

Costly Witness, Costly Grace, Free in Christ: The Life and Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Session Three – Ethics

Pastor Dixon – January 2024 – Mount Olivet Lutheran Church

Session Three Overview:

Bonhoeffer was invited in 1939 to give a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh. He expected those lectures to be the basis of his magnum opus, his treatment of Christian ethics. Looming war put an end to the Edinburgh trip, and the Nazi ban on Bonhoeffer's lecturing and publishing forced him to keep the manuscript under wraps. He was arrested in April 1943 and portions of the manuscript were confiscated and likely destroyed. While the work that survived to publication is thus unfinished, it is still a major contribution to the field of ethics. Bonhoeffer's version of a Christian ethic--grounded in the Christ's reconciliation of God's reality with the reality of life in this world--is radically different from some of the classic approaches that seek to enumerate some abstract general principles for ethical actions and decision-making. Bonhoeffer asserted that the Christian life of discipleship would not offer the comfort and clarity of a formula for moral living, but would instead demand moments of concrete action in defiance of concrete evil. He was as good as his word, of course, leaving the safety of the United States to return to Germany as the Nazi party ascended in order to resist it head on, a choice which ultimately led to his death.

Questions to consider:

When determining whether an action is ethical, do you put greater emphasis on its outcome/result or on the inherent principle? For example, if a lie saves a life, is it ethical because it accomplished something good, or is it unethical because lying is inherently wrong?

As a Christian, do you feel inclined to separate from "the world" or do you feel called to engage with it more deeply? Do you feel there's a distinction between the stuff of God and the stuff of the world?

How do we identify evil? Is it a matter of public opinion? If 50% + 1 think of some politician or some book or some philosophy as evil, does that make it so? Or is there a more reliable way of making that determination and by extension discerning our ethical duty as Christians?

Key Scriptures/Passages

"For whoever is not against us is for us."

-Mark 9:40

"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

-Matthew 12:30

"What is worse than doing evil is being evil. It is worse for a liar to tell the truth than for a lover of truth to lie. It is worse when a misanthrope practices brotherly love than when a philanthropist gives way to hatred...One sin, then, is not like another. They do not all have the same weight. There are heavier sins and lighter sins."

-Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67