

A **theonomous** approach to Christian ethics sees the Bible as containing all a person needs to live a good life. Behind this, there is the idea that the Bible is a **set of truth statements** that reveal God's message to the world: it is propositional revelation. If the Bible is, indeed, a set of statements that God has made, then it is logical that these statements should be followed directly.

German Christianity was split in the 1930s. Some Christians, believing that the **State's laws were an expression of God's laws**, linked with the Nazi ideology and became a part of the official German Church: Hitler was 'inspired' by the Holy Spirit. Anyone with Jewish ancestry was banned from Church office. Others wished to break away from politics entirely and were members of the **Confessing Church**, named because they believed that they were the only Christians who were truly 'confessing' their faith. Bonhoeffer's experiences in America gave him a global perspective on what Christianity is. He moved to America briefly in 1939 because he wanted to avoid being made to serve Hitler's army, but he realised that this was **hypocritical**: he had been speaking against any Christian who stood by and let atrocities happen. He also realised **pacifism was flawed** because it tried to bring about peace in this world, not a divine peace that was part of the Kingdom of God. **Christians need to be prophets**, who speak into society when misuse of power is going on. Therefore, Bonhoeffer thought that in extreme circumstances, **doing nothing is not acceptable**. The State will never be able to reflect God's wishes fully as it is run by **fallen human beings**. The question a Christian must ask is whether it is God's will currently to obey the State. So, all ethics must be about discovering the will of God.



- It is only in the moment of action that one can work out the will of God
- Christians must give in to what they think is right and try to understand God's will
- Christian discipleship is about deciding which leader you are going to follow
- Following God's leadership above that of the State is therefore a radical approach to ethics



CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Bonhoeffer clearly sees **duty to God as coming above duty to the State**. It was for this reason that Bonhoeffer joined the resistance, spoke against Hitler publicly and joined the plot to kill Hitler. Bonhoeffer felt that this could be justified because a Christian's duty is not because of the State but it is towards the State. Jesus, too, seemed to ignore the possible consequences in his relationship with the State.

Jesus and Paul both thought that Christians must exist within society. Paul said that if someone **rebels against the State**, they are **rebelling against God** (see Romans 12:1-2). Jesus said that we give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God (see Matthew 22:21). Both these passages suggest that Christians should not act against the State and yet Jesus does that himself when he comes into conflict with the authorities around him. **Jesus identified situations that he needed to be a prophet within**, such as in the interpretation of the law or the treatment of outcasts, and Bonhoeffer certainly did the same in his very different context.

- Other arguments could include:**
- Jesus approached things from **within the State**; Bonhoeffer separated himself from the State. Perhaps Jesus' example is the one Christians should follow
 - Civil disobedience lowers the Christian to the level of **terrorist**
 - Bonhoeffer was working in an **extreme** situation
 - Christians should never begin with the assumption that they will disobey
 - Action is the only way that Christian **truths** can be heard
 - It accepts God as the **ultimate authority**
 - If costly grace is accepted as an approach, Christians do **need to act**



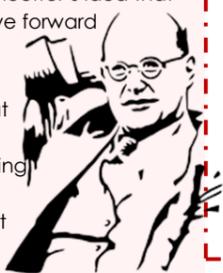
CHURCH AS COMMUNITY AND SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

The role of a Christian community is to give its members what they need to live **good lives**. Bonhoeffer thought that the Church needed to understand that the world is religion-less and work within that context. Religion-less Christianity is understood as:

- Being in a world that has **moved beyond the superstitions** that religion brings with it and is moving towards rationalism
- Needing to **react** to what society has replaced these superstitions with, such as Nazi ideologies
- Lifting itself beyond both its past and current challenges
- Needing to get rid of 'rusty swords' – Bonhoeffer's idea that **ethics needs to be reinterpreted** and move forward

BONHOEFFER'S ROLE IN THE CONFESSING CHURCH

The **Confessing Church** met together in 1934 at Barmen, to produce the **Barmen Declaration**, written by Karl Barth. In particular, the Confessing Church rejected the move by the German hierarchy to ban anyone not of Aryan descent from leadership within the Church.



The core beliefs found in the Barmen Declaration include:

- Jesus** is the only **true leader** and way to God
- Christians must not follow any teaching that does not come from the **revelation** of Jesus
- Other ideologies do not have **authority** over a person's life

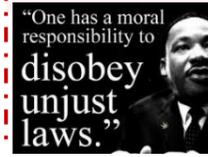
While the Barmen Declaration very firmly expressed its core beliefs, Bonhoeffer felt that it was **not explicit enough** in its idea of Church being for all people, not just the people of a nation. Its focus on beliefs, rather than action, was a weakness for Bonhoeffer, who by the end of his life thought that it had not done enough to promote disobedience to the State in a religion-less world. He was perhaps particularly stung by the fact that the Confessing Church did not take a strong stand against the directive that all Church leaders should take the **oath of obedience to Hitler**.



BONHOEFFER'S RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AT FINKENWALDE

In 1935 Bonhoeffer, on returning from America, was asked to look after a seminary (a place where Church leaders are trained) which soon moved to **Finkenwalde**. The seminary was illegal and secret because the State seminaries were only allowing Aryan people to train in their institutions. The seminary was closed in 1937 by the Gestapo because it went against the State. The seminary allowed Bonhoeffer to reflect on **what it meant to be a Christian community**: for him, this was where spiritual discipline comes from. **Spiritual discipline** was, for Bonhoeffer:

- Prayer-centred**, including meditation
- Bible-based**, with lots of Bible study and discussion about Scripture
- Simple**, that is, there is no need to clutter a mind if you want to progress spiritually
- Focused** on the whole-person, that is, the body as well as the soul
- Communal**, based on the idea of mutual support and searching for guidance of the Holy Spirit
- Action-based**, that is the Church must look out towards the world and speak into the world



ASSESSING BONHOEFFER CAN WE ALWAYS KNOW GOD'S WILL?

How can fallen human being know God's will? Bonhoeffer, like Barth, believed that all we can know of God comes through **God's deliberate decision to reveal himself**. In the moment of action, Bonhoeffer felt that we should **act in accordance with God's will** do the Christian who practises spiritual discipline is likely to be able to identify God's revelation more clearly. This could imply that Bonhoeffer himself reveals God's will, although his **interpretation** of action might differ from somebody else's. It could also lead to Christians **over-reacting** to situations where calm negotiation might have more impact than direct action. Bonhoeffer's views could be said to be coloured by his extreme context (the Nazi regime). However, community living might be the remedy to this danger. In a community, it is possible to discern together and mistakes are less likely. Yet, nevertheless, in determining God's will, we seem to be suggesting more **use of reason** than revealed theology might like – and reason is what led to Nazi ideology.



One thing that Bonhoeffer clearly advocated was the **role of the Christian as the prophet**. A prophet's job is to **speak the word of God** and the prophets of the Old Testament did so with real confidence. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on simplicity and on Jesus might be said to show that with this discipline a Christian can indeed be confident that they can discern the **will of God**.

DOES BONHOEFFER PLACE TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON SUFFERING?

Yes	No
Bonhoeffer lived in extreme circumstances and so, while it was appropriate to talk of suffering alongside Jesus in some way in the context of fighting the Nazis and possibly dying, this is not relevant outside the situation.	Suffering is part of life for anyone who experiences injustice and for everyone at some level at some point in their lives.
Most Christians need to live their lives in 'everyday' circumstances and suffering should not be part of this approach.	For Bonhoeffer, suffering goes alongside solidarity and so the emphasis is on the whole picture of his thought, not just suffering.
It is unhealthy to 'seek out' situations that might lead to suffering.	Jesus told people to take up their own crosses and follow him, so Jesus himself encouraged his followers to embrace their suffering.
Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the suffering (and death) of Jesus might leave no room to understand the resurrection as a place where suffering is no more.	Bonhoeffer's thought is more than just about suffering – he is interested in the Christian engaging with Jesus Christ on all levels, because Jesus is the total revelation of God.
The New Testament is full of references to God's grace being freely given, suggesting that the idea of costly grace requiring something from humans is not appropriate.	If you take your eye off the idea of suffering, you could end up being the person who does not act – which is the starting point for Bonhoeffer's thought.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

GRACE

Bonhoeffer rejects any understanding of grace as being easy to obtain. He calls this **'cheap grace'**. It is wrong to focus on the idea that grace is freely given and won in advance by Jesus because it suggests that whatever you do in life you will benefit fully from it. For Bonhoeffer, grace should be obtained by the Christian **engaging with the suffering of Jesus** because without doing this, the Christian is rejecting Jesus in some way. The grace that Bonhoeffer advocates is 'costly grace'.

- The Christian must accept fully the leadership of Jesus, including his teachings
- If Christians truly believed Jesus' words, they would do anything to achieve the Kingdom of God
- Costly grace means obeying God totally**

SACRIFICE AND SUFFERING

Suffering was central to Jesus' life and it is through Jesus' suffering that Christians can fully understand God's revelation in him and obtain grace. Of course, for Bonhoeffer, this was expressed in his experiences against Nazism, in his imprisonment and eventual execution. Bonhoeffer did not mean that a Christian's suffering should be as extreme as Jesus'. However, his point was that **a life of sacrifice is distinctive** – the Christian must be different to the world around him or her. Conversely, the Christian who has fully 'bought in' to costly grace will be willing to sacrifice much. Bonhoeffer's work at **Finkenwalde** also emphasises that true spiritual discipline is a sacrifice in itself, which will help the Christian to overcome temptations and to suffer in the same spirit of acceptance in which Jesus did.

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity is the word used to express Bonhoeffer's view that **the Church must be 'for others'**. His understanding of solidarity is shown in the way that he chose to return to Germany to be alongside others and to work with them. Solidarity must be expressed to all people. Christians should do this by speaking out and questioning, by finding the will of God and then following through with action. Bonhoeffer's view that **Christians must be prophets** who speak out is complemented by his view that Christians must take direct action. It was Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the Jews that led to his arrest. For Bonhoeffer, solidarity is understood through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Understanding Jesus' interaction with political authorities, injustice in his time – as well as Jesus' example of taking action first, often before he discussed the used – shows how Jesus was 'for others'.



BONHOEFFER'S RELEVANCE TODAY

- Bonhoeffer's call to **reject cheap grace** and to embrace spiritual discipline could be valuable to people in today's society, who could be said to live superficial/materialistic lives
- For Christians, the idea of **refocusing obedience** onto the person of Jesus Christ and the will of God could be attractive
- Community life and solidarity could be attractive as people seem to become more isolated
- Inequality** in the world is a reality that needs to be addressed
- National boundaries and cultural boundaries are very different today; the Church should place itself beyond these
- Church attendance and Christian faith is declining in some areas; does Christianity need to move away from its past?



For Christians seeking to use the teachings of Bonhoeffer, it is important to consider the extent to which **he was writing within an extreme time**. If he was, can any of his message appropriately transfer to a modern context?

Alternatively, it could be argued that Bonhoeffer's context forced a **radical rethink of Christianity** that is still relevant, even though the specific situation has passed.

BARMEN DECLARATION

CHRISTIAN MORAL PRACTICES