

Luther and Bonhoeffer misunderstood

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Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have many things in common. Among them is the frequency with which their writings are misunderstood. A recent illustration of Luther being misunderstood is based on the following statement from his table talk [1], which has been cited as evidence that Luther believed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were sexually intimate. (This is discussed by Mollie Ziegler. [2])

Christ was an adulterer for the first time with the woman at the well, for it was said, ‘Nobody knows what he’s doing with her’ [John 4:27]. Again, [he was an adulterer] with Magdalene, and still again with the adulterous woman in John 8 [:2-11], whom he let off so easily. So the good Christ had to become an adulterer before he died.

Lack of context facilitates taking these statements literally. Here is a recent example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer being misunderstood from *Christian News*. [3]

By denying the virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, and ascension, Bonhoeffer worshipped a false Christ and taught a false gospel.

Statements like this most frequently cite as evidence Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, particularly his statements about interpreting Christianity in a ‘non-religious’ sense. (These received an extended discussion in the biography *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Eberhard Bethge. [4])

There are four letters in particular in which these issues are discussed. [5] In all four Bonhoeffer refers explicitly to Karl Barth and the Apostle Paul. In the middle two he also refers to Rudolph Bultmann. It is these references to Bultmann that have been most frequently cited in this context.

Although Bonhoeffer was closely identified with Karl Barth, especially during the years 1933-1935, ten years later he criticized Barth and the Confessing Church. The differences with Barth were fundamental. Barth blamed National Socialism on Luther. Bonhoeffer categorically rejected this. Bonhoeffer was unequivocally committed to the German resistance movement. Because many in it were of traditional Prussian military background, Barth would not support it. Other leading figures in the resistance, including members of Bonhoeffer’s own family, were motivated by nineteenth century liberal thought and far from Christianity. It was specifically to address the latter that Bonhoeffer wanted to develop a ‘non-religious’ interpretation of Christianity.

Bonhoeffer criticized Barth for having nothing to say to the resistance. In contrast, Bonhoeffer regarded Bultmann more favorably for explicitly taking up the issues raised by nineteenth century liberalism. Bultmann’s approach was to separate such ‘mythological’ concepts as miracle and resurrection from such concepts as God and faith, which did not need ‘demythologizing’. My brother Bill once criticized this approach with the remark “Who is more mythological than God!” Bonhoeffer made the same criticism, that concepts such as miracle and resurrection “are not in principle separable from God and faith.”

In so far as Bultmann intended to respond to questions raised by liberal thought, Bonhoeffer considered it necessary to address the issues of God and faith as well as miracle and resurrection. Bonhoeffer criticized Bultmann's approach as "a liberal one (i.e. abridging the gospel) whereas I'm trying to think theologically." Thus, when Bonhoeffer stated that Bultmann's 'demythologizing' "didn't go far enough" he was asserting that, to respond to questions raised by liberal thought, it is necessary to address not only miracle and resurrection but also God and faith. He was not, as has been claimed, endorsing 'demythologizing'. He had explicitly criticized it as "liberal" in contrast to his own intention to be "theological."

In describing Jesus as an "adulterer" Luther was speaking the language of some in Jesus time in order to make a point about Jesus becoming sin for us. In the same way Bonhoeffer described Bultmann's project in Bultmann's own language in order to make a point about the importance of reformulating Christian concepts anew theologically. Two times he referred to Bultmann and each time Bonhoeffer cited, as a model for what he wanted to do, the Apostle Paul addressing the circumcision question. Paul saw gentiles turning to Jesus and, instead of addressing them in the 'religious' language of circumcision and observance of the law, he addressed them in a 'non-religious' language. So Bonhoeffer saw liberal resistance figures turning to Jesus and wanted to address them in a 'non-religious' language.

Another reason Bonhoeffer adopted the language of Bultmann is to address the question of "what we really believe." He explicitly criticized Barth and the Confessing Church for having "encouraged us to entrench ourselves behind the 'faith of the church', and evade the honest question of what we ourselves really believe." Bonhoeffer had been confronted directly with this question around 1931 and had undergone a dramatic transformation. He began to read the Bible with great intensity. A student remembered Bonhoeffer telling a group of students in 1932 that "every word of Holy Scripture was a love letter from God directed very personally to us, and he asked us whether we loved Jesus." He was particularly concerned to address his family. He wrote as follows to a liberal brother-in-law in 1936. "In a few days it will be Easter. That makes me very happy." One can believe it only because of what "the Word, as God's truth" teaches. "Resurrection . . . resurrection as the Bible means it – as a rising up from real death (not sleep) to real life." [6]

In approaching the liberal resistance, Bonhoeffer wanted to present Christianity gradually in ways that addressed issues which they were encountering. In this he appealed to early church tradition in which catechumens were asked to leave the liturgy before Holy Communion. His 'non-religious' language for Christianity was like a catechism. At some point the catechumens will be ready for traditional Christian language. One can notice how members of his family came gradually to speak traditional Christian language, especially as they faced execution. Indeed, after his extended reflections on 'non-religious' language, Bonhoeffer himself returned to traditional language after the failure of the attempted assassination of Hitler. "My past life is brim-full of God's goodness and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified." [7]

Hermann Sasse offered this opinion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer while visiting Concordia Seminary in 1964. "The longer he lived the more Lutheran he became." [8]

References

1. Luther's Works Volume 54, page 154.

2. <http://www.getreligion.org/?p=1626>.
3. Evangelicals Who Promote Unbelievers, page 11 *Christian News*, Vol. 44 No. 23 Monday, June 5, 2006.
4. The New Theology, pages 853-891 in Eberhard Bethge *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Revised Edition, 2000, Fortress Press.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Enlarged Edition, 1972, Macmillan, paperback. See pages 281-282, 285-286, 328-329 and 381-383.
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Meditating on the Word*, Cowley, Cambridge MA, 1986, page 47.
7. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, page 393.
8. As quoted by Professor Robert Kolb. He heard this as a student at Concordia Seminary from Sasse who was a visiting guest lecturer there in 1964.