

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-45



Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant pastor (church leader) who opposed the Nazi regime. Soon after Hitler was elected in 1933 Bonhoeffer made a famous radio broadcast criticising his policies. He also wrote a published essay in which he defended the Jews against the cruel persecution that had been unleashed against them. The German government took control of the national church and used it as a tool for Nazi propaganda. The church included a number of people who had Jewish ancestry but were Christian in terms of their beliefs. Hitler expelled these people. Bonhoeffer was one of a number of evangelical leaders who were disgusted by all of this and started a new organization called the Confessing Church which aimed to be a purer form of Christianity, free from Nazism. Another one of the co-founders was Martin Niemöller who was courageously to suffer imprisonment in two concentration camps for his beliefs but narrowly survived the war.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer began an underground training school for people wishing to serve in the Confessing Church. In 1937 the Gestapo (Nazi secret police) arrested twenty-seven of his former students and imprisoned them. It was after this experience that he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* from which come the extracts chapter 12 'Revenge' and chapter 13 'The Enemy – The Extraordinary'.

In 1939 Bonhoeffer left Germany and moved to New York. Although it was much safer there, he felt bad that he was no longer helping his Christian flock back at home. He decided to return at the risk of his life and he joined the German Resistance which was an organization designed to undermine Nazi rule in Germany, similar to the French resistance in France. In 1941 he was part of 'Operation 7' in which two spies successfully smuggled fourteen Jews to safety over the Swiss border. In 1944 Bonhoeffer was part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. A bomb was hidden in Hitler's personal office. Hitler went out of the room just before the bomb exploded. He narrowly escaped death with only minor injuries. It might have ended the war much quicker, saving perhaps millions of lives.

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in Buchenwald and Flossenburg concentration camps where he used his Christian faith to strengthen and encourage other prisoners. He was hanged in April 1945, only a few months before the end of World War II.

## 12 REVENGE

**Ye hath heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil: but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man would go to law with thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. (Matt. 5.38-42)**

JESUS classes this saying about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth with the commandments which he has already quoted from the Old Testament, for instance, the sixth commandment against murder. He recognizes this saying, like the sixth commandment, as the veritable law of God. This law, like all the others, is not to be abrogated, but fulfilled to the last iota. Jesus will not countenance the modern practice of putting the decalogue on a higher level than the rest of the Old Testament law. For him the law of the Old Testament is a unity, and he insists to his disciples that it must be fulfilled.

The followers of Jesus for his sake renounce every personal right. He calls them blessed because they are meek. If after giving up everything else for his sake they still wanted to cling to their own rights, they would then have ceased to follow him. This passage therefore is simply an elaboration of the beatitudes.

In the Old Testament personal rights are protected by a divinely established system of retribution. Every evil must be requited. The aim of retribution is to establish a proper community, to convict and overcome evil and eradicate it from the body politic of the people of God. That is the purpose of the law which is maintained by retribution.

Jesus takes up this declaration of the divine will and affirms the power of retribution to convict and overcome evil and to ensure

the fellowship of the right kind of retribution. The disciple will prove his

The right way to resist it.

This saying of Christ is not a matter of politics and law. The law is like the old Israel, but it is not bound by national ties. The law of God and a nation of God that they should meet different: it has abandoned before it must patiently heaped upon evil. Christ maintained.

At this point it becomes with injustice, he not at all costs. He is able Christ alone. Again, Jesus creates the only aggressor for him to

The only way to still because it does not force merely creates when evil meets not only patient endurance opponent which is not happen when the last renunciation of revenge mark, it can breed not

By willing endurance spent force when we back the enemy in without resistance, tumultuously and insult. V evoke counter-violence

Compromised

the fellowship of the disciples as the true Israel. By exercising the right kind of retribution evil is to be overcome and thus the true disciple will prove himself.

The right way to requite evil, according to Jesus, is not to resist it.

This saying of Christ removes the Church from the sphere of politics and law. The Church is not to be a national community like the old Israel, but a community of believers without political or national ties. The old Israel had been both – the chosen people of God *and* a national community, and it was therefore his will that they should meet force with force. But with the Church it is different: it has abandoned political and national status, and therefore it must patiently endure aggression. Otherwise evil will be heaped upon evil. Only thus can fellowship be established and maintained.

At this point it becomes evident that when a Christian meets with injustice, he no longer clings to his rights and defends them at all costs. He is absolutely free from possessions and bound to Christ alone. Again, his witness to this exclusive adherence to Jesus creates the only workable basis for fellowship, and leaves the aggressor for him to deal with.

The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. Resistance merely creates further evil and adds fuel to the flames. But when evil meets no opposition and encounters no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn, and at last it meets an opponent which is more than its match. Of course this can only happen when the last ounce of resistance is abandoned, and the renunciation of revenge is complete. Then evil cannot find its mark, it can breed no further evil, and is left barren.

By willing endurance we cause suffering to pass. Evil becomes a spent force when we put up no resistance. By refusing to pay back the enemy in his own coin, and by preferring to suffer without resistance, the Christian exhibits the sinfulness of contumely and insult. Violence stands condemned by its failure to evoke counter-violence. When a man unjustly demands that I

should give him my coat, I offer him my cloak also, and so counter his demand; when he requires me to go the other mile, I go willingly, and show up his exploitation of my service for what it is. To leave everything behind at the call of Christ is to be content with him alone, and to follow only him. By his willingly renouncing self-defence, the Christian affirms his absolute adherence to Jesus, and his freedom from the tyranny of his own ego. The exclusiveness of this adherence is the only power which can overcome evil.

We are concerned not with evil in the abstract, but with the evil *person*. Jesus bluntly calls the evil person evil. If I am assailed, I am not to condone or justify aggression. Patient endurance of evil does not mean a recognition of its rights. That is sheer sentimentality, and Jesus will have nothing to do with it. The shameful assault, the deed of violence and the act of exploitation are still evil. The disciple must realize this, and bear witness to it as Jesus did, just because this is the only way evil can be met and overcome. The very fact that the evil which assaults him is unjustifiable makes it imperative that he should not resist it, but play it out and overcome it by patiently enduring the evil person. Suffering willingly endured is stronger than evil, it spells death to evil.

There is no deed on earth so outrageous as to justify a different attitude. The worse the evil, the readier must the Christian be to suffer; he must let the evil person fall into Jesus' hands.

The Reformers offered a decisively new interpretation of this passage, and contributed a new idea of paramount importance. They distinguished between personal sufferings and those incurred by Christians in the performance of duty as bearers of an office ordained by God, maintaining that the precept of non-violence applies to the first but not to the second. In the second case we are not only freed from obligation to eschew violence, but if we want to act in a genuine spirit of love we must do the very opposite, and meet force with force in order to check the assault of evil. It was along these lines that the Reformers justified war and other legal sanctions against evil. But this distinction

between person and office is wholly alien to the teaching of Jesus. He says nothing about that. He addresses his disciples as men who have left all to follow him, and the precept of non-violence applies equally to private life and official duty. He is the Lord of all life, and demands undivided allegiance. Furthermore, when it comes to practice, this distinction raises insoluble difficulties. Am I ever acting only as a private person or only in an official capacity? If I am attacked am I not at once the father of my children, the pastor of my flock, and e.g. a government official? Am I not bound for that very reason to defend myself against every attack, for reason of responsibility to my office? And am I not also always an individual, face to face with Jesus, even in the performance of my official duties? Am I not therefore obliged to resist every attack just because of my responsibility for my office? Is it right to forget that the follower of Jesus is always utterly alone, always the individual, who in the last resort can only decide and act for himself? Don't we act most responsibly on behalf of those entrusted to our care if we act in this aloneness?

How then can the precept of Jesus be justified in the light of experience? It is obvious that weakness and defencelessness only invite aggression. Is then the demand of Jesus nothing but an impracticable ideal? Does he refuse to face up to realities – or shall we say, to the sin of the world? There may of course be a legitimate place for such an ideal in the inner life of the Christian community, but in the outside world such an ideal appears to wear the blinkers of perfectionism, and to take no account of sin. Living as we do in a world of sin and evil, we can have no truck with anything as impracticable as that.

Jesus, however, tells us that it is just *because* we live in the world, and just *because* the world is evil, that the precept of non-resistance must be put into practice. Surely we do not wish to accuse Jesus of ignoring the reality and power of evil! Why, the whole of his life was one long conflict with the devil. He calls evil evil, and that is the very reason why he speaks to his followers in this way. How is that possible?

If we took the precept of non-resistance as an ethical blueprint

for general application, we should indeed be indulging in idealistic dreams: we should be dreaming of a utopia with laws which the world would never obey. To make non-resistance a principle for secular life is to deny God, by undermining his gracious ordinance for the preservation of the world. But Jesus is no draughtsman of political blue-prints, he is the one who vanquished evil through suffering. It looked as though evil had triumphed on the cross, but the real victory belonged to Jesus. And the cross is the only justification for the precept of non-violence, for it alone can kindle a faith in the victory over evil which will enable men to obey that precept. And only such obedience is blessed with the promise that we shall be partakers of Christ's victory as well as of his sufferings.

The passion of Christ is the victory of divine love over the powers of evil, and therefore it is the only supportable basis for Christian obedience. Once again, Jesus calls those who follow him to share his passion. How can we convince the world by our preaching of the passion when we shrink from that passion in our own lives? On the cross Jesus fulfilled the law he himself established and thus graciously keeps his disciples in the fellowship of his suffering. The cross is the only power in the world which proves that suffering love can avenge and vanquish evil. But it was just this participation in the cross which the disciples were granted when Jesus called them to him. They are called blessed because of their visible participation in his cross.