

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Christ the Centre



Dietrich Bonhoeffer

- Life
- Key Ideas
- *Letters and Papers from Prison*



Life

- ◉ 1906 - 1945
- ◉ High point of German Culture
- ◉ Doctorate at 21, Habilitation at 24
- ◉ Professor at Berlin University, 1930 – 1936
- ◉ Pastor and Student abroad
- ◉ Underground Seminary, 1935 – 1940
- ◉ Anti-Nazi Resistance, 1939 – death
- ◉ Prisoner, April 1943 – April 1945

Key Ideas

- ◉ Cheap Grace
- ◉ The Communion of Saints
- ◉ Responsible, Ethical Action
- ◉ Christ the Centre

Letters and Papers from Prison

- The World Come of Age
 - Science, Ethics, Politics, Psychology
 - “as if there was no god”
- “How can we reclaim for Christ a world which has come of age?”

One Misguided Answer

○ Resist / God of the gaps

- Insist that the world cannot live without God
- Point out unanswered questions/places where God has not been edged out

○ Problems:

- What if these questions too are one day answered “as if there was no God?”
- Puts God at the fringes of life, rather than at the centre
 - God becomes the God of our weaknesses, not our strengths

A Second Misguided Answer

○ Christian Atheism / Death of God

- God has literally died in history, and is no more
- Hegel: History as the Absolute realizing itself
- Nietzsche: “God is dead.” -- Western man has learned to live without external sources of meaning
- Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*

○ Problem:

- Whatever it is, it is not Christian
- God is not just withdrawn, He is gone forever

Bonhoeffer's Answer

○ 3 Fundamental Truths

- Men have learned how to get on without God
- Jesus Christ is the centre and meaning of history
- God is yet very real and present

○ God's being pushed out of the world is a real phenomenon, and mankind truly is learning how to cope without God. The Christian is called to partake in the weakness of God, and stand by Him in His suffering.

Religionless Christianity

- Eric Metaxas' Misinterpretation:
 - Simply a call to move beyond Sunday Christianity and allow Christ to be lord of one's whole life
 - Not incorrect, but only a small part of Bonhoeffer's answer!
- Avoid the temptation to cover the world with "a veneer of religion."

Religionless Christianity

- “The Christian, unlike devotees of the salvation myths, does not need a last refuge in the eternal from earthly tasks and difficulties. But like Christ himself (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”) he must drink the earthly cup to the lees, and only in his doing that is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ.” (cont.)

Religionless Christianity

- “This world must not be prematurely written off. In this the Old and New Testaments are at one. Myths of salvation arise from human experiences at the boundary situation. Christ takes hold of a man in the centre of his life” (June 27, 1944).

Religionless Christianity

- Don't flee from secular/profane life
- Don't try to “convert” the world
- Engage in the “worldliness” of human existence
 - “The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. As a fresh start she should give away all her endowments to the poor and needy. The clergy should live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. She must take her part in the social life of the world, not lording it over men, but helping and serving them. She must tell men, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.”

Christians and Unbelievers

*Men go to God when they are sore bestead,
Pray to him for succor, for his peace, for bread,
For mercy for them sick, sinning or dead:
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.*

*Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead:
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.*

*God goeth to every man when sore bestead,
Feedeth body and spirit with his bread,
For Christians, heathen alike he hangeth dead,
And both alike forgiving.*

(July 1944)