue to look inward, but to look outward to Christ. "The temptation to self-murder cannot be resisted by the right to life, but by the grace that one may continue living under God's forgiveness. And who would say that under this most severe temptation the grace of God cannot embrace and bear even failure?"⁵ While a full analysis of Bonhoeffer's theology of autonomy in relation to mental health is beyond the scope of this thesis, surrendering

³ DBWE 6: 202.

⁴ DBWE 6: 202.

⁵ DBWE 6: 203.

cognitive autonomy to escape continual introspection certainly seems to provide mental health benefits.

Autonomy in Ethical Living

Bonhoeffer's perception of ethical living is hearing and doing the will of God with vicarious representative action as a guide for understanding the will of God.

Bonhoeffer writes,

“Obedience to Jesus' call is never an autonomous human deed. Thus, not even something like actually giving away one's wealth is the obedience required. It could be that such a step would not be obedience to Jesus at all, but instead, a free choice of one's own lifestyle.”⁶ Bonhoeffer could not be clearer. Human beings committed to ethical living are committed to follow what Jesus says and not what they think he would say.

One clear strength of Bonhoeffer's understanding of surrendering autonomy for ethical living is moment by moment dependence on God. He provides several avenues for hearing the will of God as discussed in chapter 5. With a plethora of options available, and the insistence on hearing and doing, Bonhoeffer has created a roadmap for the Christian life that both provides the impetus to stay connected to God in ethical living, but also the practical measures to make it happen.

A weakness of Bonhoeffer's understanding of surrendering autonomy for ethical living is, once again, in relation to his Lutheran binaries. You are either hearing from God or you are not. You are either doing the will of God or you are not. Vicarious representative action is the litmus test to know if you are following the will of God. However, there seem to be loopholes in his argument. I imagine, given the countless

⁶ DBWE 4: 83.

Christians who supported the Nazi movement, that many would agree with all of Bonhoeffer's statements. They would just read them differently. If vicarious representative action is required on behalf of all human beings, what happens when you think Jewish people are not human? Now, I doubt it is possible to make this an entirely air-tight argument, and certainly it is not what Bonhoeffer was trying to produce, but nonetheless it seems up for interpretation and could justify one's own prejudices.

Another weakness is the clarity of hearing from God when participating in the actions outlined in chapter 5. It seems common for Christians to behave according to what they perceive to be the will of God, line up with vicarious representative action, be ethically beneficial, and still be a failure. A common example is a person believing they are called by God to be a pastor. The person has prayed about it and it lines up with vicarious representative action to care for people as a pastor. Yet, years down the line, pastors leave the vocation because of churches closing, burnout, or their own sin (amongst other possible reasons). This often results in ex-pastors wondering whether or not they have been doing the will of God. Should they have become a pastor in a local church, or should they have gone into real estate and participated in ministry in a non-vocational capacity? When the choice is between two good options, how can a person know without a doubt that they are following the will of God?

Autonomy in Scripture

Bonhoeffer's view of autonomy at the center of Scripture is his strongest, and I believe, least explored aspect of his thought. When reading Scripture through Bonhoeffer's lens of autonomy, it does not take long to see surrendering autonomy everywhere in Scripture. The benefit of this both a deeper understanding of Scripture and

an understanding of how Bonhoeffer would interpret a specific Scripture. For example, a rich young ruler asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life in Mark 10:19-25.

But to answer your question, you know the commandments: ‘You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.’”

²⁰ “Teacher,” the man replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments since I was young.”²¹ Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. “There is still one thing you haven’t done,” he told him. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²² At this the man’s face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!” ²⁴ This amazed them. But Jesus said again, “Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. ²⁵ In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

If we see Scripture through Bonhoeffer’s lens of autonomy, this story becomes abundantly clear, as does the rest of Jesus’s teachings about money. Why is it so hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God? Being rich makes living according to the self easy and enjoyable. Rich people can design their lives however they see fit. But Jesus’s message is clear; you cannot design your life and lose it at the same time. “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39). Jesus’s response to the rich young ruler is a command to forsake his self-crafted life. It’s a command to surrender autonomy in obedience to the will of God. This sounds like Bonhoeffer, doesn’t it?

There are countless other examples in Scripture that have demonstrated the clarity that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of autonomy brings to biblical interpretations. This not only demonstrates powerful hermeneutics, but also demonstrates that surrendering autonomy was at the core of Bonhoeffer’s theology. This is a useful tool for hermeneutics in general but it also teaches us to think like Bonhoeffer. If theologians of the past, living

in a different culture, with a different language, are really to guide us in any way today, we must learn how they thought in order to think along with them in a modern context. Reading Bonhoeffer through a lens of surrendering autonomy not only allows us to understand what Bonhoeffer thought about the world he inhabited, but also what he would think of ours.

Conclusion

The central theme in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work is human beings surrendering their autonomy in obedience to the will of God. This theme is so prevalent throughout Bonhoeffer's work, that to understand it, is to be able to think like Bonhoeffer. What does Bonhoeffer think about revelation? When God reveals himself, it disrupts human beings' autonomy and they must choose to respond to revelation. What does Bonhoeffer think about reading Scripture? We must read our Bible against ourselves, which disrupts our autonomy. And so on.

As seen in chapter one, Bonhoeffer reads Scripture through the lens of autonomy. In the beginning, there was only hearing and doing. In the Fall, human beings gained autonomy, a conscience, and knowledge of good and evil and began to live in disunity within themselves. Christ lived a life of surrendered autonomy, doing the will of the Father, and now human beings have the opportunity to surrender their autonomy through faith.

As demonstrated in chapters two and three, Bonhoeffer writes about autonomy in two different ways: cognitive autonomy and practical autonomy. In cognitive autonomy, human beings are lords of their own internal lives. They freely self-reflect and judge according to their own knowledge of good and evil. To surrender cognitive autonomy is to return to God as the judge and to look only out to Christ. In practical autonomy, human beings are lords of their own actions. They act in the world according to their own knowledge of good and evil, doing their own will. To surrender practical autonomy is to return to hearing and doing the will of God as it was in the beginning.

As seen in chapter four, reading Bonhoeffer's works through the lens of autonomy provides a coherent connection between the writings of the young Bonhoeffer and those of the older Bonhoeffer, which, as we saw, is a controversial topic within Bonhoeffer scholarship. The world come of age is a world that has come to celebrate autonomy. Religionless Christianity is to return to the core of Christianity—surrendering autonomy.

As demonstrated in chapter five, practical Christian living for Bonhoeffer means to return to hearing and doing the will of God. Bonhoeffer lists several options for hearing from God throughout his works including reading Scripture, prayer, preaching, and connecting with other human beings. In the final chapter, we discussed the strengths, weaknesses, and lingering questions about Bonhoeffer's understanding of autonomy.

In the end, what makes Bonhoeffer so intriguing is the dramatic coherence between his theological reflection and his life. Surrendering autonomy was at the center of his ministerial pleas with congregations and readers, and it was also the primary goal of his own life. Pursuing a life devoted to the will of God led him across the globe and back, and moved him into the roles of pastor, professor, and resistor against Adolf Hitler. At every turn in his biography, there is clear evidence that Bonhoeffer's primary goal was to submit himself to the will of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in Flossenburg concentration camp two weeks before the end of the second World War. The camp doctor, H. Fischer-Hüllstrung, recounted witnessing the execution of Bonhoeffer. He wrote,

On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock the prisoners, among them Admiral Canaris, General Oster, General Thomas and Reichgerichtsrat Sack were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer,

before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.¹

Even here, Bonhoeffer surrendered his autonomy in obedience to the will of God and it was visible to those who witnessed his death. Bonhoeffer was not a perfect human being. His battle against living according to his autonomy was as ordinary as any other human being. He was a sinner, curved in on himself, who was reconciled to God. Even so, he internalized this insight about surrendering autonomy, and he made it his life's goal. This pursuit carried him through to the very end.

¹ H. Fischer-Hüllstrung, "A Report from Flossenburg," in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences by His Friends*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. Käthe Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 232, in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 927-928.

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