

Bonhoeffer on Abortion

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Introduction

Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life. To raise the question whether we are here concerned already with a human being or not is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And that is nothing but murder.

This oft-quoted passage is found in *Ethics*,¹ the last book written by the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). Bonhoeffer proceeded immediately to pastoral concerns.

A great many different motives may lead to an action of this kind; indeed in cases where it is an act of despair, performed in circumstances of extreme human or economic destitution and misery, the guilt may often lie rather with the community than with the individual. Precisely in this connection money may conceal many a wanton deed, while the poor man's more reluctant lapse may far more easily be disclosed. All these considerations must no doubt have a quite decisive influence on our personal and pastoral attitude towards the person concerned, but they cannot in any way alter the fact of murder.

Bonhoeffer considered *Ethics* to be his most important work.² In it he intended to offer a biblical perspective on all aspects of life, a perspective that he believed had been lost in modern Europe. He was executed by the Nazi regime shortly before its collapse in May 1945. *Ethics* was still incomplete at the time of his arrest in April 1943 and was not published until three years after his death from fragments assembled by his close friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge.

Because of their relevance to many contemporary issues we will outline the development of Bonhoeffer's ideas on marriage and sexuality

Rights of Life

With the affirmation "God gives before He demands,"³ Bonhoeffer reversed the dictum of Kant and discussed the rights of life before the responsibilities of life.

The existence of a natural right of the individual follows from the fact that it is God's will to create the individual and to endow him with eternal life.⁴

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Paperback edition, Macmillan, New York, 1965, pp. 175-6.

² Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970, p. 621.

³ *Ethics*, p. 151.

⁴ *Ethics*, p. 154.

The right to bodily life is grounded in the Christian belief in the bodily resurrection.

The life of the body, like life in general, is both a means to an end and an end in itself. To regard the body exclusively as a means to an end is idealistic but not Christian; for a means is discarded as soon as the end is achieved. . . . According to the Christian doctrine, the body possesses a higher dignity. Man is a bodily being, and remains so in eternity as well. . . . But if the body is rightly to be regarded as an end in itself, then there is a right to bodily joys, even though these are not necessarily subordinated to some higher purpose.⁵

Bonhoeffer followed this with a series of quotes from the book of Ecclesiastes on the joys of bodily life, which brought him naturally to sexual life.

Sex is not only the means of reproduction, but, independently of this defined purpose, it brings with it its own joy, in married life, in the love of two human beings for one another.⁶

It is bodily union, not reproduction, that is at the foundation of marriage.

Marriage is not founded upon the purpose of reproduction but on the union of man and woman. . . . the fruitfulness of this union is not something that is commanded. . . . It is a blessing from God.⁷

This perspective would, among other things, encourage marriage for women who are past the normal childbearing age and for people deemed unable to bear children.

Responsibilities of Life

From the previous section we see that sex rightfully brings bodily joy *within* marriage, in the union of man and woman. Nowhere else. This is not an arbitrary societal decision. Marriage is a divine mandate, established by God.⁸ Mandates are natural institutions and “the natural is the safeguarding of life against the unnatural.”⁹ Bonhoeffer strongly urged the church to oppose

the dissolution of all order in the relation between the sexes . . . the contempt for chastity and the proclamation of sexual libertinism . . . the loss of the purity and soundness of youth.¹⁰

Although bearing children is not the biblical foundation of marriage, every couple must be open to the possibility that God may choose the woman to conceive. Even a woman like Sarah, well past the normal childbearing age. The couple is to accept the child as a gift from God, as did Abraham and Sarah.

Marriage involves acknowledgement of the right of life that is to come into being, a right which is not subject to the disposal of the married couple. Unless this

⁵ *Ethics*, pp. 156-7.

⁶ *Ethics*, p. 158.

⁷ *Ethics*, p. 179 n. 16.

⁸ *Ethics*, p. 207.

⁹ *Ethics*, p. 147.

¹⁰ *Ethics*, p. 114.

right is acknowledged as a matter of principle, marriage ceases to be marriage and becomes a mere liaison. Acknowledgement of this right means making way for the free creative power of God which can cause new life to proceed from this marriage according to His will.¹¹

At this point come the passages on abortion quoted at the beginning of this article.

The foundation of marriage is the bodily union of man and woman. At the same time God uses marriage to create new life, giving children which the couple accept as gifts. Abortion is the destruction of life which God has created, a rejection of God's gifts, a "violation of the right to live which God has bestowed." The fetus is no more at the disposal of the parents than any individual life is at the disposal of others. Bonhoeffer held to this even in extreme cases:

with regard to the killing of the fetus in cases where the mother is in danger of losing her life. If the child has its right to life from God, and is perhaps already capable of life, then the killing of the child, as an alternative to the presumed natural death of the mother, is surely a highly questionable action. The life of the mother is in the hand of God, but the life of the child is arbitrarily extinguished. The question whether the life of the mother or the life of the child is of greater value can hardly be a matter for a human decision.¹²

The emphasis here is on the biblical precept that neither an individual nor the whole society – but God alone – is to decide questions of life. Such judgements are to be left totally in the hands of God. Bonhoeffer elaborated this in his discussion of the relationship of the individual to society, to which we now turn.

Right to Life

The right to life is not based on the qualities of the individual.

life, created and preserved by God, possesses an inherent right which is wholly independent of its social utility. The right to live is a matter of the essence and not of any values. In the sight of God there is no life that is not worth living.¹³

The leper Lazarus

was devoid of any social usefulness and a victim of those who judge life according to its social usefulness; yet God held him to be worthy of eternal life.¹⁴

Thus the right to life is independent of how useful or desirable, or how much a "burden" the person might be. This applies both in the relationship of an individual to society and of fetal life to its parents. Bonhoeffer discusses the danger of allowing the judgement of an individual or society to determine who has the right to live, and draws a conclusion that applies both to abortion and to euthanasia.

¹¹ *Ethics*, p. 175.

¹² *Ethics*, p. 176, n. 12.

¹³ *Ethics*, p. 163.

¹⁴ *Ethics*, p. 163.

The distinction between life that is worth living and life that is not worth living must sooner or later destroy life itself.¹⁵

He continues:

It would . . . be intolerably pharisaical if society were to treat the sick man as though he were a guilty man in order to put itself in the right at his expense. To kill the innocent would be, in the extreme sense, arbitrary.¹⁶

Penultimate and Ultimate

In this entire discussion Bonhoeffer was careful to draw a distinction between innocent and guilty persons. The distinction is crucial. Arbitrary killing is the taking of innocent life. There is nothing arbitrary, he asserts, in the killing of criminals, nor in killing the enemy in time of war.¹⁷

Bonhoeffer was well aware that the distinction between innocence and guilt is relative — all are guilty before the judgement of God and stand in need of His forgiving grace. The desire not to diminish the need for divine grace has led Protestantism to abandon such relative – or penultimate – distinctions, including the distinction between the natural and the unnatural:

The sole antithesis to the natural was the word of God; the natural was no longer contrasted with the unnatural.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer was anxious to reclaim a theology of ‘natural life,’¹⁹ even though, like the distinction between the innocent and the guilty, it is a strictly relative concept and has nothing to do with the idea of gradually overcoming sin.²⁰ It is, nonetheless, of crucial importance in the ethical questions of daily life.

Nothing better illustrates the relationship of penultimate human decisions to the ultimate action of God than a letter that Bonhoeffer wrote from prison on the occasion of Eberhard Bethge’s marriage:

it is your own very human wills that are at work here, celebrating their triumph; the course that you are taking at the outset is one that you have chosen for yourselves. . . . As God today adds his ‘Yes’ to your ‘Yes’, as he confirms your will with his will . . . he creates out of your love something quite new — the holy estate of matrimony. . . . It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.²¹

¹⁵ *Ethics*, p. 164.

¹⁶ *Ethics*, p. 165.

¹⁷ *Ethics*, pp. 159-60.

¹⁸ *Ethics*, p. 144.

¹⁹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 623.

²⁰ *Ethics*, p. 148.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged edition, Macmillan, New York, 1972, pp. 41-3.