

Bonhoeffer: Apostle of Peace

From a lecture by Dr. Clifford J. Green
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The lecture examines how Bonhoeffer the pacifist can be reconciled with Bonhoeffer the conspirator. How can Bonhoeffer, who teaches about the Sermon on the Mount, approve killing Hitler? Bonhoeffer's teachings have been used to justify war, assassination, and vigilante violence. Those who use him to rationalize "taking monsters off the world stage" show lack of familiarity with Bonhoeffer's ethical reasoning which would prevent such analogies.

First Dr. Green considers the nature of Bonhoeffer's "pacifism," suggesting that neither Bonhoeffer's peace ethic nor his support of tyrannicide were based on principles.

Bonhoeffer rarely used the words pacifist and pacifism, though he certainly did advocate nonviolence and supported conscientious objection to military service. Bonhoeffer's Christian peace ethic is located in the heart of his theology; inseparable from his reading the New Testament.

His ethical reflection about tyrannicide and the coup was not based on a principle justifying violence, and did not mean he abandoned his Christian peace ethic.

Bonhoeffer was greatly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. He was also influenced by French Reformed pastor and pacifist Jean Lasserre, who he met while at Union Seminary in 1930-31 and other pacifist friends and acquaintances. One of them, Hardy Arnold, wrote that in 1934 Bonhoeffer "considered the Nazi government to be so fundamentally evil that it had to be eliminated by any means short of violence."

Bonhoeffer planned to visit Gandhi to seek “advice on how to overthrow a hostile government nonviolently.” However, escalating violence in Germany prevented him from doing so.

Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic was an enduring commitment throughout the 1930s. It was rooted in core doctrines of his theology:

(1) A 1932 address “Christ and Peace.” The one authority Christians follow is Jesus who calls them into faithful discipleship. If law and gospel are preached as offering grace without obedience, that is nothing but “cheap grace.” Christians renounce war and violence, and seek peace grounded in God’s reconciliation; their only weapons are faith and love refined by suffering.

(2) Referring to “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Bonhoeffer wrote “Jesus calls his followers to peace, and Jesus himself is that peace. Now they are to make peace, and they do this by renouncing *violence and strife* – a phrase he put in italics. They maintain peace by choosing to suffer, rather than causing others to suffer.

(3) Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies,” is critical to the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer says, because love sums up its whole teaching. “In the enemy God magnifies divine love.” Bonhoeffer gives a theological exegesis of the word “enemy:” we are all enemies of God. Even though I acted as an enemy against God’s commands, God has acted as a friend towards me. Without God’s love of enemies there is no reconciliation, no grace, no forgiveness, no salvation. For Bonhoeffer, the Christian peace ethic is at the heart of the gospel.

(4) Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the church. Peace is of the essence of the church, just as peace is of the essence of the gospel. The command that God has given the ecumenical church in the 1930s, Bonhoeffer holds, is “the order of

international peace.” The holy catholic church of the creeds lives in the midst of all peoples because it is beyond all national, political, social, or racial divisions. The bonds that unite members of this church are stronger and more intimate than all natural bonds of history, blood, class, and language.

Bonhoeffer calls for an “Ecumenical Council of the Holy Church of Christ over all the world” that will forbid war and proclaim “the peace of Christ against the raging world.”

Dr. Green concludes it is wrong to describe what the conspirators were undertaking as assassination or murder—it was tyrannicide. Just as the just war philosophy deals with defense against an aggressor, so tyrannicide deals with defense against a ruler who was a usurper or an oppressor.

There is no doubt that Bonhoeffer regarded Hitler as a tyrant. His writing in his *Ethics* describes Hitler in everything but name. So in joining the conspiracy and approving the killing of Hitler, Bonhoeffer was not advocating assassination or murder.

Dr. Green stresses how important it is to be very clear about this, to resist the ethical and intellectual sloppiness of people who try to co-opt Bonhoeffer to justify their advocacy of promiscuous violence.

- 1) The issue is tyrannicide, not assassination or murder of Hitler. This places Bonhoeffer’s view that Hitler must be killed in a specific Christian ethical tradition.
- 2) Bonhoeffer argued from his core theological beliefs about free, responsible action, as set out in his *Ethics*.

- 3) He did not invoke principles such as the “right to self defense” or “the end justifies the means” or “political realism” to justify violence.
- 4) He consistently shunned justification of any sort.
- 5) He regarded his position as an act of free Christian responsibility done in a situation of extreme necessity as a last resort. It was an act of faith, done accepting guilt and hoping for the mercy of God.

Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic is woven throughout his theology and discipleship as a whole. It can’t be removed without shredding the whole cloth. Dr. Green’s analysis of Bonhoeffer’s theological texts leads him to the conclusion that Bonhoeffer did not abandon his Christian peace ethic to participate in the conspiracy. He then sites several facts and witnesses who independently confirm this conclusion.

Dr. Green closes this lecture with a strong call to refudiate any widespread view that Bonhoeffer’s name can be used by self-serving religious fanatics, by politicians, professors, and pundits to justify preemptive wars and promiscuous acts of violence. He declares it is time for Bonhoeffer scholarship to say loud and clear that Bonhoeffer was an apostle of peace.

It is high time to shift the focus from the exception – tyrannicide – to the core commitment, the Christian peace ethic at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s theology. It is past time to rouse the churches to their high calling to be visible and vigorous communities of peacemakers.

To you who are ministers of the gospel of Christ, pastors of Christ's people and teachers of the church, Bonhoeffer would say: let the peace of Christ be at the center of your ministry.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What are the implications of Bonhoeffer basing his decisions to participate in the resistance and overthrow of Hitler on his theology rather than principles? What applications do you see for decisions public leaders must make today?
- 2) How would you define "pacifism?" When do you find this an appropriate response to political and military policies? What role do you think the church should have in times of war or threat of war?
- 3) Which parts of Bonhoeffer's teachings on the Sermon on the Mount resonate with you the most? What applications of this do you think would be most helpful in your own ministry context?
- 4) Is the idea of referring to the plot to kill Hitler as "Tyranicide" new to you? What do you think of this? What significance does this have for current international affairs?
- 5) Dr. Green has issued a strong challenge: To you who are ministers of the gospel of Christ, pastors of Christ's people and teachers of the church, Bonhoeffer would say: Let the peace of Christ be at the center of your ministry. In what ways do you see leaders of the church today doing this?