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Bonhoeffer and the End of Christian Ethics

[1] On April 30, 1944, less than year before his execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a long letter from his cell at the prison in Tegel to his friend Eberhard Bethge, a letter that achieved posthumous renown for Bonhoeffer's discussion of "religionless Christianity." Indeed, Bethge was later to write that this "first great theological letter" of Bonhoeffer's may have marked "the beginning of a new theological epoch."¹

[2] Just what does Bonhoeffer say in this note to his friend? The theological core of the letter itself contains more questions than answers; indeed, the letter is structured around sixteen intertwined questions which frame the issue Bonhoeffer struggles to address. This suggests that he was initiating an inquiry, not summing up a final position. Working, praying, ministering to the broken and the terrified imprisoned with him, Bonhoeffer observes that the world he once knew is no longer religious. "The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over," he says, "and so is the time of inwardness and conscience – and that means the time of religion in general."² A little further on in the letter, Bonhoeffer asks, "How do we speak of God – without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on?"³ For Bonhoeffer, religion simply consists of such presuppositions, emerging from human history, spinning stories about the nature and purpose of things. But the stories no longer purchase the allegiance of people in Bonhoeffer's world. The order of life and work is now inoculated against belief in such cozy narratives, and our existence has become secular. What is Christianity in such an environment? How do we define the role of the church in such a domain? What is to be its own nature and purpose in a secular sphere where the religious vision is largely eclipsed?

[3] This concern for the identity of the church in the context of a world withdrawing from the comforting themes of traditional religion was a prominent feature of Bonhoeffer's work as far back as his thesis, *Communio Sanctorum*, completed in 1927.⁴ The questions raised in the April 30, 1944 letter from prison, therefore, have a history. They reflect the final, albeit incomplete, stage in Bonhoeffer's development of a trajectory of anxiety for an emaciated theology within the "religious" community of Christianity, a reduction of thick philosophical concepts to a thin expression of the church's place in the world. The church, it seems, must learn to live without religion.

[4] One of the most striking statements of Bonhoeffer's groping toward a grasp of "religionless Christianity" comes from a lecture he delivered in early 1929 to the German congregation in Barcelona, Spain, where he was serving as vicar. The focus of that lecture was ethics, and his proposal was nothing less than the demise of "Christian ethics." Even as the Christian church must learn to live without "religion," so too must the church learn to live without "ethics." But this second claim is as radical as the first: that the effort to craft a "Christian ethic" is as futile as is the attempt to maintain a "religious Christianity."

[5] As with the Tegel Prison letter, the 1929 Barcelona lecture, entitled "What Is a Christian Ethic?"⁵ is organized around a medley of questions. But these questions, reminiscent of that later letter, also stand beside a set of remarkable arguments that proclaim the end of Christian ethics. Bonhoeffer will insist on four things in this lecture. First, that ethics is a construct of human origin, that its roots are historical and not divine. Second, that ethics attends to the dynamics of human action, while the Christian proclamation describes God's action. Third, that the moral character of the New Testament, and thus of Christianity as an historical reality, is derivative and not unique to the revelation disclosed by Christ. Finally, that ethics is distinctively marked by assorted norms and commands abstracted away from

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genuine human action, and is therefore inadequate to motivate or define human action. These four claims serve as the support for his conclusion that the church must abandon her presumption that she can fabricate a Christian ethic.

(<https://www.lutheranethics.org/de/ethics-by/Bonhoeffer/article/>) most stark. Ethics is an emphatically earthly activity that produces many idiosyncratic moral systems. “There is a German ethic and a French ethic, just as there is an American ethic,” meaning that all ethical norms and practices are relative to some local standard.⁶ There is no universal ethic, no moral strategies that transcend the particularity of the communities that generate them. Moral judgments must be rendered in the flesh – “ethics is a matter of blood and history,” says Bonhoeffer⁷ – and those judgments are informed by criteria shaped within coherent political communities. This means that moral resources for living in the world do not originate with God, nor do they emerge from the fundamental proclamation of Christianity. Like Karl Barth, and unlike Emil Brunner, Bonhoeffer rejected those natural law approaches to ethics that would make God the creator of an established moral order to which human beings must rightly conform. Bonhoeffer also avoids any sort of divine command theory of morality, whereby God functions as a divine commander, directly issuing ethical edicts to human beings whose proper response is simply to obey. Both natural law and divine command theories falsely posit metaphysical and universal ideals as the basis for moral action, when it is clear that ethical praxis takes place in specific contexts embedded in particular communities. Idealistic and universal ethics are a sham, according to Bonhoeffer; moral action is in fact practical and local. This contrasts with the essential core of the Christian message, which is precisely universal, and metaphysically rich in the scope of its application.

[7] This metaphysical density of Christianity, which stands in contrast to the mundane ethics of the plain person, is captured in the distinctive Christian declaration that God’s action is redemptive of the human condition, and not simply remedial of human behavior. “Christianity speaks of the single way of God to us, from the merciful love of God for the unrighteous and sinners,” while “ethics speaks of the way of humans to God, of the encounter of the holy God with the unholy human.”⁸ Bonhoeffer does not consider these two ways to be alternative modes of God’s engagement with his creation, the divine condescension moving in counterpoint with the human striving. On the contrary, these two actions are opposed to one another. “[B]ecause the Christian message speaks of grace and ethics speaks of righteousness,” these twoways do not only originate in different spheres, they seek different destinations.⁹ God’s way is soteriological and eschatological, pursuing the reconciliation of all things in Christ, a reconciliation inaugurated by the cross: “there is only one way from God to humankind, and that is the way of love in Christ, the way of the cross.”¹⁰ For Bonhoeffer, this is the ultimate metaphysical singularity: that all things worthy of theological consideration for Christians should be those things which originate in God’s action toward creation, and that God’s action originates in the cross. On the other hand, “there are countless ways from us to God, and therefore there are also countless ethics.”¹¹ Bonhoeffer here designates ethics as a human enterprise whose various manifestations reflect an effort to arrange our ordinary lives in such a way to secure an imagined favor with God. While God makes all things new in Christ, our ethics continue to be a scheme for managing all the old things. We are not surprised, then, when Bonhoeffer notes that “the discovery of what is beyond good and evil was not made by Friedrich Nietzsche . . . it belongs to the original material of the Christian message. . .”¹² The reference to Nietzsche is revealing. The latter’s long soliloquy, *Beyond Good and Evil*, articulates a pair of insights: that “good” and “evil” are constructs of human imagination, and that the most authentic human goods lay beyond the confining metaphors of “good” and “evil.” This was also Bonhoeffer’s judgment: that the original material of Christianity was without the contrivance of ethics, in the same way that Christianity is now without the comforts of religion, as he would surmise some fifteen years later.

[8] There is already enough in these two arguments – that ethics is strictly a human endeavor and not a divine ordering, and that ethics holds no genuine theological interest for the Christian – to support Bonhoeffer’s claim that there can be no authentic Christian ethic. But Bonhoeffer offers two more arguments in support of his insight here, and these arguments further extend the estrangement of human moral reflection from the core proclamation of the Christian community.

[9] Bonhoeffer takes up an obvious problem for his thesis: the Gospels are full of ethical injunctions and exhortations. If there is no such thing as a “Christian ethic,” what are we to make of all the moral expressions in the New Testament, and especially those ethical commands of Jesus? Bonhoeffer’s answer is that this ethical material is not original with Jesus, and since it is not original, it cannot be of fundamental significance for Christianity. It is an interesting argument, and deserves closer scrutiny.

[10] Bonhoeffer observes that the basic moral teachings of Jesus have antecedents, and this applies

especially to the commandment of love that Jesus encourages his followers to show one another. He cites the rabbinic literature, and the writings of the Hellenistic philosophical schools whose general

slogans were well known during the time of Jesus, as providing a prior framework for the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. Bonhoeffer insists that the formulation of these moral epigrams, enjoining love

and compassion as components in the nurturing of sustained communities, were commonplace

shibboleths well understood by the audience who listened to Jesus. Why is this important? Bonhoeffer is convinced that if “the proclamation of this [love] commandment really stood in the middle of Jesus’

preaching, he would always have made a fresh beginning from this point.. But that is not the case.”¹³ In

short, if the commandment to love were the pivot of his message, Jesus would have regularly grounded

all his comments in that principle. But we find instead that much of what Jesus says to others is not

rooted in any identifiable love commandment. Those passages that speak of love as a central principle directing the lives of Jesus’ followers are relatively few, and highly concentrated, in the Gospels. In the

discourse of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament accounts, there is at least as much material

informed by Mosaic law as there is material informed by a commandment to love. But we should expect

to find love spoken of much more frequently in the Gospels, Bonhoeffer suggests, if the commandment

to love were the single underlying theme of Jesus’ teaching. Its appearances are infrequent because it

was not at the heart of Jesus’ earthly ministry, a fact clearly recognized by the New Testament

evangelists. The appearance of the love commandment, like the presence of other ethical prescriptions

in the Gospels, is owing to the familiarity of those tenets with the Jews and Greeks among whom Jesus

lived. Jesus used those sayings because they were pedestrian, part of the background noise surrounding

Hellenistic Judaism. “The commandment of love is not exclusively Christian,” Bonhoeffer says in his 1929

Barcelona lecture, “but was already generally recognized and widespread at the time of Jesus. . .”¹⁴ There

is nothing special about the love commandment, as there is nothing special about the ethical utterances

of Jesus. For Bonhoeffer, what is special is the utterly unique in the story of Jesus: the cross.

[11] Finally, Bonhoeffer crafts a subtle and lengthy position that owes much to his affinity for

existentialist thought. But this last argument both summarizes and grounds all that has gone before in

this lecture, and makes clear just why there can be no Christian ethic. Ethics is an effort to impose order

on indelibly unruly human behavior, an endeavor to construct a system out of principles and

prohibitions. Indeed, ethics is useless if it is not some sort of taut grid created to bind our public and

private conduct. All of this is necessary in a sinful creation. Without moral limits to contour our

interactions with one another, this disorderly world would overwhelm us. But we must not pretend that

our ethics, any ethics, is at all Christian. “For Christians,” Bonhoeffer says, “there are no ethical principles

by means of which they could perhaps civilize themselves” – no ethical norms or strategies by which

order could be impressed on the Christian.¹⁵ The Christian is not in fact interested in being “civilized”

(that is, governed by a moral order). The Christian is interested in only one thing: “a direct relationship

with God [that is] ever sought afresh.”¹⁶ The difficulty, as Bonhoeffer sees it, is that “if there was a

generally valid moral law, then there would be a way from the human to God – I would have my

principles, so I would believe myself assured sub specie aeternitatis.”¹⁷ This would create an impossible

situation for the Christian: “I would have control over my relationship with God, so there would be a

moral action without immediate relationship to God. And, most important of all, in that case I would once

again become a slave to my principles. I would sacrifice our most precious gift, freedom.”¹⁸

[12] Here we glimpse the heart of Bonhoeffer’s concern with the purported “Christian ethic.” Every ethic

constrains and maneuvers, every ethic is oppressive, every ethic directs the Christian away from the

freedom we have in Christ. A civilizing moral order is important for the well-being of our communities –

Lutherans sometimes refer to such a thing as the “first use of the law.” Human beings, operating in the

secular realm, concoct all sorts of moral schemes, and rightly so, for such devices are critical for our

public life. But Bonhoeffer warns us that we must not be misled by this into thinking that there is

anything fundamentally Christian about any civilizing moral order. There can be no “Christian ethic”

because the very exercise of an ethic deprives the Christian of what she has been given in Christ: her

freedom. “Christian ethics” turns out to be profoundly and ironically oxymoronic.

[13] Does this mean that Bonhoeffer accepts the traditional Lutheran teaching of the “two kingdoms,”

since it appears that he segregates ethics and politics from that which is essentially Christian? One typical

reading of the “two kingdoms” doctrine suggests that it represents a distinction between two arenas: that

in which the Christian finds himself “before God” (coram Deo) and that in which the Christian finds

himself “before the world” (coram mundo). These two modes of human existence are in turn subject to

the authority of two divine ordinances, the political state and the assembly of Christian believers. The

character and responsibilities of the secular authority were delineated by Luther first in the Address to

the German Nobility (1520) and later in the treatise On Secular Authority (1523). But the institutional identity of the other ordained power is more elusive: Luther appears to be less interested in the organizational dynamics of the church (or of the state) than with its effect on the individual Christian.

(<https://heidi.niebuhr.org/sep/>) (<https://learn.elcax.org/file/>) of this “two kingdoms” model in theological reflection. In his critical assessment of Lutheran social ethics, Niebuhr cites German Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, a contemporary and colleague of Bonhoeffer, who wrote,

It would be a better confession of faith if the churches said to the world and to the heathen: We wait. Put an end to all social injustice. Eliminate war. After you have done all that, we still wait. All this is not enough for us. Purify mankind to the highest degree of perfection, morally and spiritually. That also is not enough for us. . . I will remain as one who waits. For I have a gospel, good news. I await the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come.”¹⁹

[15] Niebuhr rightly infers that this is not only a succinct expression of the “two kingdoms” doctrine, but also reveals the public meaning of the Lutheran commitment to the key theological tenet of justification by faith. “Fortunately,” Niebuhr then observes wryly, “there have always been judges who have never heard of this doctrine of justification by faith and who have therefore been prompted by a sensitive conscience to apply the law as justly as possible.”²⁰

[16] Asmussen’s description of “a better confession” has an analogue in Bonhoeffer’s later and unfinished Ethics. In that text, midway through Part One, Bonhoeffer introduces a distinction between the “ultimate” and the “penultimate,” a distinction which may be read as Bonhoeffer’s rendition of a “two kingdoms” ethic. He insists that “[j]ustification by grace and faith alone remains in every respect the final word” – this is the ultimate – and “[i]t is for the sake of the ultimate that we must now speak of the penultimate.”²¹ The penultimate “embraces the whole domain of Christian social life, and especially the whole range of Christian pastoral activity.”²² The ultimate depicts the Christian coram Deo; the penultimate refers to the Christian as coram mundo.

[17] But these are not separate and estranged domains. Bonhoeffer would not treat the ultimate and the penultimate as alien territories; for him, to be coram Deo results immediately in an entitlement to be coram mundo. He poses a question in this passage both comforting and profound: “Does not this mean that, over and over again, the penultimate will be what commends itself precisely for the sake of the ultimate, and that it will have to be done not with a heavy conscience but with a clear one?”²³ The Christian before God is assured that her justification has already been attended to; now the Christian may enter into the life of the world and serve the neighbor. But Bonhoeffer recognizes this does not mean that the church’s proclamation of justification necessarily instructs the Christian on how she must perform in the world. Deliberation on social ethics may help in this regard, but such deliberation is a strictly human activity. Even though we may be motivated by the ultimate, our deeds and duties in the realm of the penultimate are not directly informed by the ultimate. A reluctance to acknowledge this reality is why we so often confuse human moral justification with divine graceful justification. To Niebuhr’s dismay, neither Asmussen nor Bonhoeffer submit to this confusion.

[18] This can be seen clearly through a subsequent passage in Bonhoeffer’s Ethics. He will there speak against the notion of “two spheres,” not as distinct ontological realms, but as representing a divided Christian self. The world may present itself as bifurcated, but not so the person of faith: “. . . that there is no real possibility of being a Christian outside the reality of the world and that there is no real worldly existence outside the reality of Jesus Christ. . . the Christian. . . is himself an undivided whole. . . His worldliness does not divide him from Christ, and his Christianity does not divide him from the world.”²⁴ It is apparent that there are two ontological “spheres” here – Christianity and the world – but there is no corresponding sundering of the individual Christian. In the Christian self, the good news of the ultimate releases an energy that flows to the penultimate. These two, the ultimate and the penultimate, find their connection in a kind of reorientation of the Christian toward the world.

[19] However, this does not mean that the reality of the world and the reality of Jesus Christ merge into one, or that our experience of the latter can simply be transplanted into the former. Bonhoeffer continues: “The Church does indeed occupy a definite space in the world, a space which is delimited by her public worship, her organizations and her parish life, and it is this fact which has given rise to the whole of the thinking in terms of spheres. . . The space of the Church is not there in order to try to deprive the world of a piece of its territory, but precisely in order to prove to the world that it is still the world, the world which is loved by God and reconciled with Him. . . The Church has neither the wish nor the obligation to extend her space to cover the space of the world.”²⁵ So the Church is not congruent with the world, and its ultimate truth is not to be confused with the world’s penultimate moral wisdom. This

language in the Ethics is a refiguring of Bonhoeffer's account of the essential functioning of the Church in his last letters from prison to Eberhard Bethge, where he speaks of the disciplina arcana, the "secret discipline" of the Church, "a place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation" that "takes on a new importance" in the context of a thoroughgoing secularism.²⁶ The space of the Church is filled with her public worship, organizations and parish life, which is the "secret discipline" that sustains her allegiance to the ultimate, and motivates the Christian to live and move and work in the world. The proper work of the Church is worship and pastoral care, not wearying the world with repeated efforts to enshrine a Christian ethical triumphalism.

[20] So – does this mean that Bonhoeffer accepts the traditional Lutheran teaching of the "two kingdoms"? Yes, but only if we refuse to attach primary significance to the specifically "dimensional" aspect of the metaphors of kingdom, sphere, domain, and the like, and view these terms as reflecting two different stances on the part of Christian, the first a posture of receiving the Gospel as the necessary guarantor of God's redemptive grace active for me and for the world, and the second an attitude of giving to the world those transient resources which it needs from me. The Christian understands the dual reality she experiences not as higher and lower, good and bad, sacred and secular – these are merely malnourished human ethical categories, after all — but as ultimate and penultimate.

[21] I believe we do not give Bonhoeffer enough credit for the radical character of his theological vision. Even those who find the notion of a "religionless Christianity" to be a provocative proposal are often reluctant to embrace an "ethicless Christianity."²⁷ We sometimes regard his more accessible works, like *The Cost of Discipleship*, to be a stimulating primer on a new kind of ethics, when it gives every appearance of being just the opposite: a call away from moral reflection and toward a free and faithful journey up the steep slope to an encounter with God. Bonhoeffer considered the *Ethics* to be his magnum opus, not because it presented a new way of conceiving a theological ethics, but because it segregates ethics from theology completely.²⁸ It appears to have occurred first to Bonhoeffer that there must be an "ethicless Christianity" as a prelude to the broader "religionless Christianity" articulated in the Tegel Prison letter of 1944.

[22] It seems to me these remarkable insights of Bonhoeffer's afford an opportunity for those of us in the church to reconsider the entire enterprise of "Christian ethics." Of the need for a secular ethics, understood as a human artifact, to arrange our social commerce, there can be no doubt. Of the possibility that there can be such a thing as a "Christian ethic," there can be considerable doubt. Bonhoeffer, at least, appears to doubt it. What would it mean to take Bonhoeffer seriously on this point, and to adopt a critical stance toward the prospect of fabricating a "Christian ethic"? Let me offer just two examples of what an "ethicless Christianity" might need to address.

[23] It is frequently suggested that Christ crucified now makes us "free for" a life of loving service to the neighbor. This sort of "love ethic" is routinely positioned as opposed to "the law" (in whatever manifestation) in contemporary Christian ethical literature. The Christian is portrayed as relieved of the burden of "the law" precisely for the purpose of loving her neighbor. But from the perspective of Bonhoeffer, the claim that the Christian is proscriptively "free for" acts of loving service turns out to be a mandate designed precisely to diminish our freedom, by making such an instruction a refurbished bit of law. The life of the Christian is to be ordered by love instead of by law, but this still represents an attempt to structure our lives around a "love principle" rather than to live out of our radical freedom. Our liberty in Christ is not then an emancipation from sin, death and the devil, but another enslavement to a new prescription. A "love ethic" cannot be authentically Christian for Bonhoeffer, because it limits our freedom in Christ to a singular mode of expression, namely, those actions which are motivated by love.

[24] And Bonhoeffer would be likely bemused to hear a proposal that the Church should be "a community of moral deliberation." There are many venues in the secular world that might well serve as centers for moral deliberation – institutions, professions, community organizations, among others. But why the Church? Given Bonhoeffer's singular vision of the Christian Church as stripped of any pretense to ethical or religious expertise – or expertise of any kind – it would seem that the Church might be the last place to look for moral deliberation. Like the stricken hearers of Peter's speech in Acts 2, however, the Church seems forever obsessed with finding something productive to do. Ethics is a serious subject in our culture, even if more often observed in the breach. So the Church is regularly tempted to deflect its gaze from the center of its life, and to take up those matters which will keep it busy, including moral deliberation. In so doing, we squander our freedom. Bonhoeffer would have none of it. Bonhoeffer's last months at Tegel were not filled with ethical fulminations against an oppressive political regime that had abandoned all pretense of seeking justice. There is very little indication in his final letters that he was engaged in standard moral deliberation, of discerning causes or proposing solutions. Instead, he

engaged in praying, preaching and pastoral ministry, those actions of ultimate significance for the

Church, carried out in the midst of an extreme attenuation of the penultimate: a manifestation of his Christian freedom. Bonhoeffer was by that time quite starkly beyond good and evil, beyond "religion,"

where the cross of Christ was the only living icon for those who must surely die. In our day, as the Church faces its peculiar trials in a world pious but no longer religious, it is likely he would encourage us to do the same.

[25] As in Bonhoeffer's own writings, we are left with more questions than answers. But one answer does seem to be available, if the analysis here is accurate. "What Is a Christian Ethic?" may be seen as the beginning of a continuous reflection on the part of Bonhoeffer that stretched from 1929 until his death in 1945. In the process of reaching a tentative conclusion that perhaps the modern world must encounter the church as an exemplar of a "religionless Christianity," he begins by distinguishing ethics from theology, and relegating the former to a non-theological, non-metaphysical, non-transcendent – indeed, non-Christian – domain. It is for Bonhoeffer, in fact, the end of Christian ethics.

End Notes

1 Bethge, Eberhard Bonhoeffer: An Illustrated Biography, Rosaleen Ockenden, translator (London and New York: Harper & Row (Fount Paperbacks), 1979), page 78

2 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Letter of 30 April 1944, in Letters and Papers from Prison, edited by Eberhard Bethge, revised edition (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1953), page 152

3 Letter of 30 April, 1944, page 153

4 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church, Lukens and Krauss, translators (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1) (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998)

5 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich "What Is a Christian Ethic?" reprinted in A Testament of Freedom, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperCollins, 1990, 1995), pages 345-351

6 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 346

7 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 346

8 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 347

9 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 347

10 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 347

11 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 347

12 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 347

13 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" pages 347-348

14 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 347

15 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 348

16 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 348

17 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 348

18 "What Is a Christian Ethic?" page 348

19 Asmussen, Hans, in Zwischen den Zeiten, July 1930, cited in Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (Volume II: Human Destiny (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1943, 1964), pages 195-196, footnote 18

20 The Nature and Destiny of Man, page 196, footnote 18

21 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Ethics (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1955), page 125

22 Ethics, page 126

23 Ethics, page 126

24 Ethics, page 198

25 Ethics, pages 199-200

26 Letters and Papers from Prison, pages 153-154

27 Douglas John Hall is one example. In his excellent reflection on Bonhoeffer in Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of "Neo-Orthodoxy" (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), Hall cites the following passage from Bonhoeffer's Ethics:

(<https://www.elca.org/jle/>) (<https://learn.elca.org/jle/>) Among God's creatures of the revelational reality of God in Christ, just as the problem of dogmatics is the truth of the revelational reality of God in Christ. The place which in all other ethics is occupied by the antithesis of "should be" and "is," idea and accomplishment, motive and performance, is occupied in Christian ethics by the relation of reality and realization, past and present, history and event (faith), or, to replace the equivocal concept with the unambiguous name, the relation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (Ethics, page 57).

Hall then comments: "There could hardly be a stronger statement of the theological – indeed, of the trinitarian theological – foundations of Christian ethics" (Remembered Voices, page 72). But if we situate the Ethics within the trajectory of Bonhoeffer's unfolding thought from "What Is a Christian Ethic?" to his final letters from prison, it seems clear that Bonhoeffer's claim here is that what "occupies" the heart of ethics is fundamentally opposed to what "occupies" the heart of Christian proclamation, just as the equivocal is opposed by the unambiguous. There can be no reconciliation between Christian theology and ethics for Bonhoeffer, a position that Hall appears to overlook.

28 It is interesting to note that Bonhoeffer entertained a number of possible titles for this unfinished work. Eberhard Bethge reports that Bonhoeffer considered such titles as "The foundations and structure of a world which is reconciled with God," "The foundations and structure of a future world," "The foundations and structure of a united west," and finally, "The preparing of the way and the entry into possession." His proposed subtitle was, "A tentative Christian ethic" (see the "Editor's Preface to the First Through the Fifth German Editions" in the Ethics). Given our understanding of what Bonhoeffer considered the "foundation and structure" of Christianity – the ultimate proclamation of God's action in Jesus Christ – the posthumous title of "Ethics" is at best misleading.

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