

**CHI RHO LECTURES**  
**Adult Forum**  
**Central Lutheran Church, Eugene, Oregon**  
**November 14, 2021**

**What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?**

**PRIMING THE PUMP: How do Donald Trump and Joe Biden compare on “The Pinocchio Test”?**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. In Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison he reports several times on his work on “What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?” (November and December 1943)<sup>1</sup>
2. Essay begun under impact of interrogations by Senior Military Prosecutor Manfred Roeder
  - a. Initial focus on Bonhoeffer’s role in Operation 7
    - i. 14 “non-Aryans” traveled to Switzerland under pretext of working for Military Intelligence
    - ii. Currency irregularities
    - iii. Effort to sabotage Reich deportation policies
  - b. Then Roeder sought to demonstrate UK (*unabkömmlich*) classification a sham
    - i. Engaged in a civilian occupation essential to the war effort
    - ii. As courier for military intelligence, assigned to communicate through foreign church leaders with allied leaders
    - iii. Kept him out of military duty and provided cover for conspiracy activities
    - iv. Roeder also wanted to prove he was helping other pastors avoid active military duty
  - c. Fate sealed after failure of July 20, 1944, assassination attempt and discovery of Zossen files
  - d. Roeder’s shock in scene from *Agent of Grace*
3. Planned fundamental reflection on “Eighth Commandment”
  - a. What does it mean to bear false witness?
  - b. Did not address all the topics he hoped to in this essay
  - c. Last two points not explained
4. Hitler and Nazis were masters of the “big lie”

**BONHOEFFER ON TELLING THE TRUTH**

1. Contextual
2. Criteria
  - a. One’s intention
  - b. Accurate perception

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<sup>1</sup> *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, volume 16 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, 601–608.

- c. Serious consideration of real circumstances
- 3. Must be learned
- 4. Zealot for truth
- 5. Concept of living truth
- 6. Increased profligacy (reckless extravagance) of public discourse
- 7. Definition of lying
  - a. Inadequate
    - i. Conscious contradiction between thought and speech
    - ii. Conscious deception of others to their harm
  - b. Bonhoeffer's attempt
    - i. Denial of reality of God revealed to world in Jesus Christ
    - ii. "Negation, denial, and deliberate and willful destruction of reality as it is created by God and exists in God to the extent that it takes place through words and silence"
- 8. How does my word become true?
  - a. By recognizing who calls me to speak and what authorizes me to speak
    - i. Unconnected word hollow—contains no truth
    - ii. Justification for speaking emerges from office or role
    - iii. Thinking something does not authorize me to say something
  - b. By recognizing the place in which I stand
  - c. By putting the subject into this context
- 9. Speaking has mission, time, place, limits

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL SPHERE**

- 1. Some political leaders incapable of telling the truth fully because they lack an adequate grasp of reality of our situation
- 2. Lack of involvement or silence of citizens in the political process can be a form of not telling the truth.
- 3. Beware of "zealots for truth"

**DISCUSSION:** What other implications of Bonhoeffer's concept of telling the truth do you see for our current political context?