

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth

Charles E. Ford

26 April 2006

A major theme in my articles on Bonhoeffer is to explain the differences between Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth. They were close in many respects and Bonhoeffer always wanted a close relationship with Barth. Nevertheless their paths diverged. Barth blamed National Socialism on Luther and did not support the German resistance. Bonhoeffer committed himself to the resistance. Bonhoeffer's search for "nonreligious interpretations" for Christianity was an attempt to speak to resistance figures who were drawn to Jesus. It was an explicit criticism of and departure from Barth, who had nothing to say to the resistance. In one of his last letters from prison Bonhoeffer explicitly cited Luther as his model.

At the Confessing Church Seminary in Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer discovered the Lutheran confessional writings. Eberhard Bethge was a student at that Seminary. He became Bonhoeffer's closest friend and, later, his biographer. In the biography he wrote about this and about the controversy Bonhoeffer caused in the Confessing Church by articulating the Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion.

Bonhoeffer was among the first to confront the National Socialist program against the Jews. In his first article on the issue he quoted Luther three times to make clear that, despite Luther's violent rhetoric against the Jews, they shared the same fundamental concern: that the gospel is for Jew and German alike.

### Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and the resistance

Bonhoeffer completely rejected Barth's statements blaming National Socialism on Luther and the Prussian military traditions, calling it "one of the most grotesque mistakes the historian can make." In part because so many resistance figures had Prussian political and military backgrounds, Barth refused to support the German resistance movement.

Bonhoeffer wrote about resistance figures, including members of his family, who embraced humanitarian values (which Bonhoeffer believed had their origin in Christianity) and had come to regard the church as irrelevant if not hostile to these values. Then came National Socialism. "The children of the church, who had become independent and gone their own way, now in the hour of danger returned to their mother." They "learned once again to speak the name of Jesus Christ, even though it is often with hesitation and with genuine fear."

It was to speak to such people that Bonhoeffer wanted to introduce a "nonreligious interpretation" for Christianity. Both times Bonhoeffer wrote about this he explicitly cited as his model the Apostle Paul confronting the circumcision question. Just as Paul, in comparison to the religious language of his time, spoke a "non-religious language" to gentiles turning to Christ, so Bonhoeffer wanted to address the resistance in a new way.

Bonhoeffer explicitly expressed his attempts at nonreligious interpretation as criticism of Karl Barth. Barth had nothing to say to the resistance. Bonhoeffer was concerned above all to address the resistance. Bonhoeffer appealed to Bultmann's "demythologizing" because Bultmann did attempt to address his contemporaries. When Bonhoeffer said that Bultmann "did not go far enough" he was not saying that "demythologizing" was the proper way to address the issues, but only that Bultmann "did not go far enough" in the issues he intended to address. "Bultmann's approach is fundamentally still a liberal one (i.e. abridging the gospel) whereas I am trying to think theologically."

At the same time, as Bethge writes, Bonhoeffer "never considered abandoning his connection with the traditional words and customs of the church." This is illustrated, for example, in the marked return to traditional language in his letters to Bethge after the failure of the 20 July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life, as seen in this quote from his letter of 23 August 1944.

I am so sure of God's guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. . . . my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified . . . and I only hope . . . [I] will always be certain of, and thankful for, God's mercy and forgiveness.

### Bonhoeffer and the confessions

Although Bonhoeffer's own theological education did not include the Lutheran confessional writings, he made it a major topic for his students, as Bethge described in the biography.

After July 1935 the seminary's work focused almost entirely on the confessional writings, which were discussed . . . passionately . . . With each passing semester Bonhoeffer devoted more time to classes on the confessions than to any other subject.

. . .

Every page of the *Formula of Concord* in Bonhoeffer's copy of the confessional writings is covered with underlined passages, exclamation marks, and question marks. During the later courses at Finkenwalde it became the predominant theme in the series of lectures. His notes from the entire seminary period contain no fewer than eighty-one themes and questions on this subject that he assigned the ordinands to work on. He loved the *Formula of Concord* and enjoyed exploring its tendency, through traditional philosophical formulas, to express saving truth and the comforting meaning to be found in the confessional teaching about the "true distinctions."

Although Bonhoeffer strongly supported the Confessing Church, he refused to ignore theological differences with the Reformed. He wrote the following to his students concerning a May 1937 confessional synod.

However much I agree with the result, I am equally troubled by the theological reasoning behind it. This, I should say, is simply the Reformed thesis which holds that the confessional dispute over Eucharist centers solely around the *modus praesentiae* rather than the real presence, without explaining this further. This leads to conflict with the Formula of Concord and a total failure to absorb its message.

Bethge adds the following. "His views on Holy Communion were so decidedly Lutheran that he became embroiled in further controversy in 1940."

### Bonhoeffer and the Jews

Sasse and Bonhoeffer were the major drafters of the *Bethel Confession* in August 1933 which contains the following statement.

It is the task of the Christians who come from the Gentile world to expose themselves to persecution rather than to surrender, willingly or unwillingly, even in one single respect, their brotherhood with Jewish Christians in the church, founded on Word and Sacrament.

Even the Reformed scholar Klaus Scholder acknowledged that Bethel was better than the *Barmen Declaration* drafted the following year, which contained no references to the Jewish question.

In fact Bonhoeffer was the first to address this issue in writing, in April 1933, even before the so-called Aryan clause, expelling Jews from the civil service, including the Protestant pastorate, had been publicly announced. In it he quoted Luther three times. The Nazis had republished Luther's 1543 treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* in order to enlist Luther in their campaign against the Jews. One effect of Bonhoeffer quoting Luther was to demonstrate that Luther's violent remarks against the Jews had nothing to do with race. Indeed Luther and Bonhoeffer were both acting on behalf of the same concern: that the message of the Old Testament and the New Testament are the same, and that message is for Jew and German alike.

One of the clearest departures from the liberal theology in which he had been educated was Bonhoeffer's insistence that the Old Testament speaks of Jesus Christ. His 1936 bible study on King David prompted a response in a National Socialist newspaper commenting on his

impudence, even now in the year 1936, to represent the world-enemy Judah as the 'eternal people', the 'true nobility', 'the people of God'.

Bonhoeffer later wrote a meditation on Psalm 119 and a small book on the Psalms entitled *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*.