

Ethics for this world

By [Robin Lovin](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Clifford Green, ed.
Fortress

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer died on April 9, 1945, few would have predicted his influence on theology at the beginning of the 21st century. As word of his execution

reached his friends and colleagues during the chaotic days at the end of the war in Europe, Reinhold Niebuhr praised Bonhoeffer's courage, but noted that he had been "too busy in the affairs of a militant church to state his own position in many books."

Niebuhr at that point knew little of what Bonhoeffer had left behind. His collected writings fill 16 large volumes in German, and a complete English translation of this critical edition is now under way. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer's theological writing came to an unplanned and untimely end, and the book on ethics that he expected to be his most important work was left in fragments—13 manuscripts and 115 handwritten notes.

Sixty years later, a new English translation of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* testifies to the continuing importance of his thought, as well as his life. Many pages of *Ethics* connect intuitively with the world as if they were written yesterday, but to fix Bonhoeffer's meaning clearly requires considerable work on the fragments. Clifford Green, the editor, and translators Reinhard Krauss, Charles West and Douglas Stott bring us Bonhoeffer's text and the results of two generations of scholarship devoted to it.

The study began with Eberhard Bethge's reconstruction of *Ethics*, first published in 1949. The book went through six German editions before it became the small, black-covered paperback known to many American readers since its publication in 1965. I bought it that year for \$1.45. I found it incomprehensible.

Bonhoeffer must be understood on his own terms, but in the case of *Ethics*, the text alone is clearly not enough to convey the ideas. That was the special challenge that faced Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil and Clifford Green, who edited the new German edition on which this translation is based. To begin, they abandoned guesswork about the outline and thematic structure that Bonhoeffer might have intended in favor of a meticulous reconstruction of what he actually wrote. The published German text was carefully corrected against the original manuscripts, and Bonhoeffer's work on his book was correlated to references in diaries and letters to produce a detailed account of when and where he produced the manuscripts that remain. These are presented in the order he wrote them, with notes, afterword and appendices that connect the text to the books he was reading, the places where he was working, and other things that were happening in his world. As a result, the text of *Ethics* becomes almost biographical. We understand Bonhoeffer's theology better because we see more clearly what he was reflecting on in his own life.

At the same time, the editors recognized that the Bonhoeffer we meet in this carefully reconstructed work is no longer our contemporary. We need help to understand the questions he faced and the sources from which he drew inspiration. The introduction by Clifford Green and the notes provided by him and the editors of the German text help locate *Ethics* in relation to the rest of Bonhoeffer's work and provide a vivid picture of how theology was done amidst the collapse of the old European order and the rise of Nazism. Almost ten pages of bibliography catalog what we know Bonhoeffer read, from Bismarck's memoirs to *Don Quixote*. The editors' notes provide a running account of how these sources influenced *Ethics*.

Foremost among these sources for Bonhoeffer's generation was the work of Karl Barth, whose return to the "strange world of the Bible" inspired his younger German counterpart's early lectures. Barth's theology marked a complete break with the adjustments to modern culture and Prussian political order that Bonhoeffer had learned from his mentors in Berlin, and it provided the starting point for the Confessing Church, which absorbed Bonhoeffer's pastoral energies after Hitler's ascendancy made it impossible for him to continue university teaching.

Through the Confessing Church, German pastors and laypeople tried to keep their church faithful to the historic Reformation confessions and resist the incursions of Nazi organization and ideology. Bonhoeffer was not present at the Barmen Synod which launched the movement in 1934, but he quickly became one of its younger leaders, and he spent most of the rest of the decade as director of a Confessing Church seminary. It is to this period that we owe two of his most widely read works, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The Confessing Church maintained a courageous resistance to Hitler's decree that every German institution had to reorganize itself in conformity with National Socialist policies. Simply by its continued presence, the church defied the ideology that every person and every institution exists to serve the nation at the command of the Führer. "The Body of Christ takes up space on earth," as Bonhoeffer put it in *The Cost of Discipleship*. "That is a consequence of the Incarnation." In his context, that was a political statement.

But it was not a definitive one. If his declaration precluded the enthusiastic patriotism of the old Prussian "union of throne and altar" or the mindless nationalism of the pro-Nazi "German Christians," it was nonetheless susceptible to interpretation along classical Lutheran lines, in which the secular ruler is entitled to obedience in

everything except matters of faith, which may be interpreted in such a way that they take up very little space indeed. By 1938 most Confessing Church pastors had taken some form of loyalty oath to Hitler.

With the approach of war, Bonhoeffer faced his own choices. He struggled with ideas of Christian pacifism and Gandhi's nonviolence. He considered the possibility of exile, returning to his teaching career in the safety of Union Theological Seminary. In the end, after a brief visit to New York, he returned to Germany in August 1939, determined to face the impending war at home in order to be part of Germany's reconstruction afterwards. He was, however, no passive witness to the unfolding tragedy. He became part of a conspiracy against Hitler at the highest levels of the German government, using his role as a civilian agent in military intelligence as a cover for ecumenical contacts that allowed the conspirators to make tentative overtures toward a peace settlement with the British government. It is clear from his actions as well as his writings that for Bonhoeffer purity of witness was no longer the primary criterion of faithful discipleship. Taking responsibility in a concrete situation, with a willingness to risk guilt in the course of it, becomes the hallmark of Christian action. "Who stands fast?" Bonhoeffer asked in an essay he wrote for several of his fellow conspirators at the end of 1942. "Only the one for whom neither reason, nor principles, nor conscience, nor freedom, nor virtue is the final measure, but who offers all this, when called in faith and in sole allegiance to God to obedient and responsible action."

Ethics would be important if it were only a theological reflection on the conspiracy. As Green observes, "The book is unique in being the only ethic written by a Lutheran theologian while engaged in a conspiracy to topple a tyrant." Still, it is not immediately clear how the preoccupations of a small group of elite conspirators with issues of honor and authority provide a starting point for our own thinking about ethics. We give our attention to this tale of resistance and martyrdom with the uneasy sense that the drama may be diverting our attention from critical questions that we ought to be asking about the characters and their place in society.

One advantage of this new presentation of *Ethics* is that it allows us to see more clearly how Bonhoeffer struggled with that question himself. He began work on the book in 1940, as the war finally closed off his work with Confessing Church seminarians and he began his covert role as ecumenical messenger for the conspiracy. Some of the early pages of his work contrast Christ, who loves humanity and is despised for it, with the tyrant who despises humanity and is idolized by the

people nonetheless. “By this ingratiating treatment of human weaknesses, what is base and mean is generated ever anew. . . . The meaner the baseness becomes, the more willing and pliant a tool it is in the hand of the tyrant.”

The reference to Hitler is unmistakable, as is Bonhoeffer’s disgust with the masses of people who could not see through the deception. What follows, however, is not an abstract moral argument for tyrannicide, but Bonhoeffer’s struggle with his temptation to view the German people with the same contempt that Hitler has for them. “Only because God has become human is it possible to know and not despise real human beings.”

Responsible action must be undertaken on behalf of these real human beings whom God loves, and not to vindicate one’s own superiority, righteousness or wisdom. That is the idea behind the initially puzzling concept that earlier editions of *Ethics* translated as “deputyship,” rendered in this translation as “vicarious representative action.”

The phrase is less elegant than the German *Stellvertretung*, but it is exactly right, and it has the advantage that it calls our attention to the fact that this christological theme runs through Bonhoeffer’s theology as a whole, from his first published work to the late manuscripts of *Ethics*. The variety of previous English translations made it all but impossible for English readers to spot this continuity in Bonhoeffer’s thought. The use of a standard vocabulary for translation in all volumes of the new *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* largely solves that problem. Responsible action now gains some theological depth. It is not simply a grand gesture by the responsible person, nor a paternalistic service offered by one who happens to be well placed enough to do for others what they could not do for themselves. Responsible action is a true imitation of Christ, a willingness to be despised and abused for the sake of those who have themselves been despised. Readiness for death speaks from every page of the manuscript, not as an act of personal courage but as a theological affirmation.

Nevertheless, this is above all a book about new life. Bonhoeffer did not return to Germany in 1939 to die, but because he wanted to participate in the reconstruction after the war. In large parts of *Ethics*, it seems that is where his sights are set, which explains the care with which he develops his new idea of the “divine mandates.” For the theological generation influenced by Karl Barth, it was axiomatic that Christian ethics is about hearing God’s commandment and not a matter of abstract moral principles that can be learned and followed. For Bonhoeffer, however, the

commandment is not an isolated word from God. We hear the commandment in specific settings, which are always social rather than individual. "This commandment encounters us concretely in four different forms that find their unity only in the commandment itself, namely, in the church, marriage and family, culture and government." In contrast to a regime that despised the relationships and loyalties of everyday life and sought to remake them in its own image, Bonhoeffer envisioned a society in which unity is expressed in institutional diversity.

The idea behind the mandates of church, family, culture and government goes back to Luther's "orders" of society, which appealed to socially conservative theologians and could even be used by Nazi sympathizers to provide a theological rationale for Hitler's program. Understandably, Barth reacted to these distortions by rejecting such "natural theology" root and branch—Catholic natural law, Luther's "orders" and Emil Brunner's "orders of creation," along with "natural" orders of race and nation proclaimed by the German Christians. "If you really reject natural theology," Barth warned, "you do not stare at the serpent, with the result that it stares back at you, hypnotizes you, and is ultimately certain to bite you, but you hit it and kill it as soon as you see it."

Barth's idea of a church that would be directly obedient to the commandment of God and understand itself solely in terms of the church's historic confessions continues to exercise a powerful influence today. "Let the church be the church" has become the motto for Christians in many situations where faith sets them at odds with their culture.

Bonhoeffer saw the point, but *Ethics* also reveals its limits. Responsible action is not only responsible before God. It is responsible in those specific places where life is shaped for a whole society. You cannot be responsible by yourself, without living in solidarity with the people who share the world with you. You cannot be responsible only by being the church. "God has placed human beings under all these mandates," Bonhoeffer wrote, "not only each individual under one or the other, but all people under all four. There can be no retreat, therefore, from a 'worldly' into a 'spiritual' realm. The practice of the Christian life can be learned only under these four mandates of God." "Let the church be the church," then, but let family, government and the economic and social institutions that make up the culture be themselves, too.

What we know about the good society in theological terms is not that it conforms to this or that pattern of legislation or economic organization, but that it is a place where one person can be responsible in all of these settings at the same time. One way to recognize a government or a political system gone wrong is that it tries to deny the authority of the other mandates, claiming all loyalty for itself and redefining responsibility so that the responsible person serves the state or the party by betraying family or church or culture.

As Bonhoeffer thought about the reconstruction of society after the war, he sought above all to remove this burden of contempt which leaders in modern times had laid on people and their everyday lives. Hitler was a symptom of this corruption rather than the cause of it, and responsible action would involve more than removing the symptom. Responsible action creates institutions that allow persons to maintain their integrity across all the settings that are essential to a full human life. “This is the witness that the church has to give to the world, that all the other mandates are not there to divide people and tear them apart but to deal with them as whole people before God the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer—that reality in all its manifold aspects is ultimately *one* in God who became human, Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer thus develops a profound theological humanism that defends the dignity and integrity of human life as a witness to the incarnation. Details about such a witness in times like our own are not easy to infer from Bonhoeffer’s reflections on his own extraordinary circumstances, but it is safe to say that it would not be confined to proclamation alone. And it is safe to say that the witness is still important. People still bear a burden of contempt from leaders and systems that reduce them to jobs to be done, votes to be cast, products to be bought, or—let us be honest enough to add—data points on a rising line of worship attendance.

If Bonhoeffer’s problem was a tyrant who threatened to suck all the mandates into one, ours is the relentless opportunism that fragments the world into separate centers of power and loses the unity of the persons who, by God’s commandment, live in all of the mandates and measure their humanity by the unity the Incarnate One embodies. Sixty years after the war’s end, we are still waiting for the reconstruction of society for which Bonhoeffer dared to hope, but we have more resources for understanding his vision. The new translation of *Ethics* takes its place at the head of that list. n