

**CHI RHO LECTURES**  
**Workshop**  
**November 13, 2021**

**Toward a Concrete Evangelical Ethics of Responsibility**

- I. **BONHOEFFER'S MOVE TOWARD A CONCRETE CHRISTIAN ETHIC**
  - A. **Starting point: reconciliation of God and the world in Jesus Christ (*E* 100)<sup>1</sup>**
    1. Reality of God and reality of world distinguished but not separated
    2. Concrete—that is, revelational (reality of God) and empirical (reality of the world)
    3. Any ethic underplaying reality of God or reality of world an abstraction  - B. **Purpose of concrete Christian ethic**
    1. **Speak**
      - a) Not about what the good is, can be, or should be in every time and place
      - b) But how Jesus Christ is taking form among us today and here (*E*99)
    2. Question of the good becomes question of participation in concrete reality revealed in Jesus Christ (Cf. *E* 50)
    3. Purpose of Christian ethics: participation in the reality of God and in the reality of the world in Jesus Christ today (*E*55)
    4. Human beings participate in concrete indivisible reality both as individuals in their person and work and as members of the community of God, human beings, and all creatures (*E*53)  - C. **Challenge to two realms thinking**
    1. Christian and secular, supernatural and natural, revelational and rational, sacred and profane, etc.
    2. Relational understanding of reality
      - a) God, human beings, and all creatures in relationship
      - b) Maintain their individual distinctiveness
      - c) Participate in one relational reality  - D. **Foundation for a positive affirmation of the world**
    1. Biblical witness to deep love of God for world (*cosmos*) (John 3:16)
    2. Miracle of divine mercy (*E*66)
    3. Not possible to love God apart from world
    4. To love Jesus Christ is to love both God and the world

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics (E)*, volume 6 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 100.

## II. WHY “RESPONSIBILITY”?

- A. “Responsibility” not a prominent biblical concept
- B. Bonhoeffer’s use of “responsibility”
  - 1. Useful in articulating what it means to participate in the concrete reality of Jesus Christ, both individually and corporately
  - 2. Employing a non-theological term for theological purposes
  - 3. Cannot simply repeat biblical terminology—changing ethical problems require changing terminology (*E* 256–57)
  - 4. Key to integrating biblical and other terminologies
    - a) Stay focused on the concrete form of Jesus Christ
    - b) What form is Jesus Christ taking in this time and place?
    - c) Keep in mind both revelational and empirical reality
- C. Entails accountability and giftedness
  - 1. Accountable to God, human beings, and creation
  - 2. God-given abilities to respond
- D. Stress primacy of God’s activity and importance of our activity

## III. CONCRETE ETHICS MUST BE COMPREHENSIVE ETHICS

- A. Want to avoid any ethical model too narrowly linked with teleology, deontology, situationalism, and so on
- B. Utilize a wide variety of ethical models and perspectives in discerning how we are called to respond in given situation
- C. Comprehensive response
  - 1. Whole matrix of relevant factors: motives, possible consequences, values, general conditions, principles, virtues, etc.
  - 2. Avoid single principle or single factor approaches
- D. Practical implications
  - 1. Critique of single principle approaches to abortion issue
    - a) Pro-life principle: unborn child’s right to life
    - b) Pro-choice: woman’s right to choose
  - 2. Critique of patient autonomy as “trump card” in medical ethics
  - 3. Critique of ethical approaches not taking creation into account
  - 4. Case study format needs to reflect comprehensive approach
- E. Fiction of the isolated ethical individual (*E* 219–20)
  - 1. No such thing as isolated individual choosing between recognized good and recognized evil on basis of absolute criterion
  - 2. Can never ignore social historical context of human existence
  - 3. Add: never ignore ecological context
  - 4. Never act simply on our own behalf

#### IV. PORTRAIT OF JESUS AS THE RESPONSIBLE PERSON *PAR EXCELLENCE*

##### A. Introduction

1. This portrait essential to:
  - a) Discerning will of God for humans and whole creation
  - b) Experiencing and coming to know ethical reality
  - c) Participating in reality of God and reality of world in Jesus Christ
  - d) Becoming responsible persons in responsible community
2. Enduring form of Jesus Christ
  - a) On one hand, Jesus willingly takes form in variety of ways in concrete historical situation in particular human beings.
  - b) On other hand, form of Jesus Christ one and the same in all times and places
    - (1) Confronts us as responsible person *par excellence*
    - (2) His life, death, and resurrection define what it means to be a responsible person
    - (3) Embodiment of responsibility
    - (4) Makes God's will for human beings visible and comprehensible in history
3. Life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the responsible person *par excellence*, God's personal appeal to human beings to act as responsible persons
  - a) Life: incarnation of God's reconciling love for sinful human beings (*E* 82–83)
  - b) Death: responsible action in life leads to death on cross
  - c) Resurrection: God's affirmation of concrete life of responsibility that he lived

#### V. BONHOEFFER'S CONCEPT OF THE RESPONSIBLE PERSON

##### A. Introduction: bound and free

1. Luther's two propositions concerning freedom and bondage of the spirit
  - a) A Christian perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
  - b) A Christian perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.<sup>2</sup>
2. Bonhoeffer's two factors conditioning the structure of the responsible life (*E* 257)
  - a) Responsible person bound to God and to other humans
  - b) Responsible person able to respond freely to God and other humans

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 277.

## B. Responsible action (*Stellvertretung*)

1. *Stellvertretung* translated as “vicarious representative action”
2. Definition: concrete action in the world in the place of or on behalf of others
  - a) Life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the *Stellvertreter* makes clear that *Stellvertretung* essence of all human life
  - b) Involves complete surrendering of one’s life to the will of God for the sake of others
3. Everyday responsible action: mandates (*E* 68–75, 388–408)
  - a) Definition: concrete divinely imposed task (*E* 68–69)
    - (1) Concrete forms of the form of Christ shaping and guiding the normal structures and processes
    - (2) “Orders of creation” not adequately account for fallenness of creation
    - (3) Tasks or commissions need to be understood in relation to Jesus Christ
  - b) Work: participation in the action of creation
    - (1) Not *creation ex nihilo*—only God creates out of nothing
    - (2) Creative activity on the basis of first creation
    - (3) Example: building contractor
  - c) Marriage: producing of children and nurturing those children to become disciples of Jesus Christ
    - (1) Acting on God’s behalf to bring child into the world and to educate the child
    - (2) Work for their children, care for them, stand up for them, fight and suffer for them
  - d) Government: preserves that which has been created
    - (1) Unlike labor and marriage, government does not participate in the process of creation
    - (2) Maintains law and order and makes possible establishment of reality of Jesus Christ in the world
    - (3) Two ways of accomplishing
      - (a) Make laws (legislators)
      - (b) Secure respect for law (police officers)
  - e) Church: make the reality of Jesus Christ become real in preaching, church order, and Christian life
    - (1) Distinguished but not separated from other three
    - (2) Mandate of every Christian
    - (3) Bear witness to reality of God in Jesus Christ
  - f) Bonhoeffer himself acknowledges limitations of mandates<sup>3</sup>
    - (1) Preoccupation with sphere of obedience
    - (2) Discussion tilted toward duty and obligation

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<sup>3</sup>“Letter of January 23, 1944, to Eberhard Bethge,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:267–69.

4. Extraordinary responsible action
  - a) Occasionally responsible persons face moments requiring bold risk-filled ventures of responsibility
  - b) May need to engage in free and responsible action in opposition to everyday tasks and callings (*E272–75*)
- C. Accordance with reality
  1. Reality defined by the Real One—Jesus Christ (*E261*)
  2. Action in accordance with the Real One is responsible action
  3. Real test of our actions: Are my actions in this time and place helping my neighbor become a responsible person (=real person) before God?
- D. Willingness to become guilty (*E275–76*)
  1. Willingness to participate in the community of guilt
  2. Real innocence: not staying free from taint of sin and guilt but willingly entering into community of guilt for sake of others
  3. Personal innocence not placed above responsibility for others
- E. Freedom
  1. Freedom given in obligation to God and to the neighbor (*E283*)
  2. Responsible persons act in freedom of own selves—cannot appeal to rule of their action (*E283*) [Free lord]
  3. Examine motives, consequences, values, and other relevant ethical factors
  4. Responsible persons are free inasmuch as they engage in responsible action on behalf or in the place of others
  5. Domain of relativity: let God be the ultimate judge (*E284–85*)
  6. Responsible action combines ignorance of own goodness or evil with dependence on God’s grace (*E268*)

## VI. EVANGELICAL CONCEPT OF THE RESPONSIBLE PERSON

- A. Responsible action: self-giving action in response to God, other human beings, and whole creation which (1) conforms to Jesus Christ, the responsible person *par excellence*, (2) fully employs our God-given abilities to respond, (3) builds up the responsible community
- B. Conformity with Jesus Christ, the responsible person *par excellence*
- C. Everyday God-given response-abilities
  1. Family
    - a) Caring for spouse
    - b) Nurturing children
    - c) Caring for extended family
  2. Work
  3. Citizenship: actively participating in the political community/process
  4. Culture
    - a) Art
    - b) Music

- c) Literature
  - d) Customs
- 5. Friendship
- 6. Recreation
  - a) Rest
  - b) Renewal
  - c) Enjoyment of creation/play
- 7. Church
  - a) Worship
  - b) Mission
- D. Need to balance our response–abilities
  - 1. Not have to live as “Hercules at a crossroads” (*E* 385)
  - 2. Not want to wear us out in conflict of duties and decisions
  - 3. Every moment not a great crisis
  - 4. Free to carry out God-given tasks as parent, spouse, worker, citizen, and Christian without having to dissect every action
  - 5. Mandates intended to work together to fulfill God’s will
  - 6. No exact formula for balancing
- E. Participate in building up the church as responsible community by
  - 1. Utilizing our response-abilities
  - 2. Fulfilling our responsibilities
- F. Extraordinary responsible action: Bonhoeffer’s engagement in the conspiracy against Hitler
  - 1. No precedent for Lutheran pastor in Germany to be involved in conspiracy to assassinate head of state<sup>4</sup>
  - 2. No attempt to justify this action before or after<sup>5</sup>
  - 3. One thing to give an account of what compelled this particular action, but any justification would be ethical arrogance
  - 4. Bonhoeffer’s response may have been a tardy one<sup>6</sup>
- G. Sharing in the guilt of others
  - 1. Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)
  - 2. Black hole of ethical purity
- H. Evangelical freedom
  - 1. For freedom Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1)
  - 2. Yoke of slavery
    - a) Seeking to be justified
    - b) Self-indulgence—doing our own thing
  - 3. True freedom
    - a) Serving God, other humans, all creatures [Dutiful servant]
    - b) Real responsibility for shaping history [Free lord]<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 791–97.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 830

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:42.