

SORROW AND JOY: THE IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT ON THE THEOLOGY OF
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts
Interdisciplinary Studies

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Date: _____ Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Sorrow and Joy: The Impact of Imprisonment on the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at George Mason University

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Spring Semester 2016
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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, an examination of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prison writings as contained in *Letters and Papers from Prison* will be conducted to determine the impact of imprisonment on his theology. To identify this impact, two of Bonhoeffer's works written before his imprisonment, *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, will be compared to his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, with particular attention paid to themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology. These themes have been considered significant to religious prison writings and will serve as the point of comparison between Bonhoeffer's writings prior to and during his imprisonment. This thesis will argue that while these themes are not absent from Bonhoeffer's work prior to his imprisonment, they take on a new significance and potency in *Letters and Papers from Prison* as a result of his imprisonment.

INTRODUCTION

“Sorrow and joy
.....
Those they encounter
they transfigure.”¹

These stark lines of poetry written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer impart a sense of the transformation and emotional unmooring he experienced during his captivity in a Nazi prison. Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, theologian, and member of the resistance movement against Hitler, spent the final two years of his brief life in prison due to his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. During that time, however, he was not silent; he wrote continuously throughout his imprisonment. Bonhoeffer’s prison writings, which were compiled after his death, include many theological passages found in the form of letters, notes, and poetry. These works, compiled in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, conclude the brief but prolific career of Bonhoeffer as a theologian whose influence would grow exponentially in the decades following his death.

About twenty years after his death, Eberhard Bethge published his groundbreaking biography on the Dietrich Bonhoeffer.² This seminal work laid the foundation upon which other biographies were constructed, such as those by Ferdinand

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 334.

² Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). This biography was first published in 1967.

Schlingensiepen and Charles Marsh.³ In addition to his biographers, many other scholars have written about Bonhoeffer's involvement in the German resistance movement or have attempted analyses of his theology.⁴ Additionally, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own writings have been catalogued and republished under the guidance of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works project.⁵ Up to the present, Bonhoeffer's life and his theology have remained important subjects of study for the religious studies community, historians, and other groups.

Although writings about Dietrich Bonhoeffer are prolific, the current research fails to fully account for the impact imprisonment had on his theology. Instead, Bonhoeffer's imprisonment has functioned more as a passive backdrop to his writing during these years. Authors have analyzed Bonhoeffer's prison poetry or the letters exchanged between Bonhoeffer and his fiancée while he was imprisoned.⁶ Alternatively, scholarly work has generally centered on Bonhoeffer's biography, his theology as a whole, or his involvement in the resistance movement, without paying particular or close attention to his experience of imprisonment.⁷ It is therefore important to reexamine

³ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 1906-1945*, trans. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010); Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2014).

⁴ See Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to his Thought* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

⁵ See the Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Works website: <http://fortresspress.com/dbw>.

⁶ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria Von Wedemeyer, *Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer*, ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismark and Ulrich Kabitz (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); Edwin H. Robertson, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Poems* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

⁷ See Marsh, *Strange Glory*; Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to his Thought*; Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*.

Bonhoeffer's experiences in prison and to compare his prison writings with earlier works to understand how this event impacted his theology.

To downplay the role of imprisonment on the theological concepts captured in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* is to underestimate the impact of such a traumatic, life-altering event on the heart and mind of this theologian. When compared with his earlier works, Bonhoeffer's prison writings reflect the profound impact that incarceration had on his theology. Understanding this impact will bring new insights to the life and thought of a theologian about whom so much research has already been done. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to determine the kind of "transfiguration" of Bonhoeffer's theology by the obvious sorrows and possible joys of his experiences while in prison, with the hope that this endeavor may prove significant for understanding how the religious convictions of other individuals are affected by imprisonment. This will be achieved by comparing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings compiled in *Letters and Papers from Prison* with works written prior to his incarceration, *Discipleship* and *Ethics*.⁸

Although it is possible that research into the effect of imprisonment on Bonhoeffer's theology will produce results that could be applied to the other individuals in prison, this is not the primary purpose of this thesis. To begin this research with such an assumption would underestimate the significance of Bonhoeffer's particular historical and personal context and his intellectual uniqueness with regards to theology. Any generalizations of Bonhoeffer's experience to the experiences of others would be imprudent and will therefore be avoided.

⁸ *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

I. INTRODUCING BONHOEFFER AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN PRISONS

Before analyzing Bonhoeffer's writings to determine the impact of imprisonment on his theology, it is important to begin with a brief review of Bonhoeffer's life, his theological influences, and to discuss common themes of religious thought in prisons. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a contextual foundation upon which all subsequent analyses in this thesis will be based.

Biography

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 to an upper middle class German family. Although his father, a well-known psychiatrist, was not particularly religious or involved in the church, Bonhoeffer knew from a young age that he wanted to be a theologian. He received his doctorate at the early age of twenty-one; an achievement that reflects his intelligence and set a rigorous academic standard that Bonhoeffer maintained throughout the rest of his life.⁹ Bonhoeffer's intellectual legacy is maintained in the form of his many published works of theology, his diaries, and the letters exchanged with friends and family, some of which were preserved and published posthumously.

After completing his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer worked as an assistant pastor in Barcelona for a year. After this time, he returned to Berlin University and completed his second dissertation, *Act and Being*, which qualified

⁹ Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 60.

him for a teaching position in the theology department. As witnessed by the positive reception of both dissertations, Bonhoeffer possessed an intellect that was undoubtedly capable of long-term success as an academic theologian. Karl Barth, a theologian who would have a great deal of influence on Bonhoeffer and will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections, was so impressed by Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* that he called it "a theological miracle."¹⁰

However, Bonhoeffer would not remain in academia for long. The events of the time led Bonhoeffer to speak out against Hitler's regime and the German church's capitulation to the Nazi government. Bonhoeffer became involved with the Confessing Church, which stood in opposition to German church's affiliation with Hitler. Chief among the issues for Bonhoeffer that led him to breaking away with the German church and joining the movement of the Confessing Church was the Aryan paragraph, a piece of legislation that removed Jews and those of Jewish descent from civil service and from Christian churches.¹¹ For Bonhoeffer, a church that prohibits Jewish Christians "ceases to embody Christ, without whom it is no church at all."¹²

Through the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer established a seminary in 1935, which was originally located on the Baltic Sea but eventually moved to Finkenwalde. By this time, many seminaries had been closed and pastoral training had been relegated to universities, which Bonhoeffer lamented due to their lack of focus on "spiritual

¹⁰ Marsh, 57.

¹¹ Ibid., 162.

¹² Ibid., 168.

disciplines” and “concern for the soul.”¹³ At Finkenwalde, in contrast, Bonhoeffer wanted to instruct the seminarians in ministering to people’s practical needs, including “baptisms, weddings, and funerals.”¹⁴ In 1937, the seminary was forced to close by the government. However, Bonhoeffer continued to train clergy in secret until the Gestapo shut down this operation. Because of his affiliation with the resistance movement against Hitler and the Nazi regime, many of Bonhoeffer’s associates encouraged him to remain in the United States while on a visit in 1939. However, Bonhoeffer believed that his place was in Germany with his people, and thus returned to his home country.

Shortly after his return in 1940, Bonhoeffer was assigned to work for Abwehr, the intelligence branch of the Germany military. Bonhoeffer used this assignment to secretly communicate the resistance movement’s existence to those outside Germany with the hope of gaining their assistance.¹⁵ During this time, Bonhoeffer became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, but shortly after their engagement, Bonhoeffer was arrested and placed in Tegel prison. Meanwhile, the resistance movement plotted to assassinate Hitler, and although it is unclear exactly how involved Bonhoeffer was in this plan, there was enough evidence to incriminate him when the assassination attempt failed in 1944.¹⁶ In total, Bonhoeffer spent about two years imprisoned by the Nazis before he was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, just two weeks before Allied forces liberated the camp.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 235.

¹⁴ Ibid., 234.

¹⁵ Ibid., 291.

¹⁶ Ibid., 326.

¹⁷ Ibid., 390.

Theological Influences

As a person both widely traveled and widely read, Bonhoeffer had many theological influences. However, of particular importance for appreciating his theology are the impact of his education in Berlin under the tutelage of liberal theologians such as Adolf von Harnack, Karl Holl, and Reinhold Seeberg, his relationship with the great dialectical theologian Karl Barth, and his interest in the life and work of Martin Luther.

Berlin University and Liberal Theology

At Berlin University, Bonhoeffer worked closely with theologians who represented the “bastion” of liberal theology.¹⁸ While Bonhoeffer would not exactly follow in their footsteps and fully adopt liberal theology as his own perspective, nor did he completely forsake this tradition. Put simply, liberal theology represents an attempt to approach scriptural texts with a modern sensibility. Liberal theologians endeavored to apply the rational methods used in other fields of human understanding to theology. The Bible, like other historical texts and literary works, could be studied as a product of a particular historical and cultural milieu. Because of the work of liberal theology, “religion now became ordered toward the universe” instead of being exclusively oriented toward the heavens.¹⁹

For Bonhoeffer, the great strength of liberal theology “was that it did not try to put the clock back,” meaning that it did not ignore how the Enlightenment had changed

¹⁸ Dramm, 26.

¹⁹ Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 103.

the way people, including theologians, understood their world.²⁰ Liberal theology “did not attempt to avoid the historical critical method” of scriptural analysis and interpretation, “but supported it with might and main.”²¹ Bonhoeffer respected liberal theology for its refusal to reject the world outright in an attempt to defend itself from the critical eye of reason. Bonhoeffer learned a great deal from his studies under Harnack, Holl, and Seeberg, “three luminaries of the Protestant liberal establishment.”²² Karl Holl “shaped Bonhoeffer’s view of Martin Luther” as a theologian who “did not belong only to Germans,” a perspective that would resonate with Bonhoeffer in his own universal and ecumenical Christian worldview.²³ Bonhoeffer credited Adolf von Harnack for inspiring his “pursuit of ‘truth born out of freedom.’”²⁴ Despite his appreciation for both Holl and Harnack, however, Bonhoeffer would write his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* under the supervision of Reinhold Seeberg.²⁵ Bonhoeffer was drawn to work with Seeberg because of his “eclectic” approach to theology, which included a focus on “the practical reality of human fellowship,” a theme that would maintain a presence in Bonhoeffer’s thought, as seen especially in his work *Life Together*.²⁶

While it would be incorrect to classify Bonhoeffer as a liberal theologian, it would be equally problematic to ignore the impact of his student years, spent with some of the great minds of liberal theology at that time, on his work.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 327.

²¹ Dramm, 26.

²² Marsh, 43.

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁵ Ibid., 49.

²⁶ Ibid., 50.

Karl Barth and Dialectical Theology

It can be argued that out of the many theologians that Bonhoeffer encountered, none had as significant of an impact upon him as did Karl Barth. Although his personal relationship with Barth was important, including their shared position within the Confessing Church movement, a close evaluation of this relationship is out of the scope of this research project. Instead, the focus here will be on the impact of Barth's dialectical theology, also known as neo-orthodoxy, on Bonhoeffer's own thought.

While Bonhoeffer excelled academically at Berlin University, it was when he first read Barth that "everything changed."²⁷ Barth's writing, with its appreciation for the utter strangeness of the Bible, "sounded the death knell to peaceful times for liberal theology."²⁸ For Barth, liberal theology failed in its inability to recognize that "the Kingdom of God is not a reality that stands alongside culture and history; it is the new, the different, the unexpected, the *wholly other*."²⁹ With this point of view, which was radical for the time, Barth ushered in the dialectical school of thought. Dialectical theology turned away from liberal theology's belief that God could be known by human reason and studied in the world, and instead embraced revelation of God in the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ as the source Christian knowledge. For dialectical theologians, the error of liberal theology was that it did not maintain a critical distance from the world and thus lost the ability to recognize and critique its sinfulness.

²⁷ Ibid., 51.

²⁸ Dramm, 26.

²⁹ Marsh, 53.

Bonhoeffer's discovery of and vast appreciation for Barth, who was scorned by liberal theologians such as Harnack, led Bonhoeffer to see himself as "between Bonn and Berlin, between the chairs of dialectic and liberal theology."³⁰ As such, Bonhoeffer would never fully belong to one side or the other. While Bonhoeffer appreciated Barth's work in rejecting the notion that religion was just another sphere of human existence, thereby stripping it of all its transcendence, Bonhoeffer did not find this view entirely unproblematic. From Bonhoeffer's point of view, the failings of liberal theology and dialectical theology were really two sides of the same coin. While under liberal theology, Christianity became totally "subject to the world," dialectical theology made the equal but opposite mistake of presenting a Christianity that "took flight from it."³¹ For Bonhoeffer, Barth's "positivism of revelation" correctly liberated Christianity doctrines from the limitations imposed upon it by liberal theology, but did not go far enough in determining how Christians should apply these doctrines to their worldly lives.³² In Bonhoeffer's point of view, Barth left this critical question about how Christians should relate to the world unanswered.

Martin Luther

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Martin Luther on Bonhoeffer's theology. Both Luther's theology, such as the doctrine of two kingdoms, and his biography, particularly his departure from life in the monastery, were very impactful for Bonhoeffer. Although these are just two examples of how Martin Luther influenced

³⁰ Marsh, 54; Dramm, 27.

³¹ Feil, 107.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 280.

Bonhoeffer's thought, they demonstrate the significance of the great theologian of the Reformation on Bonhoeffer's theology.

Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms, which held that God had established the kingdom of earth, ruled by human governments, and the kingdom of heaven, which was led by the church, would prove influential for Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer did not interpret the doctrine of two kingdoms as a call to dismiss the kingdom of earth and to focus solely on the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he considered this interpretation to be an incorrect reading of Martin Luther's original intentions for this doctrine. According to Bonhoeffer, when he developed the doctrine of two kingdoms,

“Luther was protesting against a Christianity which was striving for independence and detaching itself from the reality in Christ. He protested with the help of the secular and in the name of a better Christianity...It is only in this sense, as a polemical unity, that Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms is to be accepted.”³³

The doctrine of two kingdoms was not intended to create a barrier between the Church and the world or to insist upon the dominance of the kingdom of heaven, but rather to assert their unity in Christ. According to this interpretation, “there is no real possibility of being a Christian outside the reality of the world and...there is no real worldly existence outside the reality of Jesus Christ.”³⁴ Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms was at least in part what attracted Bonhoeffer to the events of Luther's own life.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 197.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

As important as Martin Luther's theology was to Bonhoeffer, "*Lutheran* elements were less formative than *Luther* himself."³⁵ In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer discusses Luther's departure from monastic life in his evaluation of the difference between cheap and costly grace. According to Bonhoeffer, the problem with monastic life was that it took the requirements of costly grace, which "forces people under the yoke of following Jesus Christ," and made it "the extraordinary achievement of individuals, to which the majority of church members need not be obligated."³⁶ Additionally, by separating itself from the church-community, the monastery's "estrangement from the world had been turned into a new spiritual conformity to this world."³⁷ The monastery had separated itself from the church-community and had therefore bought into the secularization of the world, understood as the necessary separation of religion from other secular elements of life. Bonhoeffer agreed with Luther's criticism of this institution and with the assertion that "the 'unworldliness' of the Christian life is meant to take place in the midst of this world."³⁸ Bonhoeffer would maintain the belief in both thought and action that Christian life, based on Luther's return from the monastery to the world, should take place in this world and not in a cloistered realm or state of being.

Religious Thought in Prisons

While there is currently very little research on how prisons impact religious thought, there are three themes that are particularly important in the current scholarship: liberation, justice, and practical theology. In this thesis, the presence or absence of these

³⁵ Dramm, 25.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 45; *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

themes will be analyzed in Bonhoeffer's writings prior to and during his imprisonment to determine how prison impacted Bonhoeffer's thought. Before looking to Bonhoeffer's prison writings, it is important to address how scholars have accounted for religious thought for people in prison more generally. These pieces and their interpretations of the effect of imprisonment on religious thought will inform the research conducted in this thesis and will act as a lens through which to view Bonhoeffer's particular situation and his prison writings.

Liberation

Because of their position within a system that greatly restricts freedom, prisoners show great desire for this freedom and liberation in their religious expressions.³⁹ This statement resonates with Bonhoeffer's prison writings, which express a desire for both physical freedom from Nazi prisons and for freedom from sin bestowed onto the individual by God. The theme of liberation is relatively absent from *Discipleship*, but does play a role in *Ethics*, particularly in regards to how obedience to Jesus Christ's will is liberating in the sense that it does not bind the individual to follow other laws or their own conscience.

Justice

Justice, particularly a social justice that addresses the suffering of others, is a significant theme in religious thought in prisons.⁴⁰ In one of the most celebrated pieces of Bonhoeffer's prison writings, he identifies the pursuit of justice as one of the main ways

³⁹ Elizabeth Haysom, "Prison's Door to Freedom," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46, 2 (Summer 2007): 135; Sadie Pounder, "Prison Theology: A Theology of Liberation, Hope, and Justice," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, 3 (Fall 2004): 282.

⁴⁰ Pounder, 287-8.

that someone can be a Christian.⁴¹ Clearly, Bonhoeffer was concerned with justice and the suffering of others in his prison writings, and these can certainly be tied to the context of living within a prison and being surrounded by fellow prisoners who were also suffering unjustly. While it is unlikely that the importance of justice for Bonhoeffer was entirely related to his imprisonment, since it is a theme that also appears in *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, it can be argued that the experience of imprisonment added new significance to this concept for Bonhoeffer.

Practical Theology

In his study of prison letters written during the English Reformation, Gilpin suggests that the theological claims made in these letters were concerned with “practical theology, the use of religious thought to interpret the concrete challenges, aspirations, and inevitabilities of human life” as opposed to more theoretical or philosophical undertakings.⁴² Although dealing with a very different historical context, this assertion coincides with Bonhoeffer’s own acknowledgement of his theological transformation from “phraseology to reality,” a process which began during his travels abroad and continued throughout his theological career.⁴³ Gilpin understands this focus on practical theology to be the circumstantial result of the position of the individual within the prison

⁴¹ Schlingensiepen, 355.

⁴² W. Clark Gilpin, “The Letter from Prison in Christian History and Theology,” Martin Marty Center’s Religion and Culture Web Forum at the University of Chicago Divinity School, last modified January 2003, accessed November 20, 2015, https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/012003/Gilpin_Commentary2.pdf, 17.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 275.

environment; their theology is practical because it was “never abstracted into a system.”⁴⁴ It is clear that the presence of practical theology in Bonhoeffer’s writings prior to imprisonment are not solely the result of circumstance, but due to Bonhoeffer’s interest in pastoral pragmatics, concrete ethics, and so forth. However, it is plausible to suggest that the prison environment may have augmented this concern for practical theology in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in accordance with Gilpin’s findings about the presence of practical theology in prison writings.

⁴⁴ Gilpin, 17.

II. THEOLOGY BEFORE IMPRISONMENT: *DISCIPLESHIP* AND *ETHICS*

In this chapter, two books written by Bonhoeffer prior to his imprisonment, *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, will be studied to determine the extent to which the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology appear in these texts. Before conducting that evaluation, some preliminary remarks will be made about each work, which will provide a more general understanding of the occasions of these writings and illustrate the overall focus and trajectory of Bonhoeffer's theology.

Discipleship

Discipleship, which was published in 1937, can be categorized as the first book that Bonhoeffer wrote "from faith, in faith, and for faith."⁴⁵ Although Bonhoeffer had previously written two other works, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, these books are far more academic in nature than *Discipleship*, which Bonhoeffer wrote after his self-described transition from an academic theologian to a Christian.⁴⁶ While *Discipleship* is not necessarily inconsistent with his earlier works, it is more consistent with his so-called late theology as seen in *Ethics*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which is the subject of the third chapter.

⁴⁵ Dramm, 81.

⁴⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 202-3.

Context

Although *Discipleship* was not published until after the Gestapo closed Bonhoeffer's seminary in 1937, the years spent at Zingst and Finkenwalde, the locations of the seminary, form the contextual backdrop of this work. In fact, "entire sections of his lectures went straight into the book."⁴⁷ It is important, therefore, to spend some time discussing the mission of Bonhoeffer's seminary.

The undertaking of Bonhoeffer's seminary was not just to train new pastors, but to instruct the students on "a new manner of being Christian" based on "prayer, Bible study, and meditation."⁴⁸ In contrast to Bonhoeffer's experience at Berlin University, the seminary at Finkenwalde also emphasized the importance of "practical ministry," from baptisms to funerals and all manner of church life in between.⁴⁹ The seminary was Bonhoeffer's "experiment in Protestant monasticism," as witnessed by the focus on fellowship and open confession.⁵⁰ However, Bonhoeffer did not intend for the pastors to retreat from the world, but to explore the question of "What does it mean to be a Christian?"⁵¹ The answer to this question, as Bonhoeffer saw it, was the central message of *Discipleship*.

Overview

As aforementioned, Bonhoeffer's mission in writing *Discipleship* was to elucidate what it means to be a Christian. For Bonhoeffer, this question could only be answered by

⁴⁷ Ibid., 451.

⁴⁸ Marsh, 232.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 234.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁵¹ Ibid., 242.

focusing on “neither the interior of man nor the exterior of the world, but the person of Jesus Christ, His image and example.”⁵² To that end, the major themes discussed in *Discipleship* that will be reviewed in this section are grace, discipleship as portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount, and how discipleship applies to the church-community.

Costly Grace

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer launches a critique of the current Christian understanding of grace and identifies it as “cheap grace,” which is “denial of the incarnation of the word of God.”⁵³ Cheap grace does not challenge the sinner to live any differently than she already does or to distinguish herself from the world in any way. It is “grace without discipleship...grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴

Bonhoeffer contrasts this idea of cheap grace with costly grace, which calls the individual into discipleship with Jesus Christ. In contrast to cheap grace, this grace is costly because “it costs people their lives” and “costs God the life of God’s Son.”⁵⁵ This introduction to true, costly grace is important because of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the relationship between grace and discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, living and being justified by grace means following Christ, and vice versa.⁵⁶ The two are inextricably linked, as Bonhoeffer continues to demonstrate throughout the text.

⁵² Dramm, 83.

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

Discipleship and the Sermon on the Mount

According to Bonhoeffer, discipleship is not a Christian standing up and professing her faith, but is the “obedient deed” in response to Christ’s call.⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer explores this understanding of discipleship through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7.

In response to the beatitudes of Matthew 5, Bonhoeffer argues that the characteristics that Jesus called blessed, such as want and renunciation, are not blessed as such, but only because the call to discipleship leads Jesus’ disciples to live in this state of being.⁵⁸ In response to Matthew 6, Bonhoeffer differentiates between visible and hidden discipleship. Visible discipleship is a response to Christ’s call to be extraordinary that can lead the disciple to the pursuit of visible acts of righteousness as their own end.⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer urges against this visible discipleship in favor of hidden discipleship, in which the disciples do not see themselves in their righteous acts.⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer expands this idea of hidden discipleship to apply also to how the Christian prays and to acts of piety. For Bonhoeffer, neither of these acts should emphasize the worth of the disciple, but should be solely concerned with the worth of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer interprets Matthew 7 as a condemnation of Christian judgment, which he calls “the forbidden evaluation of other persons.”⁶¹ Such judgment is to be left entirely up to God.⁶² Instead of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 101-102.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 148-9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 149.

⁶¹ Ibid., 171.

⁶² Ibid., 174.

focusing on the world around them, disciples must focus only on obediently following Jesus Christ.⁶³

Discipleship and the Church-Community

The second part of *Discipleship* is an attempt to determine how Jesus Christ calls Christians to discipleship today, since he is no longer present on earth in bodily form as he was for the first disciples.⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer answers this question by insisting that “Jesus Christ is not dead but alive and still speaking to us today through the testimony of scripture” and that “the preaching and sacrament of the church is the place where Jesus Christ is present.”⁶⁵ This assertion makes clear the influence of Barth and his understanding of the relationship between incarnation, revelation, and preaching on Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer declares that just as Christ took a corporeal form in the New Testament, he exists today in a physical body, “taking the form of the church-community.”⁶⁶ Therefore, the call to discipleship is proclaimed today from the preaching of scripture in the church-community. As such, the individuals who constitute the church-community cannot hide from the world, but must, like Luther after his return from the monastery, practice their “‘unworldliness’...in the midst of this world.”⁶⁷ The church-community fulfills its mission to call individuals to be disciples of Jesus Christ through being a community that is still truly in the world, not a monastic one that seeks to escape the world.

⁶³ Ibid., 176.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 201.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 201-202.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 226.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 245.

Prison Themes in *Discipleship*

The purpose of this section is to explore the extent to which the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology are present in Bonhoeffer's work prior to his imprisonment in order to provide a point of comparison for his prison writings in chapter three. Of the three themes identified with religious prison writing, the two that appear to be most influential in *Discipleship* are justice and practical theology. The theme of liberation is less prevalent in this work and as such it will not be discussed in this section.

Justice

In Bonhoeffer's discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, he approaches the beatitude of "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" as having definite implications for how the Christian disciple should pursue justice.⁶⁸ According to Bonhoeffer, peacemakers "renounce violence and strife" because "those things never help the cause of Christ."⁶⁹ To that end, disciples should be "silent in the face of hatred and injustice."⁷⁰ These statements appear to suggest that whatever injustice a Christian is faced with, their response can never be a violent one. When considering Bonhoeffer's life, particularly his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler, such assertions may seem inconsistent with Bonhoeffer's own actions. How can the concept that a Christian must never engage in violence even in situations of great injustice be reconciled with Bonhoeffer's reality?

⁶⁸ Matt. 5:9

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 108.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

An additional example of Bonhoeffer addressing the notion of justice in *Discipleship* takes place within his larger analysis of the Sermon on the Mount. In response to Matthew 7:1-5, which urges the believer not to judge others, Bonhoeffer argues that the only way a Christian should respond to evil is through prayer. “Disciples should know that their worry and concern about others must lead them to prayer.”⁷¹ At this point in Bonhoeffer’s writing, there are no caveats that call the Christian to act in the pursuit of justice or, alternatively, in order to prevent injustice. Instead, disciples must “always encounter other people only as those whose sins are forgiven,” as those who are justified, seemingly without concern for how those sins might affect other people.⁷² As with Bonhoeffer’s reading of the peacemaker beatitude, this passage seems inconsistent with Bonhoeffer’s later writing and actions.

Without attempting to explain away these passages from *Discipleship* or to overwrite them by referencing Bonhoeffer’s later writings or actions, one way to understand these writings is to consider Bonhoeffer’s influences and the situation in Germany at that time. During his year of study in New York from 1930-1931, Bonhoeffer met Jean Lasserre, a French pacifist who would be later noted as “one of the sources of [Bonhoeffer’s] growing pacifist convictions.”⁷³ While Bonhoeffer would begin to explore Christian pacifism in the United States, upon returning to Germany this concept took on “additional urgency” as Bonhoeffer realized that his homeland had “created a mystique

⁷¹ Ibid., 174.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, editors’ introduction to *Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 14.

about war and the manly glory that could be attained only on the battlefield.”⁷⁴

Bonhoeffer’s interest in pacifism and his awareness of his country’s obsession with war are important to consider when reading Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of Matthew 5:9 and 7:1-5. It can be argued that during the writing of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer was more concerned with attempting to persuade those infatuated with violence to adopt Christ’s message of peace instead of directly challenging the injustices perpetuated by the German state himself.

In addition to these examples, *Discipleship* also includes passages that seem to affirm the importance of just treatment of human beings. When human beings were first created, they were created “in God’s own image.”⁷⁵ Through the serpent’s deception and the entrance of sin into humankind, humans distorted this divine image.⁷⁶ However, through Christ, who “assumes human form and comes to us,” the human form is once again made the image of God.⁷⁷ Because of this, whoever “attacks the least of the people attacks Christ.”⁷⁸ Similarly, injustice against humanity is injustice against God. While Bonhoeffer does not take this conclusion to a further extent of arguing that Christians are obliged to prevent or take action against these attacks or injustices when they occur, it is still clear that Bonhoeffer regards the human form, insofar as it is the image of God, as precious and worthy of righteous treatment.

⁷⁴ Kelly, 15.

⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 281.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

These examples of Bonhoeffer's attention to the theme of justice in *Discipleship* clearly demonstrate that while Bonhoeffer considered violence and other injustices against people to be an attack on God, he did not consider it the disciple's duty to take direct action against such injustices. Instead, Bonhoeffer argued that when faced with evil and injustice, the Christian should take no action beyond prayer.

Practical Theology

In his opening remarks, Bonhoeffer identifies a problem with the Christian church that has caused some to "become estranged from the church and its message."⁷⁹ Of particular concern in this regard is that the church has ceased to focus solely on "Jesus himself and Jesus alone," but has instead become too entrenched in the "merely human, institutional, or doctrinaire."⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer believed that Christian preaching that was too dogmatic and "burdened with difficult human rules" and that did not speak to people's practical needs would drive people away from Jesus.⁸¹ Clearly, one of the motivations for Bonhoeffer in writing *Discipleship* was to challenge the overly doctrinal nature of the message of the Christian church and instead argue for a more practical focus. Bonhoeffer saw something problematic about preaching whose burdens and demands would "be rejected by people who work and worry about their daily bread."⁸² This concern for presenting a practical theology would be repeated throughout *Discipleship* in its continued focus on Christ's call to follow him above all else.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

⁸¹ Ibid., 38.

⁸² Ibid.

Practical theology comes up again in *Discipleship* with the notion of simple obedience, which Bonhoeffer contrasts with “legalistic obedience.”⁸³ Simple obedience is belief and obedience to “the word of Jesus Christ,” without concern for “conscience, responsibility, piety, [or] even the law.”⁸⁴ Through the “concrete call” and simple obedience, Jesus brings about a situation where his disciples are “free for faith only,” a statement that reflects the theme of liberation in addition to practical theology.⁸⁵ Simple obedience comes up again in Bonhoeffer’s analysis of the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer insists that the only true way to understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount is to “simply go and obey.”⁸⁶ For Bonhoeffer, Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount for the express purpose of being acted upon, against which the only other possibility is inaction, which includes all “our questions, complications, and interpretations” concerning this passage.⁸⁷ The Sermon on the Mount is not a theoretical exercise or an explanation of Christian doctrine, but is for Bonhoeffer a set of instructions for the Christian to follow. Bonhoeffer’s concept of simple obedience and the concrete call to action represent the clarity and practicality of his theology in *Discipleship*.

The mission of *Discipleship* is to provide a concrete answer to the highly practical questions of “What did Jesus want to say to us?” and “What does he want from us today?”⁸⁸ The answers to these questions provided in *Discipleship* can certainly be considered practical theology, with Bonhoeffer’s focus on speaking to people’s practical

⁸³ Ibid., 78.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 182.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 37.

needs and his insistence that the Christian disciple is called simply to obey Jesus' word, as found in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in scripture.

Ethics

The second part of this chapter will focus on *Ethics*, the completion of which Bonhoeffer identified as his “principal mission in life.”⁸⁹ Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer was unable to complete this work before his arrest in 1943. While some chapters of this work appear to be relatively complete, other sections of the book are clearly unfinished and contain outlines that Bonhoeffer presumably intended to revise at a later date. In a letter written to Eberhard Bethge from prison, Bonhoeffer lamented the unfinished status of *Ethics* and acknowledged that his “ideas were still incomplete,” but was nevertheless confident that he had told Bethge “the essentials.”⁹⁰ Therefore, while *Ethics* presents a challenge to the Bonhoeffer scholar because it is incomplete, the published version, which was edited by Bethge, is a useful resource for the current project of determining the presence of religious prison writing themes in Bonhoeffer's earlier works.

Context

Bonhoeffer began to write *Ethics* in the fall of 1940, after he returned from America in order to “join the struggle that would cost him his life.”⁹¹ He had at this time made the “decisive and irrevocable step” to join the resistance against the Nazi regime through his post in Abwehr.⁹² Abwehr recruited Bonhoeffer as a spy, interested in his church contacts abroad and his ability to learn about other governments through these

⁸⁹ Damm, 92.

⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 129.

⁹¹ Marsh, 285.

⁹² Damm, 95.

networks.⁹³ With the help of his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi, Bonhoeffer worked against the National Socialist government by communicating the existence and goals of the resistance movement to the Allied governments in the hopes of gaining their support and their trust.⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer was still working on *Ethics* at the time of his arrest in 1943, and its pages “lay prominently on his desk in order to help camouflage his other, secret activities.”⁹⁵

Far from being simply a decoy to throw the Nazis off his trail, Bonhoeffer had a “special, emotional bond” with *Ethics*, which was perhaps exaggerated by the fact that it would remain unfinished due to his imprisonment and eventual execution.⁹⁶ The grim state of the world at the time of Bonhoeffer’s writing certainly did not escape his notice or consideration. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argues that despite the “hardness” of the world, which “exhausts its fury against the body of Christ,” God “forgives the world its sin” and loves the world, even though it is “not an ideal world, but the real,” practical, “world.”⁹⁷ For Bonhoeffer, Christian ethics are based in the “concrete situation” of this flawed, sinful world that God yet loves.⁹⁸

Overview

Because of its status as an unfinished work, it is difficult to review *Ethics* as a whole, as was done in the previous part of this chapter with *Discipleship*. However, it is still possible to review several important themes that appear in the text as it is available.

⁹³ Marsh, 290.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 291.

⁹⁵ Damm, 95.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 72-73.

⁹⁸ Damm, 97.

The general question to which Bonhoeffer responds through his writing in *Ethics* is how the Christian can follow Jesus Christ concretely in the world. To that end, some of the major themes that are addressed in *Ethics* are Christian ethics based in the reality of Jesus Christ and Christian ethics as concrete ethics.

Ethics in the Reality of Jesus Christ

Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christian ethics was grounded completely "on Jesus Christ in the strictest possible manner without reducing this name to a mere abstract concept."⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer was concerned with the real person of Jesus, not Jesus as a symbol for some otherworldly concept like salvation or righteousness. According to Bonhoeffer, the reality of God enters the world through the person of Jesus Christ, which means "one can speak neither of God nor of the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality which do not take account of Him are abstractions."¹⁰⁰ Christian ethics must not focus on the question of how to be good, but on how to show God's reality as the ultimate reality.¹⁰¹ For Bonhoeffer, "the wish to be good consists solely in the longing for what is real in God" and in doing his will.¹⁰²

Christian Ethics as Concrete

Central to Bonhoeffer's portrayal of Christian ethics in *Ethics* is the understanding that through Jesus Christ, the world has been reconciled to God. It is reconciled not by its own merit or virtue, but simply by God's love. "It is not by ideals and programmes or by conscience, duty, responsibility and virtue that reality can be confronted and overcome,

⁹⁹ Feil, 86.

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 192.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 189.

but simply and solely by the perfect love of God.”¹⁰³ Because God loves the world and the human beings who inhabit it, Christians are to mirror that love in how they encounter the world and other people. Importantly, this means that for Bonhoeffer, Christian ethics are oriented toward the concrete world.

According to Bonhoeffer, concrete ethics must be able to adapt to the contextual reality of a particular situation. “For the responsible man the given situation is not simply the material on which he is to impress his idea or his programme by force, but this situation is itself drawn in into the action and shares in giving form to the deed.”¹⁰⁴ Christian ethics are not a set list of absolute principles that must be followed in all times and in all places, but instead, ethics “can only be heard in a local and temporal context.”¹⁰⁵ A concrete Christian ethics “shuns sublime directives written high on the heavens of ideals” and instead attempts to follow God’s commandments according to the current situation.¹⁰⁶

Prison Themes in *Ethics*

This section will uncover how the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology appear in *Ethics* to demonstrate the prevalence of these themes in Bonhoeffer’s writings before he was imprisoned, which can then be compared to how these themes are taken up in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 224.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 273.

¹⁰⁶ Dramm, 99.

Liberation

The concept of liberation appears on several occasions in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, and generally functions as a consequence of the grace and divine love bestowed on the disciple by Christ. According to Bonhoeffer, Jesus is a source of freedom for the disciple in that the disciple, after choosing to follow Jesus, is no longer burdened with "a plurality of possibilities, conflicts or alternatives."¹⁰⁷ In Jesus, disciples are liberated from this burden of choice and can be free in the knowledge that the decision to follow Jesus is not one option among many for those who want to follow the will of God, but is in fact the only choice. Bonhoeffer contrasts the gospel and its message of freedom in Jesus with the "law of logical alternatives" that constrained the Pharisees.¹⁰⁸ Jesus freed the disciples from these laws that served to encumber the Pharisees from what should have been their true purpose: following Christ.

Freedom also plays a role in Bonhoeffer's discussion of conscience, which is described as a force that "makes itself heard as the call of human existence to unity with itself."¹⁰⁹ The unity sought by the conscience is constituted on the claim that humans are like God in their understanding of good and evil. When a person acts upon their conscience, therefore, he "continues to be bound by a law of his own finding."¹¹⁰ With Jesus, on the other hand, disciples are freed from this "ungodly self-justification" and can instead pursue unity not in self-justification, but in Christ himself.¹¹¹ For Bonhoeffer, the

¹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 33.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

conscience which has been set free from the law by Jesus Christ is no longer worried about its own justification, but can instead “enter into the guilt of another man for the other man’s sake” and “stands wide open for our neighbour and for his concrete distress.”¹¹² The conscience freed by Jesus can now act on behalf of another, even if that means it incurs guilt according to the law.

When the conscience is freed, the individual is capable of responsible action. Bonhoeffer describes responsible action as “a free venture; it is not justified by any law; it is performed without any claim to a valid self-justification, and therefore also without any claim to an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil.”¹¹³ While the concept of responsible action, in combination with the conscience freed by Jesus, might make it seem like the Christian is really enabled to do whatever they want without concern for the ethical status of their actions, Bonhoeffer insists that responsible action “stands between obligation and freedom.”¹¹⁴ On the one hand, the disciple is freed from the crippling constraints of the law and the attempt to self-justify their actions, but on the other hand, they must be obedient to the will of God. As Bonhoeffer puts it, “obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will.”¹¹⁵ The disciple is liberated by Christ, but is still obligated to be obedient to Jesus’ will.

A final example of how Bonhoeffer addresses the theme of liberation in *Ethics* is located in his discussion of the relationship between Christian ethics and secular institutions. Similar to how human beings are freed by Christ, secular institutions also

¹¹² Ibid., 240-241.

¹¹³ Ibid., 245.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 249.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 248.

receive liberty “under the dominion of Christ.”¹¹⁶ In Christ, secular institutions receive “their emancipation for true worldliness,” which means that they are not subordinated to the Church or even to human ideals.¹¹⁷ Instead, these worldly institutions are liberated to perform their functions alongside of the Church, not in subjugation to it.¹¹⁸ This is an unsurprising stance for Bonhoeffer to take in consideration of his support for how liberal theology did not attempt to bring all worldly institutions under the purview of religion or the church.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer claims that through obedience to Christ, human beings are freed from choice and from answering only to their conscience. They are free in that there is no other option except to simply be obedient to Christ’s will and nothing else. Through Christ and the freeing of the conscience, individuals are able to take responsible action in the world without concern for the consequences.

Justice

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer is far more concerned with taking action in the face of injustice than he was in *Discipleship*, where prayer was put forth as the only way to respond to evil. For example, in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argues against ideological action that “carries its own justification within itself” and argues in favor of responsible action that “does not lay claim to knowledge of its own ultimate righteousness.”¹¹⁹ In the face of injustice, Christians must act not in the pursuit of their own righteousness, but must

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 323.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 324.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 326.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 230-231.

instead act with “God and [the] neighbor” as the “origin of responsible action.”¹²⁰ In terms of justice, this marks a dramatic turn from the proposed action of *Discipleship*, which instead put forth silence and prayer as the only actions a disciple should take in the face of injustice. Bonhoeffer, as he presents himself in *Ethics*, would clearly argue that it is the Christian’s duty to act not out of concern for their own goodness, but out of concern for the other and God.

Bonhoeffer acknowledges that his program of responsible action in *Ethics* includes the “readiness to accept guilt.”¹²¹ This interacts with his understanding of justice because it explains the length to which the Christian can and must go in pursuit of responsible action, which “is concerned solely and entirely with the other man.”¹²² While this is not limited to acting in order to preserve justice or fight injustice, it is reasonable to assume that these pursuits would fall under the purview of Bonhoeffer’s responsible action, assuming that the motivation was “selfless love” for others.¹²³ Just as Jesus Christ became guilty out of his selfless love for humankind, so too must Christians be ready to incur guilt as a consequence of their responsible action. For Bonhoeffer, what is truly problematic is not a Christian becoming guilty, but a Christian refusing to act because “he sets his own personal innocence above his responsibility for men” and therefore fails to see that “real innocence shows itself precisely in a man’s entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men.”¹²⁴ Responsible action, including the pursuit of justice,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 231.

¹²¹ Ibid., 236.

¹²² Ibid., 237.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 238.

will often require Christians to become guilty, but in accepting this guilt on behalf of others they participate in “the redeeming mystery of Christ’s bearing guilt.”¹²⁵

Bonhoeffer’s discussion of justice in *Ethics* marks a strong departure from his work in *Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer argues that Christians must always act when faced with injustice. Furthermore, the disciple should not be concerned with incurring guilt when acting against injustice, but should instead always be concerned with the welfare of the other person.

Practical Theology

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer addresses the indifference shown toward “any kind of theoretical or systematic ethics,” which fail to measure up to the challenges presented by the “superabounding reality of concrete ethical problems.”¹²⁶ Every situation calls for concrete, practical ethics that actually address the problems at hand. In response to this need, Bonhoeffer proposes that through the combination of simplicity and wisdom, Christians will be “set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision” and will belong “simply and solely to God and to the will of God.”¹²⁷ The combination of simplicity and wisdom enables the human being to “look in freedom at God and at reality,” an ability that is made possible through Jesus Christ, who Bonhoeffer describes as “God and the world in one.”¹²⁸ Christ makes possible the pursuit of a concrete ethic with reconciliation as its origin, which Bonhoeffer calls “ethics as formation.”¹²⁹ Ethics

¹²⁵ Ibid., 237.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 66.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 71-72.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 87-89.

as formation are not abstract ethics, but instead attempt to “speak about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world.”¹³⁰ Concrete Christian ethics are an example of practical theology because they are based in “concrete commandments and instructions,” not abstract principles or theories.¹³¹

The theme of practical theology also appears in *Ethics* in Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the limitations of ethical discourse. According to Bonhoeffer, while ethical discourse is at times important and necessary, discussions concerning ethics “must always be considered only as exceptional occurrences.”¹³² Ethical discourse must be followed by a time when action, not discussion, comprises “the centre” and “the fulness of everyday life.”¹³³ Bonhoeffer contrasts the ethical with God’s commandments, arguing that “the ‘ethical’ defines only the boundary,” while “the commandment of God...is concerned with the positive contents” of human life.¹³⁴ As such, the goal of Christian ethics is not the pursuit of the ethical or ethical discourse, but following God’s commandments.¹³⁵ God’s commandments, according to Bonhoeffer, allow humans to live as they are before God and “not merely as a taker of ethical decisions or as a student of ethics.”¹³⁶ For Bonhoeffer, Christian ethics are concerned not with perpetuating an endless cycle of ethical discourse, but with enumerating God’s commandments, which allow disciples to live full, human lives. As such, these Christian ethics are practical in that they are focused

¹³⁰ Ibid., 89.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 263.

¹³³ Ibid., 264.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 280.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 272.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 277.

on allowing “the flood of life to flow freely,” unencumbered by highly philosophical or theoretical ethical discourse.¹³⁷

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer touches on the concept of practical theology through his discussion of Christian ethics. According to Bonhoeffer, Christian ethics are always meant to be concrete, meaning that they are to be applied to the world and speak to how the Christian can follow the will of God. Furthermore, ethical discourse, while sometimes necessary, should be limited and should always be taken up for the purpose of following such discourse with action.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 278.

III. THEOLOGY DURING IMPRISONMENT: *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON*

This portion of the thesis will focus on Bonhoeffer's prison writings as compiled in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Before considering the occurrence of the religious prison themes in these letters, a biographical overview of Bonhoeffer's time in prison will be conducted in order to provide a contextual understanding of Bonhoeffer's experiences in prison and notable events of his imprisonment. This section will be followed by an investigation of how prison affected the person of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in order to determine whether or not Bonhoeffer's prison writings should be considered as contributions to his theology. After these preliminary topics have been addressed, the rest of the chapter will consist of an analysis of the appearance of the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology within Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Overview of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Imprisonment

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943.¹³⁸ Bonhoeffer spent the majority of his imprisonment in Tegel prison in Berlin awaiting trial and hoping, along with his family and friends, to be released. However, in September 1944, "gravely incriminating material" was discovered after the failed assassination attempt that decisively put an end to Bonhoeffer's hopes for freedom.¹³⁹ After that point, Bonhoeffer

¹³⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 799.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

was the responsibility of the Gestapo, and was moved from Tegel to a prison cellar on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, then to the Buchenwald concentration camp, and finally to the Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he was executed on April 9, 1945.¹⁴⁰

Once Bonhoeffer was moved from the custody of the military in Tegel to the custody of the Gestapo, few letters were exchanged between him and his family, his fiancée, or his friend Eberhard Bethge. As such, the most important period of Bonhoeffer's imprisonment for the purpose of this thesis is his time spent in Tegel prison. In Tegel, Bonhoeffer was initially permitted to exchange letters with his parents every ten days. However, communication was sporadic due to the fact that everything had to go through the censor. Because of this, Bonhoeffer enlisted "illegal messengers" to surreptitiously smuggle letters in and out of Tegel prison.¹⁴¹

Eberhard Bethge, in his editing of *Letters and Papers from Prison* and his biography about Bonhoeffer, divided Bonhoeffer's imprisonment into several general sections: his interrogation during the preliminary investigation, his time awaiting trial, a phase where Bonhoeffer and his loved ones were hoping for Hitler's overthrow, and the subsequent period after the failed assassination attempt.¹⁴² Although letters will be examined in this chapter from each of these stages, the period in which Bonhoeffer produced the theological writings most relevant to this study occurred while waiting for Hitler's assassination, from April to July 1944. During this short period, Bonhoeffer

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 894.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 839.

¹⁴² Eberhard Bethge, preface to *Letters and Papers from Prison*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Touchstone, 1997), ix.

exchanged many smuggled letters with Bethge that will inform the bulk of the material that will be analyzed in this chapter.

The Impact of Imprisonment on Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Due to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the writing of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, some scholars, such as Eric Metaxas, have sought to disavow these letters of their theological relevance and have argued that they should not be considered as part of the general canon of Bonhoeffer's theology. In his Bonhoeffer biography, Metaxas claims that if Bonhoeffer "had known that his private and ill-expressed theological thoughts would have found their way into seminary discussions of the future, he would have been not only embarrassed but deeply disturbed."¹⁴³ Metaxas is particularly uncomfortable with Bonhoeffer's concept of religionless Christianity, especially its adoption by "the liberal 'God is dead' theologians."¹⁴⁴ However, instead of arguing against this particular interpretation of religionless Christianity, Metaxas dismisses all of Bonhoeffer's religious prison writings by claiming that Bonhoeffer "never had time to work out much of his new thinking."¹⁴⁵ In so doing, Metaxas seems to argue that because Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and was communicating his thoughts in letters, the theological ideas contained within them are poorly conceived and are therefore unworthy of consideration alongside of his published works such as *Discipleship and Ethics*.

¹⁴³ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 465.

¹⁴⁴ Metaxas, 468.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 467.

To suggest that the religious writings in *Letters and Papers from Prison* are not as valuable as Bonhoeffer's other works due to their unrefined, unpublished status is a particularly tenuous argument for Metaxas to make, since he does not extend this qualification to *Ethics*. *Ethics* was unfinished and unpublished at the time of Bonhoeffer's death, and despite Metaxas' claims that it was "essentially complete," it is impossible to argue that Bonhoeffer would have made no further adjustments to the extant manuscript that was published posthumously.¹⁴⁶ While both *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison* can be considered incomplete, albeit informative, sources of information about Bonhoeffer's theology, Metaxas refers to *Ethics* as Bonhoeffer's "magnum opus" and appears to disregard the theology of the prison writings.¹⁴⁷

The purpose of this section is to argue that the theological writings contained within *Letters and Papers from Prison* should not be dismissed but should be considered an important part of Bonhoeffer's theology. This will be accomplished by considering Bonhoeffer's own thoughts about his prison writings and by considering how other scholars have addressed these prison writings.

The Impact of Imprisonment According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer spoke frequently of his condition through his prison letters, often for the purpose of reassuring his parents that they should not worry about his state of being. While his physical and mental state varied greatly, with the onset of illness and bouts of depression, Bonhoeffer also told Bethge that he had been "preserved from any serious

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 468.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 378; 468.

spiritual trial.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, Bonhoeffer wrote that while he had “learnt a great deal,” during his time in prison, he had not personally “changed very much.”¹⁴⁹ Despite the challenges and strain of being imprisoned, Bonhoeffer’s own words support the argument that his state of being within prison does not render his prison writings somehow inadmissible into his greater theological canon.

Additionally, in regards to his writings in particular, Bonhoeffer makes several statements throughout his letters that would support the claim that while these writings are not as polished and refined as his published works, they are still of value when studying Bonhoeffer’s theology. To that end, Bonhoeffer stated “one writes some things more freely and more vividly in a letter than in a book, and often I have better thoughts in conversation by correspondence than by myself.”¹⁵⁰ These letters allow the Bonhoeffer scholar to consider Bonhoeffer’s theology as it is developing in conversation with Bethge, instead of viewing the finished product in a published work. As such, they are of incredible value in analyzing the overall progression of Bonhoeffer’s thought, despite their status as unpublished and fragmentary.

It is clear that in Bonhoeffer’s own opinion as expressed in his letters, his imprisonment had not caused him such tribulation so as to impact or change him personally to a great degree. Furthermore, the letters exchanged with Bethge allowed Bonhoeffer to explore his theological ideas with a certain level of freedom and intensity that was uncharacteristic of his published works, which were carefully edited and

¹⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 128-129.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 347.

delivered in measured, calculated language. While Bonhoeffer could not have known that his prison letters would one day be published and studied alongside of works such as *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, it is unreasonable to claim that for that reason, the ideas contained within these letters are not worthy of study.

Other Interpretations of the Impact of Imprisonment on Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Scholars have also engaged with the question of Bonhoeffer's state of being during his imprisonment, and in doing so have generally concluded that Bonhoeffer kept his wits about him during his long imprisonment, although there were certainly many trying periods. In his biography, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen claims that Bonhoeffer "overcame the 'prison shock'" by drawing on his experiences with monastic life in Finkenwalde and Ettal, a monastery in Bavaria where Bonhoeffer was a guest.¹⁵¹ Schlingensiepen also notes that Bonhoeffer's experience in prison was "unusual" because of his mother's relation to General Hase, an important member of the military, which was a connection that made him a "privileged prisoner."¹⁵² Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's own personality and manner won him the respect of guards and fellow prisoners alike, leading him to the individuals who would act as his letter smugglers.¹⁵³ While it would be incorrect to minimize the difficulty of Bonhoeffer's imprisonment, his prior experiences in monastic solitude, fortuitous family connections, and his magnetic personality made his experience less taxing than it might otherwise have been. This counters a possible argument that would suggest that the trauma of Bonhoeffer's imprisonment impacted him

¹⁵¹ Schlingensiepen, 325.

¹⁵² Ibid., 342.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

in such a way as to render his theological writings from this time inadmissible into his overall theological body of work.

In Sabine Dramm's study of Bonhoeffer's theology, the trials of Bonhoeffer's imprisonment are identified as a situation that put Bonhoeffer "to the extreme test (which does not at all lessen their value and impact - quite the contrary!)."¹⁵⁴ For Dramm and scholars like her, it is clear that *Letters and Papers from Prison* cannot be read while ignoring the fact that Bonhoeffer was indeed in prison during this time. However, that is not a call to dismiss these letters. In fact, it is clear that Dramm believes the context behind these letters is exactly what makes them so important to the study of Bonhoeffer's theology. Dramm, unlike Metaxas, calls for a tempered study of Bonhoeffer's prison writings, not a wholesale rejection of them. "To marginalize [Bonhoeffer's] theology in Tegel Prison is just as unwarranted as to glorify it blindly."¹⁵⁵ Dramm's understanding of Bonhoeffer's prison writing is in direct conflict with Metaxas' claims. Despite the fact that Bonhoeffer did not write the prison letters for the direct intention of being published, their theological claims must not be dismissed.

Prison Themes in *Letters and Papers from Prison*

For this portion of the chapter, the letters focused on theology in *Letters and Papers from Prison* will be analyzed to learn how the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology, which are characteristic of religious prison writings, are dealt with within Bonhoeffer's own prison writings.

¹⁵⁴ Dramm, 189.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

Liberation

Liberation and freedom play important roles in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It is unsurprising that some of Bonhoeffer's discussion of the concept of freedom in these letters is very much related to his own imprisonment. For example, in one of his letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer confides his longing for liberation from Tegel prison. To that end, Bonhoeffer argues that the desire to be free is something that Christians "needn't be at all ashamed of" and that it is permissible to seek "earthly happiness."¹⁵⁶ In a different letter, Bonhoeffer argues that "lengthy confinement is demoralizing in *every* way for most people" and questions why, in light of all its many harsh punishments, does "the Old Testament law never punish anyone by depriving him of his freedom?"¹⁵⁷ These claims are both reflective of Bonhoeffer's situation within prison and demonstrate the significance of the concepts of liberation and freedom to imprisoned persons.

In one of his prison writings titled "Stations on the Way to Freedom," which takes a somewhat poetic form, Bonhoeffer describes different behaviors and states of being that bring the disciple freedom. According to this piece, freedom comes in part from taking action and by suffering.¹⁵⁸ It is clear that the freedom Bonhoeffer refers to here is more of a spiritual freedom than a physical liberation, but it is still significant that the concept of liberation was so clearly at the forefront of his thought during this time. Bonhoeffer reiterates the points made in "Stations on the Way to Freedom" in a later letter to Bethge,

¹⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 132.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 370-371.

where he says “not only action, but also suffering is a way to freedom. In suffering, the deliverance consists in our being allowed to put the matter out of our own hands into God’s hands.”¹⁵⁹ This is similar to his message in *Ethics* concerning how being obedient to Jesus and following his will are liberating for the disciple. Again, the subject of spiritual liberation and its relationship with suffering can be reasonably interpreted as a result of the tribulations Bonhoeffer experienced during his imprisonment.

Justice

Justice also takes on new urgency in Bonhoeffer’s prison letters. While it was present in his writings before imprisonment, it is clear that Bonhoeffer’s experiences during his time in prison lead him to new reflections on this subject. On a personal level, Bonhoeffer relates that he is made “furious” when he sees “quite defenceless people being unjustly shouted at and insulted.”¹⁶⁰ Although Bonhoeffer is generally quite even-tempered in his letters, despite the torment of his long imprisonment without trial, this outburst of emotion reflects how important justice, even in the form of simple civility, becomes for one living in such an unjust situation.

On a more theological level, Bonhoeffer frequently debates the relationship between responsible or just action and sin. This is thoroughly unsurprising considering Bonhoeffer’s situation: he has been imprisoned for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Shortly before his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote “God...demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith, and...promises forgiveness and consolation

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 375.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 136.

to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture.”¹⁶¹ Bonhoeffer would clearly categorize his own involvement in the assassination attempt as responsible action in the pursuit of justice. That he finds himself in prison as a result of this responsible action makes this understanding of justice all the more important to Bonhoeffer.

Later in his prison letters, Bonhoeffer takes up this idea again in his comparison of the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament, according to Bonhoeffer, is full of stories of sinning “to the glory of God,” while “in the New Testament there is nothing of all this.”¹⁶² Bonhoeffer is driving at the idea that the pursuit of justice and glorifying God are more important than remaining free of sin, a concept that would clearly be important to Bonhoeffer given his activities in resistance to the Nazi government. Bonhoeffer also argues that prisoners are uniquely equipped to understand that God’s judgment is unlike human legal judgment, because “God will approach where men turn away.”¹⁶³ Guilt incurred in human courts and according to human laws is not synonymous with God’s understanding of guilt and his conception of justice.

Practical Theology

The theme of practical theology comes up frequently in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and these occurrences can be divided into two major categories: the need for religious simplicity and the concept of religionless Christianity in the world come of age. While Bonhoeffer’s focus on practical theology is clear in *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, it is in

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶² Ibid., 157.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 166.

his prison writing that he demonstrates most clearly the turn from “phraseology to reality” in his religious thought.¹⁶⁴

Simplicity

Simplicity was an important concept to Bonhoeffer in his prison writings. In fact, it is precisely due to his imprisonment that this idea was so powerful for Bonhoeffer. Living in a prison, Bonhoeffer explains, “brings one back, both outwardly and inwardly, to the simplest things of life” due to the “restrictive nature of life” there.¹⁶⁵ There was simply no tolerance for frivolity or excess within this setting, which applies to religious life in particular. For example, in a letter written near Christmas 1943, Bonhoeffer laments the pending arrival of a Christmas caroler to Tegel prison, whose cheerful songs would give “the prisoners the screaming miseries” because of their overly sentimental nature.¹⁶⁶ Such sentimentality is “out of place” in prisons, and Bonhoeffer argues that a simple sermon would be a more appropriate choice for the prisoners.¹⁶⁷

However, Bonhoeffer did not see the fact that prison life demanded simplicity to be an entirely negative thing. He even went so far as to call his imprisonment “a very wholesome though drastic cure” for a lack of religious simplicity.¹⁶⁸ The sense of desperation brought on my imprisonment, especially when combined with the continual terrors of the air raids taking place over Berlin, brought Bonhoeffer “back quite simply to

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 275.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 171.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 149.

prayer and the Bible.”¹⁶⁹ These two elements, scripture and prayer, were the most simplistic elements of religion for Bonhoeffer, and would become the focus of his discussion of religionless Christianity. For Bonhoeffer, life in prison was stripped of all excesses and therefore forced him back to “simplicity and straightforwardness” in his religious thought.¹⁷⁰

Religionless Christianity and the World Come of Age

Bonhoeffer’s most clear elucidation of the concepts of religionless Christianity and the world come of age come in a letter written to Bethge in April 1944:

“What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience - and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.”¹⁷¹

With this description, Bonhoeffer makes an assessment of the world in its current state - the world come of age. In this world, religion and all its pious trappings simply do not speak to people as they used to. Religion has lost its potency and its relevance for people living in the world come of age. The dilemma is then how Christianity can survive in the world come of age, a world without religion. “If religion is only a garment of Christianity...then what is a religionless Christianity?”¹⁷² The failing of religion comes in its speaking of God “when human knowledge...has come to an end” as a “*deus ex*

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 279.

¹⁷² Ibid., 280.

machina.”¹⁷³ For example, using God as an explanation when human knowledge concerning science fails to account for a certain phenomenon. Religionless Christianity, then, must avoid this problem by standing “not at the boundaries” of human life, “but in the middle of the village.”¹⁷⁴ Religionless Christianity is therefore an endeavor in practical theology because it attempts to understand the role of Christianity not within the church or within the confines of a narrow religious sphere, but precisely in the midst of human life, even life within a prison cell.

As an extension of this focus on religionless Christianity, Bonhoeffer writes of his search for “the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts.”¹⁷⁵ As the starting point for this project, Bonhoeffer looks to what he describes as the difference between religion and Christianity. For Bonhoeffer, religion is focused on identifying the place of God within the world, such as in “morals, politics, or science,” an understanding that was clearly influenced by his study among the liberal theologians of Berlin University.¹⁷⁶ Christianity, on the other hand, as depicted in the Bible, “directs man to God’s powerlessness and suffering,” to the God who leaves this world through his suffering on the cross.¹⁷⁷ Christians, therefore, must share in this suffering “at the hands of a godless world,” as Jesus asked of his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane.¹⁷⁸

The idea that Christians should be fully invested in this world is not new for Bonhoeffer; he makes similar assertions in *Discipleship* and in *Ethics*. What is different

¹⁷³ Ibid., 281.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 282.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 359.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 360.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 361.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

in his prison writings, however, is his identification of this participation in the world and the suffering that goes along with such a life as the cornerstone of his religionless Christianity. For Bonhoeffer, the faith of the religionless Christian is solely comprised of this “sharing in the suffering of God in Christ.”¹⁷⁹ Participation in the godless world is not one component of a larger religious program, but is all encompassing, because “Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.”¹⁸⁰ This understanding of religionless Christianity is practical due to its focus on the most essential and fundamental explanation of how one can follow Christ and truly be Christian.

In his prison writings, Bonhoeffer distances himself from the writings of *Discipleship* in particular, which he felt in retrospect focused too much on acquiring faith “by trying to live a holy life,” and instead insists that the only way to truly have faith is by “living completely in this world.”¹⁸¹ This abandonment of all religious concepts in the pursuit of what is most central to being Christian clearly reflects an intensified focus on practical theology for Bonhoeffer. In his religionless understanding of Christianity, Bonhoeffer identifies just two ways of being Christian: “prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action.”¹⁸² Bonhoeffer does not argue that being Christian requires one to accept and follow a complicated religious doctrine, but instead puts forth the simple

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 362.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 369. This phrasing is possibly a response to Paul’s instructions about conforming to the world in Romans 12:2.

¹⁸² Ibid., 300.

concepts of prayer and action as the true elements of Christianity. In this way, his theology as understood in *Letters and Papers from Prison* is wholly practical.

While Bonhoeffer had been moving in this direction over the course of his previous work in *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, it is plausible that his situation within prison brought some of these issues to the forefront of his thought in a more prevalent way. For example, Bonhoeffer casually mentions in one of his letters “it’s remarkable how little I miss going to church.”¹⁸³ Perhaps, then, it was his very separation or, to put it more strongly, liberation from the church and other religious trappings that led Bonhoeffer to realize how unnecessary they were to truly being Christian and what drove him to redefine what it meant to be Christian in religionless terms. The situation of imprisonment, by this interpretation, was instrumental in bringing about Bonhoeffer’s concept of religionless Christianity.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 164.

IV. CONCLUSIONS: THE IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT ON THE THEOLOGY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

It is clear that the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology were not absent from Bonhoeffer's thought before his imprisonment as witnessed in *Discipleship* and *Ethics*. While liberation plays a less significant role in *Discipleship*, it is certainly important in *Ethics*, and the themes of justice and practical theology appear in prominent ways in both works. Of course, Bonhoeffer's religious thought quite naturally developed and changed over the course of *Discipleship* and *Ethics*. For examples, liberation appears as a more significant theme in *Ethics* than in *Discipleship*, and Bonhoeffer's conception of how the Christian should respond to injustice is much more passive in *Discipleship* than in *Ethics*. However, just because Bonhoeffer's thought is progressing and changing does not mean that *Discipleship* and *Ethics* are completely inconsistent with one another. Likewise, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, while different from his earlier works in many ways, is not a complete transformation of Bonhoeffer's religious thought.

As such, it is necessary to conclude that Bonhoeffer's prison writings, at least with regards to the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology, do not represent a drastic departure from his earlier thought. However, this does not mean that there is no difference in his writings before and during his imprisonment. Rather, the differences in Bonhoeffer's thought are best understood as a sort of sharpening of focus or a change in perspective, where the themes of liberation, justice, and practical theology are

encountered with a “new clarity and a new impact,” even if the themes themselves are not novel.¹⁸⁴ It is the argument of this thesis that this sharpening of focus is the result of Bonhoeffer’s experience of imprisonment.

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, it is apparent that Bonhoeffer’s concern with themes of liberation and freedom are primarily related to his own lack of freedom. Bonhoeffer laments his own loss of freedom and defends his desire to once again experience physical liberty and all of the pleasures that go along with such a state of being by arguing that God also wants these things for him.¹⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer points out that in the Old Testament, which he was particularly fascinated with during his imprisonment, the loss of freedom is never used as a punishment.¹⁸⁶ These instances reflect Bonhoeffer’s unhappiness with his current state of captivity, and it therefore seems unlikely that these issues would have appeared in Bonhoeffer’s thought without his own experience of imprisonment. Additionally, in one particular portion of the poem “Stations on the Way to Freedom,” Bonhoeffer expresses his unhappiness with his incarceration, which prevents him from taking action, but also acknowledges that his inability to act and the suffering this causes him is also liberating in that it allows him to rely completely on God’s “stronger hands.”¹⁸⁷ Again, it is clear that Bonhoeffer’s frustration with his imprisonment lead him to seek comfort in the only liberation available to him: surrendering his desire for control over his own life to God.

¹⁸⁴ Dramm, 192.

¹⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 132.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

Bonhoeffer's prison writings concerning justice can also be interpreted as the result of his imprisonment. His frustration with the poor treatment of prisoners, who are defenseless against the guards supervising them, is undoubtedly a product of his situation.¹⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer also draws a distinction between human justice and God's justice in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Human justice, as interpreted by Hitler's regime, found that Bonhoeffer had acted unjustly and therefore that he deserved to be imprisoned. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, interpreted his actions against the National Socialist government as responsible and necessary, and as actions that God would find to be justified.¹⁸⁹ From his cell, it seems likely that Bonhoeffer spent a great deal of time reflecting on the actions that led him to be imprisoned and considering whether or not his actions had been just.

The manner in which Bonhoeffer deals with practical theology in his prison writings is perhaps the most fascinating example of how his imprisonment influenced his thought. Bonhoeffer found that the circumstances of imprisonment hardened him towards what he saw to be religious frivolities, such as Christmas caroling, and believed that he and his fellow prisoners would respond better to more simple, straightforward sermons.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, while the concept of religionless Christianity was beginning to appear in Bonhoeffer's works prior to imprisonment, it took on new depth and clarity in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, at least in part due to the very circumstances of

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

Bonhoeffer's imprisonment.¹⁹¹ In prison, Bonhoeffer was freed from the church and other so-called religious garments, and it is due to that liberation, as well as the fact that he did not feel a longing to go to church during his time in prison, that he realized just how little they contributed to Christianity.¹⁹² Religionless Christianity and the world come of age are two concepts connected with practical theology that take on new potency for Bonhoeffer during his imprisonment.

The goal of this thesis was not to argue that Bonhoeffer's thought as portrayed in *Letters and Papers from Prison* was merely a product of his imprisonment. Furthermore, the goal was not to suggest that Bonhoeffer's prison letters represent a stark break from his earlier works *Discipleship* and *Ethics*. The purpose of this thesis was to take a well-known figure, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and his well-studied *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and to offer a fresh approach in considering how the experience of imprisonment, including all its sorrows and joys, impacted Bonhoeffer's theology during this time. However, there are certainly other areas of Bonhoeffer's prison writings that could inform future studies of religious prison writings, such as the concept of suffering alongside God.¹⁹³ It is the hope that this thesis, at the very least, has helped to dismiss any attempt to discount Bonhoeffer's prison writings as inadmissible into his larger theological canon, and instead will inspire future consideration of how imprisonment impacts religious thought, for Bonhoeffer and other imprisoned persons.

¹⁹¹ Damm, 196.

¹⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 164.

¹⁹³ It is likely that Bonhoeffer's writings on this subject in *Letters and Papers from Prison* opened the door for consideration of this subject by other theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann.

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BIOGRAPHY

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