

A CRITIQUE OF
BONHOEFFER SPEAKS TODAY:
FOLLOWING JESUS AT ALL COSTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and writings appeal to many evangelical Christians. His personal courage in the face of the Nazi regime has won him many adherents. His willingness to endure the hardships of tyranny to the point of giving his life (executed in 1944) has drawn well deserved admiration. Indeed, such bravery and authenticity is commendable under any circumstances.

As is often the case in religion and politics, however, martyrdom covers a multitude of sins. As much as one may admire the man, his doctrinal errors, which were serious, should not be overlooked. Christians must distinguish between the bravery of the man and the corpus of his beliefs. Sadly, that distinction has faded.

In his very interesting book, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at All Costs*,¹ Mark DeVine, professor at Midwestern Theological Seminary, seeks to draw his fellow conservative evangelicals into the Bonhoeffer orb. After a succinct chapter surveying Bonhoeffer's life, DeVine makes a compelling case for following Bonhoeffer in several areas.

Early in his theological studies, Bonhoeffer experienced what DeVine called an "awakening." "For the first time I discovered the Bible," Bonhoeffer wrote. Before this discovery, he added, "I had not yet

¹ Mark DeVine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at all Costs*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005).

become a Christian.” That conversion led to a strong “Back to the Bible” foundation from which all of his theology would develop.² DeVine rightly argues that Bonhoeffer’s desire to let the Bible be the ultimate authority over human experience should be emulated. His critique of “immediacy-dependent approaches” rebukes the modern church that is immersed in theological pragmatism.³ “Do not get into the habit of interpreting Scripture in the light of personal experience,” Bonhoeffer wrote. Along these same lines, he stressed that the mentality that gives way to spiritual hunches disguised as the leading of the Lord has created confusion in the Church especially in the area of discovering God’s will. Bonhoeffer’s use of the Bible as the principal means to finding God’s will is similar to Garry Friesen’s perspective in his *Decision Making and the Will of God*.⁴ One can also admire Bonhoeffer’s balanced approach to the issue of Christian relevance. The modern evangelical obsession with relevance is very much out-of-balance. The gospel message itself cannot be adjusted for relevance sake. “Where the question of relevance becomes the theme of theology,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “we can be certain that the cause has already been betrayed and sold out...” Moreover, he added, “the intention should not be to justify Christianity in this present age, but to justify the present age before the Christian message.”⁵ DeVine aptly comments that Bonhoeffer understood that “felt relevance does not define truth; truth defines true relevance.”⁶ This is advice that many Seeker and Emergent Church proponents would do well to heed.

Bonhoeffer’s apparent biblical fidelity is the stage on which Mark DeVine seeks to showcase the need for a return to his teachings. He repeatedly asserts, for example, that Bonhoeffer was Christocentric and true to the bedrock doctrine of justification by faith alone—all as a result of his “Back to the Bible” approach. But not all is as clear as DeVine would have us believe.

² Ibid., 41.

³ Ibid., 64.

⁴ Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, (Multnomah: Sisters, OR, 1980).

⁵ DeVine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today*, 105.

⁶ Ibid., 110.

II. BARTHIAN PARADOX

DeVine sees theologian Karl Barth as the principal and positive influence on Bonhoeffer's thinking. He states that Barth's influence made Bonhoeffer's theology "attractive."⁷ To be sure, Barth in a sense rescued Bonhoeffer from the radical liberalism of Frederick Schleiermacher and Adolph von Harnack. But to what end?

Of all the similarities in Bonhoeffer's and Barth's perspectives, the one most apparent and troubling is their allegiance to theological paradox. Unfortunately, DeVine does not take us down the road of Barth's contradictory epistemology, but it is the very road we must take if we want to understand the real Barth, and for our purposes, the real Bonhoeffer.

Barth is famous for championing neo-orthodoxy (a term DeVine dislikes), a system that used orthodox terms absent original intent. DeVine dismisses evangelical critiques of Barth's theology. Just after discounting the notion that neo-orthodoxy is "liberalism in disguise—the liberal wolf decked out in evangelical sheep's clothing," DeVine writes the following: "My view is that there is some truth in all of this but not very much. Evangelical critiques of both Barth and Bonhoeffer have often been a little too quick and dirty by my estimation"⁸. Unfortunately he does not point the reader to any one critic for evaluation. Some well known samples of Barth's paradoxically driven theology are as follows: The Bible is not necessarily the Word of God written, but becomes the Word of God to the willing hearer. Christ's resurrection was real even if it did not physically happen! God is the Wholly Other, completely transcendent, having no relevance or communication with man, yet is relevant and communicates with man. These are just a few examples of Barth's thinking.

Upon consideration that Bonhoeffer looked through the lens of a Barthian paradox, it becomes clear why he was so *unclear* in his own theology. For example, like Barth, he did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture—a fact DeVine admits but seems to dismiss as irrelevant—yet he sought to base his entire theology on the Bible! He was not at all Protestant in his view of the Church, even to the point of seeing the Church and its members, especially in the context of suffering, as a means of salvation. DeVine adheres to the same. ". . . As a justified sinner, I have

⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸ *Ibid.*

no interest in using my brother as a means to my own salvation in the strict sense.” One wonders how in any sense an evangelical could see a brother as a “means” to salvation. In Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* he writes that in some ways man’s own suffering may be redemptive for eternal salvation.

Although Christ has fulfilled all the vicarious suffering necessary for our redemption, his suffering on earth is not finished yet. He has, in his grace, left a residue . . . of suffering for his Church to fulfil in the interval before his Second Coming (Col. 1.24). This suffering is allowed to benefit the Body of Christ, the Church. Whether we have any right to assume that this suffering has power to atone for sin . . . we have no means of knowing. But we do at least know that the man who suffers in the power of the body of Christ suffers in a representative capacity “for” the Church, the Body of Christ.⁹

DeVine asserts in the same vein that he is “inextricably bound to fellow believers upon incorporation into Christ and that all paths to my Savior run through, not around or apart from, the church.”¹⁰ Then, true to paradox, DeVine adds, “nevertheless, in Jesus Christ, I am confronted with the completed work of atonement and reconciliation for myself and for my brother.”¹¹

III. COSTLY GRACE

Possibly Bonhoeffer’s most glaring paradoxical emphasis was the idea of “costly grace.” As noted, DeVine repeatedly states that Bonhoeffer believed in justification by faith alone, yet, neither he nor Bonhoeffer show any awareness of the logical inconsistency in the concept of “costly grace.” DeVine writes the following defense of this position:

In his rejection of cheap grace, Bonhoeffer insists not only that one cannot obey the command of Jesus unless one believes but also that one cannot believe unless one obeys. Protestants are accustomed to the former sequencing but not the latter. Bonhoeffer, like a good Protestant, agrees that faith justifies, not

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, 1963), 273.

¹⁰ DeVine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today*, 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

obedience, but he also warns that any chronological sequencing or temporal separation between faith and obedience obscures the actual character of faith as a response to the concrete call and command of Jesus Christ. Thus, faith and obedience are coincident. Faith without works is dead and so is not saving faith at all.¹²

In this statement one does not find “a good Protestant” creed, but something more akin to the Council of Trent. Note, for example, the similarity of the Roman Catholic view of saving faith unto justification:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary... let him be anathema.¹³

Not only does DeVine require a combination of obedience *and* faith as a means of justification, he clarifies further that there is no “chronological sequencing” of the two. In other words, obedience before, during, and after the act of faith is necessary for justification. This is more than a hedging away from justification by faith alone, it is an outright denial of the doctrine.

To be fair, DeVine seeks to counter any notion that Bonhoeffer believed in meritorious works for salvation. “When the slightest drop of works righteousness seeps into the disciple’s motivation for obedience,” DeVine writes, “belief in Jesus Christ has given way to unbelief.”¹⁴ By itself this is a very good statement. But it is not by itself. It is couched with numerous statements both by DeVine and Bonhoeffer to the contrary, namely, that obedience is an essential condition for justification.

It is very popular among Lordship Salvation proponents to insist that as long as obedience is not viewed as human merit, then making it conditional is not a violation of *sola fide*. The point here is a subtle one. It may be surprising to learn that the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic doctrine Luther and Calvin confronted did not espouse human merit as the basis of justification either. This is made clear by the subsequent pronouncements of the Council of Trent (1545-63). “If any one saith, that man may

¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³ Council of Trent: Canons on Justification, Canon IX, <http://socrates58.blogspot.com/2005/12/council-of-trent-canons-on.html>; accessed September 24, 2007.

¹⁴ DeVine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today*, 121.

be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ; let him be anathema.”¹⁵ For one to make obedience a condition for justification as long as it is not seen as self-meritorious is in complete opposition to the message of the Protestant Reformation, and more importantly, the Bible. The early Reformers believed that any conditions added to faith (self-meritorious or not) resulted in the nullification of grace.

In 1923 J. Gresham Machen warned of this theological trend in his seminal work *Christianity and Liberalism*. Although Machen directed his apologetic toward liberalism, the principle is the same. His words serve as a much needed corrective to the notion of “costly grace.”

According to modern liberalism, faith is essentially the same as “making Christ Master” in one’s life; at least it is by making Christ Master in the life that the welfare of men is sought. But that simply means that salvation is thought to be obtained by our own obedience to the commands of Christ. Such teaching is just a sublimated form of legalism. Not the sacrifice of Christ, on this view, but our own obedience to God’s law, is the ground of hope.

In this way the whole achievement of the Reformation has been given up, and there has been a return to the religion of the Middle Ages.¹⁶

As Machen showed, the emphasis on surrender to Christ’s lordship as a means of salvation allowed theological liberals to side-step the issue of man’s utter sinfulness so as to offer something in exchange for grace.

It is not necessary to expound to the readers of this journal why Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, is faulty along these same lines, especially if understood as a soteriological statement. *The Cost of Discipleship* has an abundance of excellent and inspiring material if read as a treatise on true Christian discipleship. It is disconcerting, however, to see the repeated assertions that absolute surrender (even to the point of death) is necessary for salvation.¹⁷ By design Bonhoeffer enfoldes the gospel of salvation for sinners with the call of discipleship for saints to the point that one can hardly be distinguished from the other.

¹⁵ Council of Trent, Canon I.

¹⁶ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923; reprint, 1983), 143.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, *passim*.

Specifically, this work presents the sinner's justification as actualized by obedience and faith. Moreover, Bonhoeffer made his assertion of "costly grace" in the context of a neo-orthodox epistemology. He espoused contradictions because paradox was central to his theological paradigm. Following Barth's lead it seems Bonhoeffer had few qualms with something being true and not true at the same time.¹⁸ Thus, grace could be both *free* and *costly*. J. Kevin Butcher has aptly shown the problem of illogical reasoning in relation to the concept of "costly grace." Butcher writes:

[T]o say that the gift of eternal life involves necessary cost to the unbeliever is not to state a paradox but a logical absurdity. It is a statement that has no possibility of being true if language is to retain meaning and ability to communicate. Truly, Christ calls the believer to a life of costly discipleship *after* receiving the gift of salvation. But to imply that the price of commitment is demanded as part of *receiving* the gift is to portray a gospel of nonsense.¹⁹

In light of the current popularity to extol the notion of "costly grace," one wonders if Lordship Salvation proponents have not unwittingly fallen into a Barthian paradox as well.

Bonhoeffer Speaks Today is a book worth reading. It will give the reader a greater appreciation for the life of a truly courageous man. Unfortunately, it will likely convince some to adopt elements of Bonhoeffer's errant theology. DeVine acknowledges that Barth and Bonhoeffer had "glaring weaknesses and blind spots" in their theology, but does not explain what he means.²⁰ He writes in his introduction that the "purpose...is not to engage the question of how to place Bonhoeffer within

¹⁸ For an appraisal of Barth's approach to theology see Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method*. Clark shows that although Barth over time lessened his adamant allegiance to paradoxical theology, it remained central to his overall method. To Barth, the concept of paradox was not simply in the realm of the apparent. That is, something did not qualify as paradoxical simply because it was true even though it seemed false. To Barth it could on one level be in fact true and on another false. This was at the crux of his understanding of *heilsgeschichte* or salvation history. What was true in one realm could be false in the other.

¹⁹ J. Kevin Butcher, "A Critique of *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 1989), 27-43.

²⁰ DeVine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today*, 173.

the history of theology, but to make Bonhoeffer help us evangelicals follow Jesus today.”²¹ To follow Bonhoeffer as he follows Jesus and yet downplay theological particulars is itself paradoxical code-speaking. In the last sentence of the book DeVine again sidesteps Bonhoeffer’s neo-orthodox theology and says that “we evangelicals need not put our heads in the sand to sit at his feet for a spell.”²² Indeed we should not have our heads in the sand, but for a different reason than DeVine gives. Vigilance for correct doctrine, doctrine that has eternal consequences for human souls, is the Church’s urgent need. It should be stated clearly that for those who accept Bonhoeffer’s “costly grace,” the cost may be higher than they ever imagined.

²¹ Ibid., 1-2.

²² Ibid., 174.