Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Moral Leader during the Holocaust in Germany

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life, theology and actions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a moral leader. In particular, it explores his impact on the church in Germany during the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich. It defines the moral responsibility of the church to participate in social justice as a biblical command and Christological model by examining evidence from both the Old and New Testament. It analyzes his decisions to publically stand against the unjust laws marginalizing the Jews and his actions to exercise social justice in participating in the plot to assassinate Hitler. It looks at the impact of his life not only for the church during his times, but as a model of moral leadership for generations that follow.

Keywords: moral leadership, ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, church, Hitler
Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Moral Leader during the Holocaust in Germany

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed (1990). However, many times the oppressed are not in the position to demand freedom for themselves. In a context of unjust laws designed to marginalize a particular group of people, there must be someone who is willing to take up the cause and fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Saint Augustine wrote that an unjust law is no law at all, and therefore it is a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws (1990). While there is no shortage of those who are willing to dialogue about the injustices of the world, it takes a moral leader to take the initiative and stand against the unjust laws and the people who made them. This is exemplified throughout the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. From the origins of his conviction that the church should be a visible witness to the world, this man of extraordinary faith, determined to do the will of God, assumed his moral responsibility to stand against the evils of Hitler and the Third Reich. This paper examines the life, theology and actions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the period of the Holocaust as a model of moral leadership.

Defining Moral Leadership

The study of ethics has been at the heart of intellectual thought since the ancient times. Ethics can be regarded as a set of moral principles or values. To get a working definition of moral leadership, both terms must be defined and understood. Over the past fifty years, there has been no shortage of research and literature on leadership. Patterson and Winston define leadership as a person who uses his or her diverse gifts and abilities to influence followers to willingly expend spiritual, emotional and physical energy to achieve organizational mission and objectives (2006). The great man and trait theories of leadership present the case that leaders are individuals
endowed with great characteristics, heroic abilities, and traits that make them better leaders (Patterson et al…, 2006). This form of leadership focuses on the individual, which is significant in understanding moral leadership.

Moral Leadership is not a role for the person who does not have the ability to make decisions. Decision making is one of the critical functions of the leader, as followers look to them for guidance and direction. At a greater level, followers look to the leader to serve as a model and representation of their values, morals, and beliefs. This is why leadership cannot be separated from the personhood of the leader. Warren Bennis described leaders as people who are able to express themselves fully (1989). They know who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how to fully deploy their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. They also know what they want, why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others in order to gain their cooperation and support. This is the basis from which every nation, organization, and household is led. Goffee and Jones state that leaders must know themselves well and be willing to share themselves with others (2006). Bennis in his studies of leaders states that leaders are made not born (1989). This process of being a leader comes more through working on themselves than by any external means. Many of them never set out to become leaders but wanted to express their passions fully and freely. These leaders became leaders because situations called on them to step up and do what no one else would do. Thus it is always with a sense of purpose that a leader must act. Unless a leader is clear about his purpose and values, then it is difficult for him to truly act as a leader (Bennis, 2006).

This essential basis for leadership is why his moral compass is a determining factor to what kind of leader a person will be. Maquad and Krone define values as the standards of desirability and evaluation independent of specific conditions (2009). Values are the lenses
through which a worldview is formulated and is the set of beliefs and practices that shape a person’s approach to the most important issues in life (1998). Leadership activities and decisions cannot be void of leadership character and moral make up. Moral leadership is determined by what comes from within a person and not simply the adherence to a set of behavioral standards. The essence of any moral decision is the question of what should I do in this situation? The answer to this interrogative process is filtered through the moral norms of the leader. These morals are the standards that require, prohibit, or allow certain kinds of behavior or the development of certain kinds of character traits. Moral leadership is what one is, as opposed to what one does. This comes directly from personal values.

Values are the framework through which a leader makes decisions. Without this framework, a leader can get caught in what is called contextual ethics. Paul Lehmann uses this term to describe the position of ethics that the Christian should take that is not foreign to the Christian church (Gustafson, 1965). A Christian leader also has to use his morals to understand when to participate in the events of the world. He must reconcile his morals with what he believes God is doing through man in a particular set of events (1965).

There are three contexts through which the leader can reconcile these events. The first is the theological one which asks what God is doing. The second is the Christian community which asks what am I as a member of his church to do. The third context is the particular situation in the world in which God is acting and in which the Christian have a responsibility to act (1965). This context for is one that relies less on rationally derived propositions and in favor of one that perceives, apprehends, or is sensitive to what God is doing. Gustafson states that this leads to responses that are always sensitive to the historical present, rather than to generalizations about what ought to be (1965).
Rowan Williams notes that Christians make moral decisions the same ways as everyone else. The only difference is in the relations they make to their environment that generates a particular kind of response (2009). Williams identifies self-knowledge as a critical component to the process of moral decision-making (2009). Acknowledging that self-knowledge is more than introspection but reconciling the contributions to our self-understanding by, others such as parents, neighbors, and all those around us and our personal contributions (2009). Out of this self-understanding a person will Gustafson states that when a person will responding to events that have an effect upon him (1965). H. R. Niebuhr says that all action is response to action upon us (1965). Thus the understanding of selfhood is the delineation of an ethics that seeks to define and do what is fitting and appropriate in the particular relationships of the self (1965). This is the same place through which a leader makes moral decisions.

Christ and Morals

To develop an understanding of moral leadership from a Christian perspective, one must begin with Christ. This definition must come from understanding the foundations of Christian ethics through the gospel of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom (O Donavan, 1994). This cannot be understood unless it begins with Christ and the reality of his rule and reign in the Kingdom of God. Helmut Merklein states that the Kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus’ teachings (1994). No other idea or concept can be formulated without it including the idea of God as Father or any king of ethic (1994). Therefore his message of the Kingdom of God is central to understanding his ethics. Merklein examined some of the central themes in the synoptics that promise the Reign of God to the poor, the call of following Jesus as a disciple, implying a separation from all former security in family, job, and property, and the double parable of the pearl and the treasure in the field. For Merklein, the expression of the Reign of God as King
refers primarily to God’s activity and not human conduct. The ethics of Jesus is colored by his message of God’s mercy and compassion. The ethical connection that Merklien makes is that Jesus was faced with many ethical demands and challenges which led to a material principle of conduct. As God turned to man with his salvation totally and without conditions, so human beings should turn to fellow mankind in radical and unconditioned openness (1994).

Bonhoeffer’s view of moral responsibility is Christological in expression. The foundation of ethical behavior is how the reality of the world and the reality of God are reconciled in the reality of Christ (1955). To share in Christ’s reality is to become a responsible person, a person who performs actions in accordance with reality and the fulfilled will of God. Bonhoeffer uses two guides to determining the will of God in any concrete situation: 1) the need of one’s neighbor, and 2) the model of Jesus Christ (1955). There are no other guides, since Bonhoeffer denies that we can have knowledge of good and evil (1955). There is no moral certainty in this world and no justification in advance for our conduct. Ultimately all actions must be delivered up to God for judgment, and no one can escape the reliance upon God’s mercy and grace (1955).

Bonhoeffer’s Ethics, is the catalyst for his actions to participate in the resistance against Hitler and the Third Reich. Part of leadership is making decisions and taking actions that are risky to accomplish a desired result. For Bonhoeffer, taking responsible action that reflects a Christological expression, is a highly risky undertaking that cannot be justified in advance (1955). It is within this expression however that we participate in the reality of Christ in accordance with the will of God (Bonhoeffer, 1955). This demand for responsible action in history is a demand that no Christian can ignore. For Bonhoeffer, there is no such thing as morals without actions. This demand places the Christian in a dilemma: when faced with the presence of
evil, he must oppose it directly with no other options. The failure to act, is simply to condone evil and makes us irresponsible people (1955).

The distinction in Bonhoeffer’s beliefs about morals and his counterparts such as Kant or Mill is that his personal life can be used as a model for his beliefs. This substantiates his qualification as a moral leader. His actions against Hitler’s regime coincided with his beliefs of what his responsibility was as a Christian leader.

The basis for Bonhoeffer’s moral leadership is found in his definition of ethical behavior. For Bonhoeffer, the foundation of ethical behavior is how the reality of the world and how the reality of God are reconciled in the reality of Christ (1955). He says that “Good is the action that is in accordance with the reality of Jesus Christ; action in accordance with Christ is action in accord with reality (1955). He states that the only way a person can live in reality is through accepting responsibility for other people. When a person lives in reality in the very moment that the individual accepts responsibility for the other, its meaning is not philosophical but actual. It is in this actual reality that the incarnation of Christ makes it possible for one to act in accordance with this reality (Nissen, 2011).

The Church and Social Justice

Duncan B. Forrester states that justice is a moral value which can be expressed in social relationships at least as much as in the courts (2001). Father John Donahue says, “The doing of justice is not the application of religious faith, but its substance; without it, God remains unknown (2001). Although there is much contemporary debate about the role of social justice and the church, the Bible is very clear about the priority of social justice among God’s people. John L Mays speaks of the priority of justice for the prophets; for they believed that the entire
history of Israel under God is subordinated to one purpose, which is righteousness expressed in justice. He continues to clarify that the prophets understood justice as a theological term inseparable from their knowledge of Israel’s God (2001).

The Bible speaks of justice as a chief attribute of God, with biblical justice inextricably tied to God’s mercy and grounded in the relationship between God and humankind. From the time of the wilderness wanderings when the Hebrew people were given ethical instructions about their treatment of widows, orphans, and strangers, the practice of justice has been understood as the mission of those who follow Yahweh (Tooley, 2000). In the Psalms and the Prophets, God is portrayed as having a special concern for the poor, particularly the widow, the fatherless and the oppressed. Psalms 10:17-18; 82:1-8 and 109:16 demonstrate the cry for justice from the oppressed when they summoned God to judge them in order to lead a normal good life. Isaiah 1:17 represents the essence of God’s requirement of justice:

“Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow”

In this passage the prophet states that there is a correlation with learning to do good and the corresponding actions of seeking justice, rebuking the oppressor, defending the fatherless and pleading for the widow.

The term justice in this passage in the Hebrew is מִשְׁפָּט (mišpāṭ). In the context of Isaiah 1:17 the root of this word refers to warning, punishing, and vindicating. Although some contexts

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of *mišpāṭ* show that the root *špṭ* and the substantive *mišpāṭ* were also used in a forensic sense, there is strong evidence that attests that originally the substantive *mišpāṭ* referred to the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity and harmony (*šālôm*) in a community (Mafico, 1992). Amos refers to the poor as righteous, referring to their basic rights as human beings to be free from oppression by the economic, social, and political systems (Mafico, 1992).

Justice is rooted in God’s character (Isa. 5:16; Deut. 32:4), and justice is what God demands of followers (16:20). A central concept is that the justice of a community is measured by their treatment of the poor and oppressed (Isa. 1:16–17; 3:15). Although the message of justice is woven throughout the Bible, the prophets especially issued a strong call for the covenant community to recognize God as the God of justice and to repent of their injustice. Their primary message can be summarized in the words of Mic. 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Tooley, 2000) This is a fitting reminder of the centrality of the call for justice. Obedience to the declared will of God is probably the strongest model for ethical obligation in most of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Barton, 1994).

In the New Testament, Jesus proclaims in his sermon on the mount that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are blessed and shall be filled. Forrester says that “justice here is proactive, healing, reconciling, forgiving, setting matters right so that people can live together in peace (2001)”. The message of Jesus is rooted in the term righteous. Those who are righteous conform to God’s will as revealed both in the Old Testament and in his own teachings. The message of Christ can only be understood through his inauguration of the kingdom of God. With the inauguration of the Kingdom, Jesus brings righteousness (Rom 14:17). Jesus even rebukes
the Pharisees, because of their lack of the pursuit of justice. The New Testament message of justice is not about an outward conformity to the Law or an appeal to ritual observances, but about the commitment to Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Matthew 7:21-17 demonstrates the link between commitment and obedience. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them …”) (Green, McKnight & Marshall, 1992). There is an expectation from Jesus to his followers that there will be an intentional pursuit of justice demonstrated in obedience to his word.

Thus when we look at the role of the church in exercising social justice, it has a responsibility to carry out the demands of its King Jesus Christ. The church by definition means called out or summoned by a herald. Thus the church consists of those who have been called out of darkness to assemble together for the purpose of obedience to Jesus Christ. J. Rodman Williams says that the church is the assembly of those on earth who belong to the Lord and exists as a social entity on the earth (Williams, 1992). As a result, the church has the responsibility to carry out those institutions and practices that wider society has not yet learned as forms of justice (Hauerwas, 2001). Stanley Hauerwas calls the church a social ethic in as much as she functions as an institution that has learned to embody the form of truth that is charity revealed in the person and work of Christ (2001). The church cannot withdraw into a religious ghetto no longer concerned to serve the world (Hauerwas, 2008). However, it is also not enough for the church to simply proclaim the message of social justice to the world. The first role is for the church to apply the teachings to its own structure and its own lives (Hauerwas, 2001). Leslie Newbigin says that the church is called to be an agency of God’s justice (2001). “In its action in the society of which it is part it will seek to be with Jesus among those who are pushed to the margins (Forrester, 2001)
The Moral Leadership of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

From the time that he was a child Dietrich Bonhoeffer displayed the marks of a person who would make an impact in the world. He was not raised in a particular radical environment but into an aristocratic family. His mother was the daughter of a preacher and his father a prominent neurologist and professor of psychiatry at the University of Berlin. He was one of eight children which consisted of four girls and four boys. They were raised in an environment where literature and the fine arts were encouraged. Dietrich himself was skilled at the piano. At the age of fourteen, and to the surprise of his parents, he declared that he was going to become a theologian. When his family criticized the church as weak and self-serving, Bonhoeffer responded, “If the church is really what you say it is, then I shall have to reform it! (Nelson, 1991)” When he was eighteen Bonhoeffer had what Eric Metaxas calls an epiphany about the concept of the universality of the church. “The universality of the church was illustrated in a marvelously effective manner. White, black yellow members of religious orders- everyone was in clerical robes united together under the church. (Metaxas, 2010)” He saw the church as truly transcendent beyond race and national identity. To think of the church as something universal would change everything and set in motion the entire course of Bonhoeffers life. It led to a revelation of further thinking of “What is the church? (Metaxtas, 2010)” These ideas and beliefs meant more than an academic discourse. For Bonhoeffer, they were nothing if they did not relate to the world of reality outside one’s mind. His thought on the nature of the church would lead him into the ecumenical movement in Europe causing him to link with Christians outside of Germany and oppose the idea of a church defined by racial identity and blood (Metaxas, 2010). Bonhoeffer began his theological studies at Tubingen University where he completed his
dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* of which Karl Barth called a theological miracle (Gushee, 1991). After graduating from the University of Berlin, in 1927 Dietrich spent some time in Spain as an assistant pastor to a German congregation. He then spent a year in America, at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, before returning to the post of lecturer at the University of Berlin. During his time at Union, he was involved in the ministry of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where he witnessed the historic black church’s passionate commitment to social justice, racial equality and human rights. This experience caused Bonhoeffer to see the growing racism against the Jews in his own country in a new light (Rankin, 2006).

During these years, Hitler rose in power to become chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and president a year and a half later. Within months Hitler managed to enact the “Law for the Restoration of Civil Service,” the first major anti-Jewish statute of the era. This law contained the so-called “Aryan Clause” which excluded Jews from positions in government, universities and churches (Rankin, 2006). From the onset, Hitler’s laws greatly disturbed Bonhoeffer and led him to give a lecture in April 1933 to a group of German church leaders entitled “The Church and the Jewish Question” His moral convictions about the role of the church and its duty to speak against these laws, set the tone for Bonhoeffer’s moral leadership to surface. This was considered one of the strongest responses of any Church leader to Nazi anti-Semitic actions (Rankin, 2006). While Bonhoeffer was speaking out against these actions, the German people including many German pastors were thinking of Hitler as a savior to the economic depression that resulted after the defeat of World War I.

“The time is fulfilled for the German people of Hitler. It is because of Hitler that Christ, God the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us…. Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ.” So spoke German pastor
Hermann Gruner. Another pastor put it more succinctly: “Christ has come to us through Adolph Hitler” (Galli & Olsen, 2000).

While other Germans were being duped by the charisma and rhetoric of Hitler, Bonhoeffer was working on ways to repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize the powers, personalities and truths of the Third Reich as revelation alongside God’s word. Bonhoeffer displayed his inner drive of leadership by calling for the Church to fight the political injustices of the Third Reich in three ways. First, to question state injustice and call the state to responsibility; second to help the victims of injustice whether they were Church members or not. Third, Bonhoeffer called upon the Church to “fall into the spokes of the wheel itself” in order to halt the machinery of injustice (Rankin, 2006). Much of Bonhoeffer’s charge to the church has to do with what he noticed about it. The church in Germany had become accustomed to the privileges dependent upon its invisibility to become visible (Hauerwas, 2004). In his work Discipleship Bonhoeffer wrote: “To flee into invisibility is to deny the call. Any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows Him (Hauerwas, 2004)”. Bonhoeffer believed that the church had to make itself distinct from the community. The church should not look like the world. In fact, for the church to be friends with the world is something that is very abnormal (Hauerwas, 2004). Key to understanding Bonhoeffer’s position is that God’s will must become visible and comprehensive at some point in history. At some point the church would always be faced with the dilemma of how it would express itself visibly to the world. It was never an option for the church to shrink back and blend in with the rest of the world. While the Jews were being unjustly treated, Bonhoeffer was convinced that the Church has an explicit moral and ethical commitment to those persecuted by the Nazis (Rankin, 2006).
Bonhoeffer was never afraid to take action that he felt was morally and ethically correct. Many ecumenical leaders in Germany favored Hitler’s efforts to unify the Protestant churches into one “Reich Church” and adopt the creeds to align the churches with National Socialism (Rankin, 2006). This was a crisis that caused a split in the German Evangelical Church because of the so called German Christians who adopted the prohibition on clergy of non-Aryan extraction (Rankin, 2006). Out of this was birthed the Confessing Church, an illegal sect of the Protestant resistance against Hitler in Germany.

During this time, Bonhoeffer was teaching pastors in the underground seminary of the Confessing church. However, after the seminary was discovered and closed, the Confessing Church became increasingly reluctant to speak out against Hitler, and moral opposition proved increasingly ineffective, so Bonhoeffer began to change his strategy. Up until this point he had been a pacifist, and had tried to oppose the Nazis through religious action and moral persuasion (Rankin, 2006).

At this point Bonhoeffer became more public in his stance against the Nazi party. His lectures against their anti-Semitic policies led to him being declared a “Pacifist” and “Enemy of the state” in 1936. In 1938 he was forbidden to live or work in Berlin. It is this opposition against the church that made Bonhoeffer’s theology so compelling. In his effort to recover the visibility of the church, Hitler as an opposition, began to draw the lines between the church and an evil dictator. It is within these lines that the church could be the representative that Christ has called her to be through the work of the Holy Spirit by being faithful (Hauerwas, 2004).

These were the convictions that Bonhoeffer brought into his fight with the Nazis and made him the powerful force shaping the churches’ witness against Hitler. Bonhoeffer’s influence on the church during this time was an act of moral leadership that cost him his life.
Bonhoeffer had a chance to escape the dangers of Germany. After being banned from working in Berlin, he took a position at Union Theological Seminary in New York with the intentions of staying at least a year. However, being a leader with a strong internal compass, the guilt of leaving his fellow pastors and countrymen was too great. He felt that he had made a mistake in coming to America because if he was not there during the war, he would have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war. One historian wrote:

“The image of Bonhoeffer boarding ship, voluntarily preparing to sail back—straight into the hell that Germany had become, into resistance, not the great likelihood of his own death—is an unforgettable scene and poignant moment in the history of the Church in the twentieth century (Gushee, 1991).”

When he realized that his pacifist efforts were no longer effective, his convictions led him to take part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Because of his actions, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually executed three weeks before Hitler committed suicide and the end of the war in Europe.

Conclusions

Bonhoeffer’s moral leadership legacy, is an example to many. He has left a legacy that was in stark contrast to the church leaders of his day. His outspoken stance against Germany’s anti-Semitic policies as well as his own actions against Hitler were done without personal concern for his safety, but from personal convictions and morals. He was a moral leader that operate with complete integrity with his message and his life. His unwavering commitment to be the church and a visible expression of Christ in the world, is still a moral example ecclesial leadership today.
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