

Response to Stanley Hauerwas

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Thank you, Dr. Hauerwas, for your interesting presentation on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I especially want to commend your attention to Bonhoeffer's 1932 lecture, "A Theological Basis for the World Alliance?" In his identification there of the ethical criterion of directedness toward Christ's coming, Bonhoeffer sets down a pattern which he will pick up again, in different words, in his *Ethics*. Indeed, that lecture is a sort of a very early "first draft" of *Ethics*, and more attention should be paid to it than it has received. I also agree completely with your assessment of the theological continuity in Bonhoeffer, and with your grounding of his Abwehr resistance activity in his ecclesiology.

I see a somewhat different ecclesiological focus from Bonhoeffer's, though, in the strength of your interest in the political activity per se arising from the theological existence of the divine community under the Word of God. Bonhoeffer's concern was, first of all, to work out the nature of the church as Christ existing as community in terms of christological formation and secondly, in terms of its dialectical relationship with the state and other elements of the secular world within the prior, over-reaching, and all-encompassing reality of their reconciliation in Jesus Christ. In this connection I think that you underestimate the continuing structural importance of the Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine, and the way it functions in tandem with christological formation, in Bonhoeffer's thought.

The two kingdoms doctrine has traditionally separated Christ's kingdom and the kingdom of this world, Christian and secular, the church and politics, so strictly that they had nothing to do with each other. Bonhoeffer's neo-Lutheran contemporaries in Germany placed an exaggerated emphasis on this. The state maintains the outward order as it sees fit, the church proclaims the gospel unto salvation, and each strictly minds its own business. Bonhoeffer considered this to be a misinterpretation of Luther — he even called it "pseudo-Lutheran" — because it makes Christ into something partial within a more comprehensive reality.¹ Lutheran ethics would thus fly in the face of Lutheran

christology — Luther's *kein ander Gott*. It is quite an eye-opener to read Paul Althaus, in his final book on Luther's ethics, separating "God," as the ruler of the outward, worldly, created order, from Christ, who as ruler of the inward and spiritual order has nothing whatsoever to do with the outward order — and to realize that this Lutheran stalwart has thereby used the two kingdoms doctrine to essentially the same christological end as that of the extra-Calvinisticum!² So Bonhoeffer recast the traditional doctrine in terms of a dynamic relation of Christian and secular as a polemic unity in Jesus Christ. Their polemic is directed toward the historical actualization of the given reality of the reconciled unity of God and the world in Jesus. Bonhoeffer claimed, I think correctly, to have recovered Luther's original intention in this directedness toward Christ.³ This understanding of the two kingdoms doctrine firmly circumscribed all of his political interest and activity.

In his 1933 essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer says that when the state, by itself becoming lawless in depriving the Jews of their rights and by interfering with the church's ministry, has completely absconded from its responsibility to maintain law and order for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel, then, and only then, the church may be obligated to act on behalf of the entire reality in Jesus Christ by jamming a spoke into the state's wheel.⁴ Similarly, in *Ethics*, he says that just as Luther had protested, with the help of the secular princes, against the Roman Church's extension of its ecclesiastical power, all in the name of a better Christianity, so also when Christianity is employed against the secular it must be solely in the name of a better secularity in the interest of the entire reality in Christ.⁵

You mentioned Bonhoeffer's interest, in *Ethics*, in the "restrainer," the power of the relatively just state for order. But this follows a much longer discussion of the decay of the Christian inheritance of the West, the West's repudiation of the form of Christ.⁶ The healing of the nations can come about only with the coming together of the church's recovery of the form of Christ and the "restrainer" within the overreaching reality of Christ. Bonhoeffer immediately follows this up with an elucidation of the church's recovery of the form of Christ in the world in terms of its representative acceptance of the Western world's guilt as its own, and the confession of its own guilt toward Christ for abdicating its role within reality by its endless concessions to the world and relentless secularization of the gospel in the interest of "relevance"

to the world's prior agenda.⁷ This coming together of a faithful church and the "restrainer" is the only hope Bonhoeffer holds out for the West in 1940; the alternative is final disintegration of the civilization.⁸ The political force of the "restrainer" is really of no interest in and of itself. This puts the important theological letter of July 16, 1944 in an interesting light:

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Humanity's religiosity makes it look in its distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs humanity to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by His weakness. This will probably be the starting point for our 'secular interpretation'.⁹

In other words, within the cosmic reality of the reconciled unity of God and the world in Jesus Christ, the Enlightenment (even though its own insight into this reality is impaired, as Bonhoeffer had earlier put it in *Ethics*¹⁰) actually serves to purify the church and is thus paradoxically directed toward Christ's coming. He always thought like this. Because politics and the church were always to be clearly distinguished within this modified, or, as he would say, restored, two kingdoms doctrine, I think your opening statement, that "from the very beginning Bonhoeffer was attempting to develop a theological politics from which we still have much to learn," probably overstates his political interest and concern as such. He saw himself as belonging primarily to the church and called to the task of purifying it to assist the secular in its appointed task. This is certainly clear enough in the final "Outline for a Book," where he envisions the life and work of the church of the future, having just properly grounded it christologically in terms of Jesus's being-for-others as the revelation of God in his concreteness.¹¹

On another, but not unrelated, matter, while you speak primarily about Bonhoeffer's attempt to develop a theological politics, the paper is titled "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology." I followed up your reference to

Arne Rasmusson's book *The Church as Polis* to clarify the distinction you would make between "theological politics" and "political theology." I gathered that political theology is theology whose categories are intentionally determined by a particular political existence and set of political presuppositions and experiences, whereas theological politics is political activity intentionally formed and limited by the theological existence of the church-community under the Word of God. If I have understood the distinction correctly, it is certainly a critical one. Yet you seem to use the terms interchangeably. I for one would be most grateful if you would clarify exactly what you mean by them. I'm not sure that you are in fact arguing that Bonhoeffer is a political theologian, the title of your paper notwithstanding.

I do think any attempt to cast Bonhoeffer as a political theologian is misguided — as misguided in its own way as the eclectic uses of him made by Cox, Robinson, or Fletcher which you rightly reject — for he was an opponent of political theology of any kind. You quote from his 1932 lecture to the Youth Peace Conference in Czechoslovakia, "There can only be a community of peace when it does not rest on *lies* and *injustice*."¹² Now "lies and injustice" is a reference to the Treaty of Versailles, which unjustly and vindictively ascribed sole guilt for the First World War to Germany and penalized it accordingly.¹³ The lecture's title was "A Theological Basis for the World Alliance?" and Bonhoeffer's point was that its largely political basis was woefully inadequate and that a proper theological basis was needed.

Bonhoeffer begins that lecture by complaining that the lack of a serious *theology* of the international ecumenical movement means that any German theologian engaged in ecumenical work will be accused of being "unconcerned with the Fatherland and unconcerned with *the truth*."¹⁴ One suspects that this may be autobiographical — that he himself had felt the sting of such accusations. His words here indicate a certain restricted area of agreement with the German nationalist political theologians Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Althaus, who were certainly among his critics. They treated German nationality as an order of creation and Germany's urgent need for international justice as an ethical absolute — and therefore supported Adolf Hitler's candidacy for Reich Chancellor even as Bonhoeffer was delivering his lecture. But Bonhoeffer accuses Hirsch and Althaus of having "a static concept of the truth."¹⁵ They were telling the truth about Allied "lies and injustice." But by their rejection of

the Christian unity given in the ecumenical movement as a sham in view of the apparent indifference of the churches in the Allied countries to German concerns, and by their acceptance of the prospect of a war of national liberation for the sake of justice, they had lost sight of the biblical command of peace and the need for truth to be related to peace in terms of the gospel concept of the forgiveness of sins, the sign of Christ's coming.

Then Bonhoeffer turns his theological guns on the Anglo-Saxon-dominated ecumenical movement, which he accuses of having "a static concept of peace."¹⁶ It rightly perceived the biblical command of peace to which Hirsch and Althaus were seemingly blind, but saw the ideal of external peace as something good in itself, an order of creation, valid quite apart from any relation to international justice and the forgiveness of sins. Bonhoeffer saw the "peace" agenda of the ecumenical movement as a one-sided political theology cloaking "lies and injustice" with theological respectability.

But above all Bonhoeffer believed passionately in the reality of the body of Christ, which overreaches every human difference and distinction with Christ's will for the unity of his body (cf. John 17:20ff). He called for the replacement of both of these political theologies of created orders with a reconciliation theology of the orders of God's preservation of humankind for Christ's coming. The ethical question then is, "Which orders in the world are directed toward that end?"¹⁷ Only in this context, never in themselves, may they be called "good." Hence German Christians must struggle for justice, but without resorting to war and misrepresenting it as "justice," for it is so destructive it cannot be said to be preserving anything for Christ's coming. They must remember that real justice can only come with forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace — that is, with Christ's coming.¹⁸ The Anglo-Saxons for their part must listen to the German cries for truth and justice, and must stop misrepresenting lies and injustice as "peace," in the interest of that real peace which can only arise with justice from forgiveness and reconciliation, that is, in the bodily reality of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ And all churches and individual Christians must concentrate on the new recognition of unity with respect to the truth of Jesus Christ — the theological basis! — so that the church may speak with one voice.²⁰

Would that Bonhoeffer's voice had prevailed in 1932! But his is a strange one indeed to political theology, then or now, in his context or some

current one. Why? Because Bonhoeffer adamantly refuses to make an ethical absolute of *any* political context, and demands that all such realities, however pressing or urgent, always be fully relativized to the concrete ecclesial reality of the unity of Jesus Christ. And here is the secret of Bonhoeffer's ethical thinking: because they are all relative to Jesus Christ, they not only *can* be reconciled, but in him, in reality, they *are*, and the only thing in question is how this given reality is to be actualized in history. That is, the answer to the *how* of political and personal ethics ebbs and flows about the Christo-ecclesiological *who*. When have we ever heard a political theologian speak like this?

Notes

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 196.

² Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972). Althaus maintains that for Luther creation and its orders are prior to Christ and continue to operate apart from him. He does say that according to Luther Christ's lordship is operative "in persons only, that is, in their faith," and not in orders, for "the Lordship of Christ is to be understood in the context of the theology of the cross. It is still hidden under the 'form of this world'." But this "does not mean that they are not subject to the will and commandment of *God*" (79-80, italics mine). Apparently, according to Althaus, Luther was prepared to discern the will of God in the things that have been made as well as in the suffering of the cross, hence my reference to the extra-Calvinisticum. However, Althaus is curiously unable to cite Luther convincingly on this point, whereas passages supporting Bonhoeffer's interpretation can be found by the score and are actually cited by Althaus in other contexts. I am at a loss to explain Althaus's interpretation.

³ *Ethics*, 199.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," *No Rusty Swords*, ed. E.H. Robertson (London: Collins, 1965), 225-26.

⁵ *Ethics*, 199.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 110-16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116-17.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Enlarged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 361. Italics mine.

¹⁰ *Ethics*, 97.

¹¹ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 381-83.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Theological Basis for the World Alliance?" *No Rusty Swords*, ed. E.H. Robertson (London: Collins, 1965), 169.

¹³ That this was Bonhoeffer's view on this matter and that his view remained essentially unchanged

even throughout his resistance activity is quite clear. Cf. the sermon “The Love of God” of 1930, in *No Rusty Swords*, 76 ff., esp. 78-82, and his joint statement with W. Visser ’t Hooft of 1941, “The Church and the New Order in Europe,” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *True Patriotism*, ed. E.H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 108 ff., esp. 110-12, 115-16.

¹⁴ *No Rusty Swords*, 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 166-67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 169-70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168-69, 171.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 171-73.