



Dietrich Bonhoffer

(1906-1945)

In His Writings:
Issues and Conflicts



Christ the Center

book based on lectures of 1933

When Christ appears in history, there is no possibility of assimilating him into the existing order of human reason. The only real question, for reason or faith, is: Who are you? [29f]

Christ is both my boundary and my rediscovered center, between I and I and between I and God. ... In the fallen world the center is also the boundary. [As such] he is both the judgement of human being and the beginning of its new existence, its center. [60f]

Christ the Center

book based on lectures of 1933

When the proletarian says, “Jesus is a good man,” he is saying more than the bourgeois when he repeats, “Jesus is God.” God is for him something belonging to the church. (35)

Quotations from Bonhoeffer's Religious Broadcast on German radio, 1933

The "Führer" [Hitler] must be aware of the limits of his authority. If he lets himself be drawn by his followers into becoming their idol, then the image of the Führer slides over into that of the "Verführer" [seducer] and he becomes criminal.... The genuine Führer must lead followers away from the authority of his person to acknowledgement of the genuine authority of order and office. When they (Führer plural) idolize themselves, they mock God. [At this point the broadcast was broken off.]

“The Church and the Jewish Question” (Pamphlet, 1933)

The Church is unconditionally obligated to the victims of every order of society. When the Church sees the state practicing either a too much or a too little in order and justice, it finds itself in the situation of “not only helping the victim crushed under the wheel, but of throwing itself into the wheel’s spokes.”

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

Cheap grace is like something sold on the market. It is the preaching of forgiveness and participation in the Lord's Supper without requiring confession and repentance; it is baptism without church discipline... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field, for the sake of it a person will gladly go and sell all that he has. ... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his or her life, and it is grace because it gives the only true life. ... Costly grace is the sanctuary of God; it must be protected from the world, and not thrown to the dogs. (47f)

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

We confess that, although the Church is orthodox as far as her doctrine of grace is concerned, we are no longer sure that the Church follows its Lord. ... It is becoming clearer every day that the most urgent problem besetting our Church is this: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?
(60)

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

“If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves.” ... To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self. Only when we have become completely oblivious of self are we ready to bear the cross for his sake. If in the end we know only him, if we have ceased to notice the pain of our own cross, we are indeed looking only to him. (97)

Suffering means being cut off from God. Therefore those who live in communion with him cannot really suffer. (101f)

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” This community...possesses no inherent right of its own to protect its members in the world, nor do they claim such rights, for they are meek, they renounce every right of their own and live for the sake of Jesus Christ. When treated with violence, they endure it patiently... (122f)

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

**“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”
The followers of Jesus...renounce all violence and tumult. In the cause of
Christ nothing is to be gained by such methods. ... They quietly suffer in the
face of hatred and wrong. In so doing they overcome evil with good and
establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate.
Nowhere will that peace be more manifest than where they meet the
wicked in peace and are ready to suffer at their hands. (126)**

**This commandment that we should love our enemies will grow ever more
urgent in the holy struggle that lies before us... (167)**

The Cost of Discipleship (book, 1937)

Sanctification is the fulfilment of the divine purpose spoken in the words, “You shall be holy: for I am holy”(1Thess. 4:7) ... The fulfillment is the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the “seal” whereby the faithful are sealed as God’s possession until the day of redemption. ... The community of the saints is barred off from the world by an unbreakable seal, awaiting its ultimate deliverance. Like a sealed train traveling through foreign territory, the Church goes on its way through the world. Its journey is like that of the ark...” ... The sanctification of the Church means its separation from all that is unholy, from sin, and the method by which it is accomplished is by God’s sealing the Church and thus making it his own possession..., the place from which judgement and reconciliation go forth into all the world. (312f)

From Ethics (1940-1943)

Transition from Pacifism to Conspiracy

The division of total reality into a sacred and a profane sphere, a Christian and a secular sphere, creates the possibility of existence in a single one of these... The reality of Christ comprises the reality of the world in itself. ... There are therefore not two spheres, but only the one sphere of the realization of Christ. (194)

From Ethics (1940-1943)

Transition from Pacifism to Conspiracy

Wherever the distinction is lost between “good” and “evil,” there the reception of Christ is impeded by an additional obstacle over and above the general sinfulness and forlornness of the world. There the world is destroying itself, so that it is in great danger of becoming of the devil.
(138f)

From Ethics, pp. 74-78

Reflections on Hitler

The despiser of humanity. The vilest contempt for humanity goes about its sinister business with the holiest of protestations of devotion to the human cause. ... In the presence of the crowd he professes to be one of their number, and at the same time he sings his own praises with the most revolting vanity and scorns the rights of every individual. He thinks people stupid, and they become stupid. He thinks them weak, and they become weak. He thinks them criminal, and they become criminal. ... In his profound contempt for his fellow men he seeks the favor of those whom he despises, and the more he does so the more certainly he promotes the deification of his own person by the mob.

From Ethics, pp. 74-78

Reflections on Hitler

The successful man. In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things...the world will allow itself to be subdued only by success. It alone justifies wrongs done. Success heals the wounds of guilt. There is no sense in reproaching the successful man for his behavior, for this would be to remain in the past while the successful man strides forward from one deed to the next, conquering the future and securing the irrevocability of what has been done. The successful man presents us with accomplished facts which can never again be reversed. What he destroys cannot be restored. ... No indictment can make good the guilt which the successful man has left behind him. The indictment falls silent with the passage of time, but the success remains and determines the course of history.

From Ethics, pp. 74-78

Reflections on Hitler

... When a successful figure becomes especially prominent and conspicuous, the majority give way to the idolization of success. They become blind to right and wrong, truth and untruth. The moral and intellectual critical faculty is blunted. It is dazzled by the brilliance of the successful man and by the longing in some way to share in his success. It is not even seen that success heals the wounds of guilt, for the guilt itself is no longer recognized. Success is simply identified with good. This attitude is genuine and pardonable only in a state of intoxication. When sobriety returns it can be achieved only at the price of a deep inner untruthfulness and conscious self-deception. This brings with it an inward rottenness from which there is scarcely a possibility of recovery. (74-78)

Nazi Government's Declaration on Church and State, March 1933

“While the government is determined to eliminate political and moral poison from our public life, it establishes and ensures the presuppositions for a deep, inner religiousness. The advantages of personal-political kind that result from compromises with atheist organizations [read: communism] do not in the least weigh the consequences that become visible in the destruction of general religious-moral basic values. The national government sees in both Christian confessions important factors in maintaining the essential values of our people. ...

Nazi Government's Declaration on Church and State, March 1933

... The government will regard all other confessions with objective justice, but it can never tolerate that belonging to another confession or a definite race could mean a release from legal obligations or indeed permission for list without punishment or toleration of crime.

Nazi Government's Declaration on Church and State, March 1933

In schools and education the national government will grant and ensure the Christian confessions their proper influence. Their care contributes to the honest life together of church and state.

Opposition to a materialist world view and promotion of a real community of the people [Volksgemeinschaft] serve as much the interests of the German nation as those of our Christian faith.

Nazi Government's Declaration on Church and State, March 1933

The government sees in Christianity the unshakable foundation of the moral life of our people. So also it most highly values continuing to hold and to deepen friendly relations with the Holy See.

The rights of the churches will neither be lessened nor their relationship to the state changed...”

Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte in Quellen (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980), IV/2, 114.

