4-1-2014

Bonhoeffer and His Answer to the Enduring Problem

Joel Durrwachter

BONHOEFFER AND HIS ANSWER TO THE ENDURING PROBLEM

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

By
Joel Durrwachter
April 2014

Approved by

Dr. Erik Herrmann Advisor

Dr. William Schumacher Reader

Dr. Joel Biermann Reader

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of many individuals. I am, first of all, incredibly grateful to Concordia Seminary and Dr. Dale A. Meyer for extending to me the wonderful opportunity to study historical theology. Years ago, and even before applying to the Master of Sacred Theology program, I never would have envisioned myself within this capacity. Before my studies began at Concordia, I was not sure what to think about the pursuit of a post-graduate degree nor did not have any idea at the time that I would be so attracted to twentieth-century theology. As time passed, however, the faculty surely kindled this interest in my life. I was especially impressed with how Dr. Erik H. Herrmann introduced me to this era of history, and how he also helped me gain familiarity with the ways that individuals such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer contributed to continental thought and to Christians living everywhere around the globe. Dr. Herrmann also served as my advisor for this project, and I am very appreciative of his time and the numerous suggestions that he gave to me along the way that contributed to this thesis.

Next, none of this would have been possible had it not been for the help that I received from beloved friends at Mercy Road Fellowship of Saint Peters, Missouri. I am especially grateful for the contributions that were given on my behalf to help with my studies, as well as the emotional support that I received from them when frustration seemed to consume me. In addition, I am also grateful to new beloved friends at Christ Church Santa Fe of New Mexico who have also provided me with much encouragement to complete this thesis. The students of the church have especially assisted me with working out some of the real-life implications of what I gained during the course of my research and writing.

I especially want to thank my friends and family for helping me along this process, too. Among these individuals, I cannot help but think where I would have been in this process without the support of Jayme, who, despite all the other voices that were trying to influence me, encouraged me to not only pursue, but to also finish this degree. Her patience and love that she exemplified throughout it all taught me more about life than any book that I consulted along the way.

INTRODUCTION

Out of the numerous, yet various ways in which H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* has been described throughout the years, Martin Marty recently summarized it as "a classic."[1] By itself, such a statement is often tossed around haphazardly by many today, so the comment certainly does not reveal much about the influence of Niebuhr's work. Then again, Marty elaborates, indicating that the book has been so significant that it cannot simply be left as "a classic," but that it is "a work of genius," so much that "a later culture must take [it] into account once that work has had a chance to leave its marks."[2]

John Stackhouse similarly stated that "perhaps no other book" outside of *Christ and Culture* "has dominated an entire theological conversation for so long"[3] within the American context. As of 2013, more than five decades have passed since the original publication date of the book, and *Christ and Culture* continues to generate discussion among Christians. It should come as no surprise then that someone such as Marty is thereby incredibly accurate with his assessment.

Marty and Stackhouse are certainly not alone with their evaluations. In fact, *Christ and Culture* has left such an imprint within the mold of American Christianity that Craig Carter can

[1] Martin Marty, foreword to *Christ and Culture*, by H. Richard Niebuhr (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), xiii.

[2] Ibid.

[3] John Gordon Stackhouse, "In the world, but . . .: Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is 50 years old—and still has something wise to say to evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, April 22, 2002, 80.

claim that "[t]he concepts set forth in Niebuhr's book have become part of the way that many people think about the relationship of Christ and culture today."[4]

To be sure, at least a few scholars have recently published monographs that have evaluated Niebuhr's taxonomy afresh which seems to suggest that Niebuhr's legacy continues to thrive.[5] These works include critiques and even modifications pertaining to the overall thesis of *Christ and Culture*. For contemporary readers of Niebuhr's classic, many of these are attempts to provide insight and commentary into relating *Christ and Culture* to a world that has undergone drastic changes within the past five decades since its initial release. Some of these authors are supportive of Niebuhr, claiming that he is still relevant within the context of theological conversations in the Western world, whereas others are not so supportive of him and seek to dismiss his contemporary relevancy.

One of the critical responses to *Christ and Culture* claims that the book has contributed to a "guilt-by-association" historiography due to Niebuhr's popularity. According to Craig Carter's perspective, this means that nearly any contemporary individual or group associated with the historical figures or movements found within the book become *de facto* linked with the corresponding typology. As Carter argues in *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, one such example of this "guilt-by-association" historiography is that any individual or group that has advocated for some form of pacifism becomes automatically identified with Tertullian and Leo Tolstoy in the

[4] Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 13.

[5] For two of the most recent publications that responded to *Christ and Culture*, see Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007); and D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Charles Scriven also contributed to this conversation in the 1980s with a lengthy response to Niebuhr. See Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1988).

"Christ against culture" type, regardless of the views that the individual or group has about other matters including Christology.[6]

Carter and others emphasize this in order to accentuate their critique that such individuals and movements like Tertullian and Tolstoy have unfairly gone down in history as those who Niebuhr labels as the "radicals" who have been allegedly "against culture." As a result, whatever these individuals or movements actually contributed to culture is either overlooked or marginalized.

Other than Carter, John Howard Yoder was one of the first who critically evaluated *Christ and Culture*.[7] Consequently, Yoder opened up an entirely new hole within the discussion of the relationship between Christ and culture as he attempted to expose several problems with the book. To be sure, it was not until years later when individuals such as Stanley Hauerwas and Craig Carter continued many of these critiques that Yoder originally presented. They have since contributed to the Christ and culture discussion by heightening accusations against Niebuhr by claiming that he presupposed the notion of "Christendom" within his presentation of culture. For these critics, and many others like them, Christendom takes on its own definition, as they use it in a pejorative sense.

Yoder and the critics of Niebuhr, however, were certainly not the first to critique Christendom. From as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard launched a tirade of attacks upon the Danish church that predominantly centered upon what he perceived to be the unholy and unruly interconnectedness between the church and the

---

[6] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 121.

[7] John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 31–89.

government. Kierkegaard reacted so strongly to the situation that he declared that the Danish church was "apostate" and far removed from what he repeatedly described as "New Testament Christianity." These attacks have been posthumously published within *Attack upon Christendom*.

Less than a century after Kierkegaard's formal attacks, Dietrich Bonhoeffer also began to call attention to the tensions that he noticed occurring between the church and the newly formed Nazi government. Like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer was often alone with his criticisms of what he perceived to be a corrupt system growing increasingly stronger around him. And also like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer was one of the few individuals of his time who responded to his cultural situation with sharp criticism while seeking to apply the Christian faith within such a social context. Bonhoeffer's keen sense of awareness into the cultural situation led him to raise concerns about how Christians should interact with culture in his 1937 masterpiece, *Discipleship.*

In light of the relatively recent critiques of *Christ and Culture*, I would like to examine another text by a rough contemporary of Niebuhr's: Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship.* In the book, Bonhoeffer is dealing with similar themes and problems as Niebuhr wrestled with years later, yet Bonhoeffer has an entirely different interpretation and outcome than Niebuhr. Why is this the case? What was occurring in Bonhoeffer's social context and what influenced him that contributed to his argument? To help answer this question I will focus upon three areas that recent criticisms of *Christ and Culture* have highlighted: (1) the definition of *culture*, (2) the assessment of Christendom, and (3) the operating Christology. In all three of these areas, I hope to explore more deeply the themes of both *how* and *why* Bonhoeffer comes to the conclusions that he does in *Discipleship*. What makes his cultural critiques so unique? Does he offer a perspective that Niebuhr did not? Such an examination will not only give us a better understanding of Bonhoeffer in this period of his theological development but it will also give us

the opportunity to look at another text besides Niebuhr's that deals with the "enduring problem" of Christ and culture.

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM OF NIEBUHR

As previously indicated in the introduction, despite the favorable reception that H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* has received throughout the years, the book is not without its critics. Specifically, there seems to be three main areas where the book has undergone critique in the past. First, the most frequent of these critiques pertain to Niebuhr's usage and description of *culture.* Critics claim that major problems not only originate at this point, but that his perspectives on culture shape other important views found throughout *Christ and Culture*. Subsequently, critics claim that this applies the most towards his operating Christology and at least a few critics have also accused Niebuhr of presupposing the normality of *Christendom* within his presentation of culture.

Within this chapter, I shall investigate each of these three areas of contemporary criticism of *Christ and Culture*. As a result, this will open a door to help us to better understand that Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* was wrestling with very similar themes as Niebuhr. Yet unlike Niebuhr, however, Bonhoeffer had an entirely different interpretation and outcome of his cultural situation. As I will demonstrate, this is because Bonhoeffer wrote *Discipleship* in response to his own cultural situation as he was attempting to *prescribe* how Christians should respond in their particular culture within Germany. Niebuhr's goal was different as he self-admittedly attempted to *describe* how Christians have responded to the Christ and culture situation throughout history.

In other words, I shall look into the critical response to Niebuhr on these three major topics so that we will better understand both *how* and *why* Bonhoeffer was so unique with *Discipleship.* Contemporary critics of Niebuhr highlight alleged problems with his work that Bonhoeffer had already taken into consideration years before *Christ and Culture* surfaced. In this sense, *Discipleship* has an entirely different outcome than *Christ and Culture* in its ability to answer the enduring problem that Niebuhr articulated in the 1950s.

While there is a vast amount of secondary sources available pertaining to critiques of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*,[8] I will focus the majority of my attention on John Howard Yoder's response to Niebuhr titled, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture.*"[9] My reason for this is not arbitrary because the essay is one of the most detailed responses available. In fact, Stephen Wilson claims that Yoder's essay is "one of the most significant though neglected analyses" that responds to *Christ and Culture.*[10] Other than Yoder's contribution, additional resources will also be consulted that interact with Yoder's critique of Niebuhr on these three key issues.

With that said, Yoder's article was not a hasty or a flippant response to Niebuhr, as Yoder began his formal critiques during a series of lectures in 1958 and expanded them throughout the years. These lectures were eventually published into a seventy-two page essay in 1996 within *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*. Yoder's essay was a

---

[8] The two most recent books that directly engage with Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* are Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006); D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008); and Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1988).

[9] John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 31–89.

[10] Stephen Wilson, "Christ and Cult(ure): Some Preliminary Reflections on Liturgy and Life," *Liturgical Ministry*, no. 12 (September 1, 2003): 184.

comprehensive project that took him years to develop, as he devoted much of his time towards it throughout the decades.[11]

As much effort as Yoder devoted to his response, however, Niebuhr himself did not produce his book on a whim, either. In fact, at least a few of the main themes of *Christ and Culture* date back to as early as 1949 when he delivered a series of lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.[12] Just as Yoder was influenced by Niebuhr for the bulk of his essay, Niebuhr also had Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* as "a key influence" on him.[13] This suggests that Yoder and Niebuhr were not writing in a vacuum but that they had key conversational partners for their projects. The relationship between these two individuals is significant because Bonhoeffer also had Kierkegaard as a conversation partner for *Discipleship*. In the next chapter, I will show why this is significant, but for now, the discussion between Yoder and Niebuhr will take precedence.

Among all the critical responses of *Christ and Culture*, Yoder's essay is perhaps one of the most widely discussed within academic circles. In *Resident Aliens,* Hauerwas shares Yoder's critiques when he claims:

> We have come to believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr rightly saw that our politics determines our theology. He was right that Christians cannot reject "culture." But his call to Christians to accept "culture" . . . and politics in the name of the unity of God's creating and redeeming activity had the effect of endorsing a Constantianism social strategy. "Culture" became a blanket term to underwrite

[11] Mark Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience*, *Evangelical Witness*, *Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 134.

[12] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), ix.

[13] Ibid., xi-xii.

> Christian involvement with the world without providing any discriminating modes for determining how Christians should see the good or the bad in "culture."[14]

Hauerwas also accuses *Christ and Culture* of not offering "an objective description" of certain individuals or movements throughout the history of Christianity. Instead, according to Hauerwas, the book had a subtle, yet prescriptive bent to it.[15] According to the critics, the absence of any kind of criticisms pertaining to the transformative type within *Christ and Culture* allegedly "set up"[16] Niebuhr's argument in order to make it appear the most worthy of the five.[17] As a result, critics argue that Niebuhr's definite preference has marginalized the other types, especially that one which he describes as "Christ against culture." Hauerwas even claims that Niebuhr crafted his book in such a way that it would resonate the most with modern, Western readers who, in his estimation, are predisposed to embracing the notion of progress.[18]

Not everyone, however, has been this critical of Niebuhr. In fact, James Gustafson, a former student of Niebuhr, has come to his defense. In the preface of the most recent edition of *Christ and Culture*, Gustafson responds to some of the criticisms made by individuals like Yoder and Hauerwas by claiming that not only was Niebuhr's project incredibly unique, but that it also accurately represented history. Niebuhr's critics have simply misread him, according to Gustafson, and have completely blown *Christ and Culture* out of proportion. Among these

---

[14] Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 40.

[15] Ibid., 39.

[16] Yoder and Hauerwas both argue that Niebuhr "set up" his argument. See Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 40; and Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 52.

[17] This point is repeatedly made in secondary literature about Niebuhr showing favoritism towards the transformative type in *Christ and Culture.* It is interesting to note, however, that Diane Yeager recalls a conversation that she had with Niebuhr's son, Richard R. Niebuhr, who reportedly told Yeager that he was "skeptical" that his father did "prefer" the transformative type. See Diane M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in Christ and Culture," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 101–120.

[18] Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 40–41.

counter-criticisms from Gustafson is one specifically directed towards Yoder. Gustafson writes of him:

> John Howard Yoder . . . for years circulated versions of a critique of *Christ and Culture* which is laced with more *ad hominem* arguments and fortified with more gratuitous footnotes than anything I ever read by scholars in the field of Christian ethics. This paper has been published, but I have not had access to it—perhaps fortunately.[19]

Yoder and Hauerwas apparently struck a nerve with Gustafson. Even though Yoder and Hauerwas claim that *Christ and Culture* implicitly trains its readers "*what* to think"[20] under the guise of objectivity, Gustafson, however, strongly rejects that Niebuhr had his own hidden agenda. Rather, Gustafson argues that individuals such as Yoder and Hauerwas have simply misread *Christ and Culture*. Yoder and Hauerwas seem to suggest that they would not have as many problems with the book if Niebuhr simply admitted that he had a certain goal with it. On the other hand, if he was as straightforward with his agenda as someone like Bonhoeffer was in *Discipleship* about writing in response towards the cultural situation of his day, perhaps critics would not have been so vocal with their critiques of the book. As I will demonstrate later, Bonhoeffer makes it clear to his readers from the onset of *Discipleship* what his goals entail.

Returning to Gustafson, he also denies that Niebuhr sought to compel his readers towards embracing one of the particular types against the others. At the same time, however, Gustafson acknowledges that the transformative type is "treated less critically and more sympathetically" than the other four, and that such treatment "reflects Niebuhr's judgment that it is the most adequate."[21] Gustafson elaborates by claiming that "even a preference for the conversionist

---

[19] James Gustafson, preface to the expanded edition of *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xxiii.

[20] See Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 52; and Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 40–41.

[21] Gustafson, *Christ and Culture*, xxviii.

theme does not vitiate the disinterested fairness with which the other four types are developed."[22] In other words, Gustafson argues that Niebuhr attempted to be as fair as possible with his presentation, and that he was successful with it.

Yoder was certainly aware of Niebuhr's attempts of engaging in epistemic humility, but at the same time, Yoder interprets the situation quite differently than Gustafson. "In making 'humility' the prime virtue," writes Yoder, Niebuhr "rejects as naive any conviction that truth can be clearly known and can lay upon us definite claims which we must unequivocally obey."[23] To some, this may be an indication that Gustafson and Yoder are simply looking at the book from different angles.

These interpretative differences seem to reflect something about how theological commitments and hermeneutics shape the discussion of relating Christ to culture.[24] Diane Yeager comments on this theme, claiming that "for Yoder there is one Christ and one gospel and one witness, carried into and spoken of and lived out in diverse cultural milieus." Conversely, Yeager labels Niebuhr as the "Christian pluralist" who she suspects would reject Yoder's exclusivism.[25] Yeager argues that Niebuhr should be understood as a "Christian pluralist" who is "respecting of Christian diversity" and "attempts, on theological grounds, to acknowledge and even celebrate the distance between his own view and that of Yoder."[26] Yeager's argument seems to indicate

---

[22] Ibid., xxix.

[23] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 52.

[24] Dennis P. McCann, "Hermeneutics and Ethics: The Example of Reinhold Niebuhr," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 47–48. For a thorough presentation of Yoder's overall theology, along with his Barthian influences, see Craig Carter, *The Politics of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 61–90.

[25] Koontz describes Yoder's perspective as more "exclusive" than Niebuhr. See Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 4 (October 1, 1987): 417.

[26] Yeager, "The View from Somewhere," 119. Koontz offers a similar interpretation of Niebuhr's theology in that one of the implications his alleged theocentrism is that "Christians cannot claim exclusive knowledge of God or

(continued next page)

that theological presuppositions significantly shape how one relates Christ to culture.

Hermeneutics is certainly important for the Christ and culture discussion. In the next chapter, I will show how Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach to the Sermon on the Mount in particular drives the way in which he perceives of the relationship between Christ and his particular cultural situation.

For now, we should summarize and stress that Yoder began a critique against Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* years ago that has influenced other critics of Niebuhr. Despite all of Yoder's critiques, however, the one that is regularly reintroduced in criticisms of Niebuhr is that *Christ and Culture* has firmly established what Yoder identifies as a "definite preference" for the transformative model within American Christianity.[27] In his own words, Yoder attempts to justify his claim by appealing to Paul Ramsey who indicates:

> When Richard Niebuhr's book first appeared almost everyone in American Christendom rushed to locate himself among the "transformists": naturalists, process theologians, personalists, idealists, Lutherans and Anglicans who were sometimes Thomists, as well as those you would have expected . . . so universal was the conviction that . . . the Christian always joins in the transformation of the world whenever this is proposed.[28]

Hauerwas adds his own perspective to this issue by claiming that the assumption that the transformative model is superior to the others has had "the effect of endorsing a Constantinian

---

assume that their ethical judgments are universal absolutes" which seems to provoke Yoder's Christocentric focus on Christian responsibility. As such, Koontz describes the tension between the two men well when she writes, "Yoder sees Christians far too quickly relativizing the authority of Christ and of the Scriptures in relation to other more provincial, self-serving or secular authorities, while Niebuhr warns against the opposite problems—biblicism and the self-righteous ethics of a 'redeemed community.'" Koontz describes additional tensions between the two individuals which may be a result of their overall theological commitments and presuppositions, as alluded to above. See Koontz, "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context," 413–418.

[27] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 41, 53. See also Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 39–41; Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 52; and D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 28–29, 38–39.

[28] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 53.

social strategy."[29] Consequently, readers of *Christ and Culture* have assumed the normalcy of "Constantianism" or "Christendom" which Hauerwas specifically claims has led to the decay of the Christian faith in the Western world.

According to the critical view, therefore, Niebuhr's alleged preference of how Christians should transform what he describes as *culture* has contributed to the transformative type as being the "definite preference" as Ramsey indicates. Besides this, should one suspect that Niebuhr's influence has also shaped the ways that writings pertaining to the Christ and culture debate are read? In other words, could it be that Niebuhr's dominating influence has led to the neglect of other works like *Discipleship* that attempt to prioritize the significance of a separated church community? In the next chapter, I will argue that this is one of Bonhoeffer's priorities in *Discipleship* that is key to understanding how he understands the relationship between Christ and his cultural setting.

For now, however, the three themes—Niebuhr's usage and description of *culture,* his Christology, and his alleged presupposition of *Constantianism* or *Christendom* within his concept of culture—will be expanded upon in these next sections. In each section, the goal is to not only lay out Niebuhr's own perspective towards these issues, but to also show how critics have responded to each respective topic. By doing so, I will highlight how Bonhoeffer approached the Christ and culture question in *Discipleship*, where he went with those themes in his context, and where Niebuhr supposedly did not.

[29] Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 40.

Niebuhr and Culture in *Christ and Culture*

One of the ongoing critiques that has been directed towards *Christ and Culture* throughout the years has been in regard to Niebuhr's usage and description of *culture*. Conclusions reached about this topic will inevitably determine how one responds to Niebuhr's Christology and also to his alleged *Christendom* presupposition. Stated differently, critics claim that his concept of *culture* is not only faulty but that hidden within it is an alleged Christendom presupposition. In addition, critics also argue that Niebuhr's concept of *culture* informs his Christological views. From the critical standpoint, they would argue that more is at stake with Niebuhr's presentation of *culture* than one might expect on the surface.

To be sure, Niebuhr elaborates on *culture* along with its nuances in the book. His ultimate goal, however, is to expound upon *culture* in regard to his primary task which he poses as a question. Niebuhr asks the reader, "What do we mean in our use of this word when we say that the Christian church enduringly struggles with the problem of Christ and culture?"[30] That which follows in the subsequent pages of *Christ and Culture* is his answer to this perennial question.

In his essay, Yoder devotes significant space to this theme, as much of what he has to say about Niebuhr's usage of *culture* reverberates into other areas of critique, especially in regard to Niebuhr's Christology. Some have even argued that one of the central themes in Yoder's essay is his critique of Niebuhr for allegedly assuming the normalcy of *Christendom* or *Constantianism* within his definition of *culture*.[31]

Why, then, is Yoder so greatly dissatisfied with Niebuhr's presentation of *culture*? From Yoder's perspective, there is much at stake with Niebuhr's terminology. As I will argue in the

[30] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 30.

[31] Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 164.

next chapter, Niebuhr is simply not as clear as Bonhoeffer is in *Discipleship* with how he addresses *culture*. While Yoder argues in his essay that *Christ and Culture* has not only developed a distinctive reputation as being "the common coin of contemporary thought" in regard to its themes pertaining to the relationship between Christ and culture, he also claims that the arguments made throughout the book "have been borrowed consciously by many, unconsciously by many more."[32] To this extent, it is a classic. Yet, within any book hailed as a classic, Yoder maintains that there are bound to be "unspoken axioms" and "tacit biases" throughout it. *Christ and Culture* should not be regarded as an exception to such concerns, Yoder claims, so the starting point of his essay begins with an examination into these "unspoken axioms" and "tacit biases." Among these subtle presuppositions are the ways that Yoder argues how Niebuhr specifically uses the word *culture* in his book. In order to support his claims, Yoder directs his attention to the first chapter of *Christ and Culture* where Niebuhr sets out to define his major term of *culture*.

In the chapter, Niebuhr himself acknowledges that he is writing as a theologian, so part of his attempt to provide a working definition of *culture* is not to venture into the intricacies and nuances of what it could entail if it were originating from a strictly anthropological perspective. Niebuhr readily admits this point, yet Yoder claims that his insistence to avoid anthropology is misleading,[33] as he argues that Niebuhr's first attempt to describe *culture* is essentially anthropocentric.[34]

---

[32] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 31.

[33] Kreider maintains that Niebuhr still used "anthropological definitions" despite his stated concerns to avoid interaction with the discipline. This perspective seems to harmonize with Yoder's overall position. See Alan Kreider, "Christ, Culture, and Truth-Telling," *Conrad Grebel Review* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 1997): 210.

[34] Yoder makes the point that Niebuhr's theology is "first of all an anthropology" and that his "starting point is not revelation but modern man's rational analysis of his nature and his predicament." See John Yoder, "Reinhold

(continued next page)

Other critics echo Yoder's critique about Niebuhr's alleged anthropocentric foundation.[35] Carter also reflects the concerns of this critique, claiming that Niebuhr's definition of *culture* is "defined in a humanistic way" as he points to Niebuhr's own words where he writes that it is "man" who determines what is good, since "man begins with himself as the chief value and the source of all other values."[36] Within such an allegedly "humanistic" description of culture, Carter argues that what is not clear within it is *how* or even *if* Niebuhr's concept of culture has been impacted by the fall.[37]

Niebuhr seeks to move past this allegedly "humanistic" orientation by narrowing down *culture* in a way that is more precise and without ambiguity. One of these occurrences is when Niebuhr distances his presentation of *culture* from its casual connotations that often take it to be synonymous or interchangeable with *society*.[38] Yet *culture*, understood from this perspective, is still too broad for Niebuhr. Not long after he offers this point of clarification, Niebuhr expounds upon *culture* even further, indicating that "what we have in view when we deal with Christ and culture is that total process of human activity" where "culture is the 'artificial, secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural."[39]

For Niebuhr, this includes "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values."[40] Yoder's interpretation of these remarks is

---

Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1955): 102.

[35] Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 60.

[36] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 35, quoted in Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 68.

[37] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 68.

[38] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 30.

[39] Ibid., 32.

[40] Ibid.

that for Niebuhr, *culture* "can mean everything people do" and that it involves "every realm of human behavior."[41] From Yoder's perspective, this definition is simply too broad and confusing, as it would include areas of life where "minority groups" such as the Mennonites have flourished at during the years. But Yoder finds a problem with the way Niebuhr has already constructed his argument, since the inclusion of the Mennonites in the "against" type would suggest that they are also "against" cultural activities. In contrast, Yoder argues that the Mennonites have been quite productive with cultural activities, including areas of agriculture, family, schools and literature.

Beyond these descriptions, Niebuhr also claims that *culture* is a "social heritage" which the writers of the New Testament "had in mind" when they wrote about "the world."[42] Niebuhr reiterates this last point, claiming that "the world" is "what we mean when we speak of culture."

In other words, Niebuhr indicates that *culture* and *the world* should be regarded as synonymous terms within his project. "The world," according to Niebuhr, also "appears as a realm under the power of evil; it is the region of darkness . . . it is characterized by the prevalence in it of lies, hatred, and murder . . . it is a secular society."[43]

From the critical perspective, this is a decisive point where critics begin to raise serious allegations of Niebuhr's motives for writing *Christ and Culture*. Critics claim that if *culture* and *the world* should be regarded as synonymous as Niebuhr allegedly presents them to be, then the implication is that *culture* is not only fallen but that it has been, that it is, and that it will always be in conflict with Christ, since Christ himself is not regarded among those who are fallen from

[41] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 54.

[42] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

[43] Ibid., 48.

Niebuhr's perspective.[44] But, as Yoder maintains, Niebuhr's definition seems to arbitrarily change later when minority groups are addressed.[45]

Yoder claims that this change comes suddenly and without warning. According to Yoder, Niebuhr turns from his allegedly broad definition of culture to a narrow one that targets Mennonite groups for being "against culture" since they promote pacifism, a view that is not represented by the majority population in Christian history. For Yoder, this suggests that Niebuhr has shifted his broad and inclusive definition of *culture* to now mean "the *majority* position of a given society."[46] Yoder calls this "a new definition" and one that comes "without explanation anywhere else in the text."[47]

Yoder further claims that the implication of this shift in terminology works to Niebuhr's advantage to the extent that if an individual or a movement is critical of anything that has been embraced by the majority population of a culture, then they are labeled as being against *all* of it. With this argument, Yoder strongly claims that Niebuhr had an all-or-nothing approach to culture.

At least one critic disagrees with Yoder at this point. According to D. A. Carson, the apparent contradiction can be resolved. Carson's attempted solution to the problem is that one must assume that what Niebuhr had in mind was that when *culture* is compared with *the world*, what Niebuhr is actually implying is that *culture* should be understood as "something like 'culture-devoid-of-Christ.'"[48]

---

[44] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 68–69.

[45] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 54–57.

[46] Ibid., 56.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 12.

Even though Yoder wrote his critique of *Christ and Culture* years before Carson's surfaced, Yoder's essay does not seem to make room for such an interpretation. There is a significant reason why Yoder would have been reluctant to share in Carson's interpretation if he had the chance to assess it.

The reason is that Yoder himself claims that Niebuhr's presentation of *the world* is simply incorrect, as Yoder writes that "the New Testament" does not indicate that *the world* means "all of culture," but instead, "it means culture *as self-glorifying* or culture *as autonomous* and rebellious and oppressive, opposed to authentic human flourishing."[49] In other words, Yoder is not as generous to Niebuhr as Carson seems to be by assuming that Niebuhr may have intended "something like 'culture-devoid-of-Christ.'"[50] Instead, Yoder holds Niebuhr accountable for his precise wording.

As a result of these two perspectives, it seems to be that critics are divided about whatever Niebuhr meant by his usage of *the world*. As such, it remains a debatable topic among scholars. What seems to come across, however, is that it connects in some way to how Niebuhr understood *culture*. As ambiguous as it may be at times, Bonhoeffer also used the phrase *the world* quite often in *Discipleship*, and as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the ways that he spoke of this phrase is critical to understanding how he perceived the relationship between Christ and his own cultural setting.

Yoder's dispute with Niebuhr about terminology remained a problem. It is an especially significant problem for Yoder because he emphasizes that even though Niebuhr is inconsistent with his terms, he is still more than willing to take the time to expose individuals like Tertullian

[49] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 70.

[50] Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 12.

and Tolstoy who were acting "inconsistent"[51] in their criticisms of culture. In order to demonstrate this claim, Yoder indicates that regardless of the critiques that someone like Tertullian made of politics, military service, business practices, philosophy and the arts, Tertullian's foundational problem for Niebuhr was that he was "inconsistent" in regard to his perspective about culture. What this means, according to Yoder, is that "should anyone [such as Tertullian] not have the same attitude toward every part of culture, this is itself evidence of inconsistency."[52] Yoder cites Niebuhr at this point where he describes Tertullian as one who could "not in fact emancipate himself and the church from reliance on and participation in culture."[53]

Compared to Niebuhr's interpretation of Tertullian, Yoder argues that Tertullian's knowledge of Latin, along with his affirmations about the value of human intelligence, and even some of his praises of Roman society were overlooked or ignored by Niebuhr simply because he did not denounce or affirm *all* of the culture around him.[54] According to Yoder, if someone like Tertullian refuses to participate in war, or repudiates the practice of making oaths to Caesar, while at the same time is fluent in Latin and appreciates music, then he is being inconsistent in Niebuhr's estimation.[55] So, *culture* for Niebuhr, at least from Yoder's interpretation, is monolithic, and for this supposedly monolithic aspect of Niebuhr's representation of *culture* to work, Yoder claims:

---

[51] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 48–49, 54–55.

[52] Ibid., 54.

[53] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 55.

[54] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 54, 56.

[55] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 69–73.

> For this kind of inconsistency to be a logical or moral flaw, as it is reported to be, "culture" must be assumed to be a single bloc, which an honest and consistent approach would either reject entirely or accept without qualification; you must either withdraw from it *all*, transform it *all*, or keep it *all* in paradox.[56]

In order for someone like Tertullian to escape being denounced as someone who was "against culture," Yoder argues that he would have had to affirm everything about the culture around him without having any moral discrimination.[57] Carter argues from this perspective, too, adding that anyone who ever embraced pacifism would be automatically dismissed by Niebuhr as being "against culture."[58] Critics wonder if Niebuhr provided allowance for someone to have a favorable attitude of creation and of culture even though such an individual may not consider war to be a morally justifiable option.

To be sure, critics interact with Niebuhr's own conditions that there are times when "movement of withdrawal and renunciation is a necessary element in every Christian life,"[59] and that it is to be "followed by an equally necessary movement of responsible engagement in cultural tasks."[60] According to Carter, these are Niebuhr's indications that it is "impossible" to "rely solely on Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture."[61] As a result of the way Niebuhr related *culture* and *the world*, Carter not only claims that Niebuhr's Christ points people away from this world to God, but that there is something else even more problematic:

> [Niebuhr] allows no choice between a godly culture and an ungodly one, no possible contrast between a Christian community (e.g., a monastic one) and a pagan society (e.g., the Roman Empire). Why not? His definitions simply exclude such possibilities.

---

[56] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 54–55.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 121.

[59] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 68.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 42.

> For him, to move closer to Christ (and God) is by definition to move away from culture. But this conclusion is not deduced from historical data; it is contained in the definitions, which function as a premise.[62]

Carter later seems to have extended the logic of this argument to claim that Niebuhr's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount entails that the commands in it are "unrealistic given the *reality* of the world."[63] In other words, Carter thinks that this is yet another occurrence where Niebuhr frames his argument, but this time it precludes Christians from actually abiding by the literal precepts in the Sermon on the Mount.

As for Yoder, he attempts to rescue Tertullian and others from the apparent trap of being "radicals" by claiming that "every morally accountable affirmation of culture discriminates."[64] Tertullian is just one of these figures who engaged in moral discrimination, according to Yoder. To this extent, Yoder argues that Niebuhr does not provide any assistance in *Christ and Culture* with offering categories of discernment with the result that it lacks cultural specificity.[65] *Christ and Culture* is not a very helpful resource at all according to Niebuhr's critics. It simply lacks any way for Christians to sort through moral issues in their own cultural settings while attempting to be faithful to God.

In fact, this is one of Yoder's major grievances. Yoder claims that his discriminating principle is not only "the cultural stance of the Christian church according to the New Testament,"[66] but that it offers a better way to think about relating Christ to culture in a way that Niebuhr's book simply did not. According to Yoder, such a perspective as his does not explicitly

---

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 65.

[64] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 55.

[65] Ibid., 69–70.

[66] Ibid., 69.

present a strategy to apply "uniformly, either accepting or rejecting (or paradoxing or transforming) [to] all of 'culture' in the same way"[67] like Niebuhr's strategy. Yoder's comments imply that there will always be some sort of a paradoxical tension between Christ and culture. Yoder explains in further detail:

> Where there is opposition between the claims of Christ and the claim to autonomy of a given cultural value—i.e., when it claims our ultimate loyalty, making itself an idol—then the Christian church and the individual disciple must reject that claim . . . it is important that Jesus does say this not only about wealth or war but also about the family. At these points . . . the New Testament-oriented Christian will follow Christ in taking the kind of position which Niebuhr calls "radical" and "sectarian." But by no means need it be assumed that this choice is always necessary. Even when it is, those who take that position are not leaving the world, but influencing it . . . for when the New Testament speaks of "world" it precisely does not mean, as Niebuhr says, all of culture. It means rather culture as *self-glorifying* or culture *as autonomous* and rebellious and oppressive, opposed to authentic human flourishing.[68]

For Yoder, Niebuhr was not only wrong with his presentation of *culture* but also with his biblical exegesis of *the world.* Could it be that something—perhaps Niebuhr's own culture—influenced his exegesis of these themes without his direct awareness? Similarly, how might one, such as Bonhoeffer, who lived in an entirely different culture as Niebuhr, describe this important terminology? As we will see, Bonhoeffer not only uses *the world* frequently, but he also relates it to his own cultural situation with remarkable precision.

As for Yoder, he simply juxtaposes *the church* and *culture* in a way that Niebuhr does not seem to do in his book. Yoder's special emphasis on these words leads him to feel no shame about admitting that Christians should be counter-cultural, and that they should even be radical at times.

---

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., 70.

From Yoder's perspective, the juxtaposition between *the church* and *culture* is necessary because he understands the community of disciples within the New Testament to be paradigmatic of a "subculture."[69] For Yoder, this means that the church is an alternative community that is separated from the surrounding culture at large. Since this sort of subculture takes its cues primarily through the witness of Jesus Christ, Yoder argues that its beliefs and practices will necessarily come into conflict with the majority of culture at times. As a result of promoting an ecclesiology that distinguishes between *the church* and the *culture* at large, Yoder ultimately distances himself from Niebuhr's alleged pluralism when he argues that:

> Some elements of culture the church categorically rejects (pornography, tyranny, cultic idolatry). Other dimensions of culture it accepts within clear limits (economic production, commerce, the graphic arts, paying taxes for peacetime civil government.). To still other dimensions of culture Christian faith gives a new motivation and coherence (agriculture, family life, literacy, conflict resolution, empowerment.). Still others it strips of their claims to possess autonomous truth and value, and uses them as vehicles of communication . . . Still other forms of culture are *created* by the Christian churches (hospitals, service for the poor, generalized education, egalitarianism, abolitionism, feminism) . . . Our need, one with which Niebuhr gives us no assistance, is precisely to find categories of *discernment* by virtue of which the several value dimensions of cultural creativeness can be distinguished.[70]

These comments seem to indicate that there are simply aspects of culture for Yoder that Christians should never support and never have to engage. Yet Christians can be effective in culture. Yoder elaborates upon this in his final comments of his essay, and even offers correctives to Niebuhr by claiming:

> Everything we call "culture" is both in some way created and creative and positive, and in other ways rebellious and oppressive. This is not a fifty/fifty mix, but a far more complex dialectical challenge, whereby we are called to exercise discernment.

---

[69] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 93. See also John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 15–36, 37–50.

[70] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 69–70.

> We should precisely *not* try to be consistent by affirming all, rejecting all, or paradoxing all, as the Niebuhr outline assumes would be consistent, but to be concretely discriminating, after rejecting any notion of an overall escape. Some aspects of human activity are thus less redeemable than others. In particular settings, Christians have rejected the theater; in others theater has served the gospel and the church. This is not inconsistency but concrete situational discernment. We need to ask not either/or questions but How? and When? questions.[71]

One of the areas of emphasis for Yoder in these comments is the necessity for "situational discernment." As far as the Christ and culture debate is concerned, Yoder's discussion about the proper role of the church is a significant point that is also found in *Discipleship* as Bonhoeffer has a similar way of understanding how the church should relate to the culture around it. Yet for Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship*, as I will argue, he is not simply arguing how the church should function within societies in theory, but instead, Bonhoeffer is arguing how the Confessing Church should operate in Nazi occupied Germany. In the next chapter, this theme will reappear as it will be argued that Bonhoeffer was primarily concerned with appropriating the role of the church within *Discipleship* in his cultural context. In addition, I will also show how this led him to a much different interpretation and outcome of relating Christ to culture than Niebuhr did in *Christ and Culture*.

Niebuhr and Christology in *Christ and Culture*

Niebuhr's representation of Jesus in *Christ and Culture* is another topic that has encountered critiques in recent years.[72] In fact, the topic received heavy criticism from Yoder, since Niebuhr's Christology for him has been said to be "the crucial point on which Niebuhr's

[71] Ibid., 85–86.

[72] In order to avoid confusion, the words *Jesus* and *Christ* will be used interchangeably from this point onward.

book stands or falls."[73] Yoder's critiques on Niebuhr's Christology has been so influential that others have closely followed in his footsteps throughout the years by making similar arguments.

In this relatively brief section, I will show how the critical response to Niebuhr argues that his operating Christology in *Christ and Culture* contributes to his alleged agenda of marginalizing the "against culture" type and how Niebuhr's Christology allegedly shapes his presentation of ethics.[74]

As for Niebuhr's presentation of Jesus, he offers some of his own interpretations of this key figure of history in at least a few places. At one point, Niebuhr describes Jesus in the following way:

> Jesus Christ of the New Testament is in our actual history, in history as we remember and live it, as it shapes our present faith and action. And this Jesus is a definite person, one and the same whether he appears as a man of flesh and blood or as risen Lord. He can never be confused with a Socrates, a Plato, or an Aristotle, a Gautama, a Confucius, or a Mohammed, or even with an Amos or Isaiah . . . there always remain the original portraits with which all later pictures may be compared and by which all caricatures may be corrected. And in these original portraits he is recognizably one and the same. Whatever roles he plays in the varieties of Christian experience, it is the same Christ who exercises these various offices.[75]

For Niebuhr, Jesus is "in our actual history" so he is a historical figure. Yet, while "this Jesus is radically obedient,"[76] Niebuhr seems acknowledge a tension with the one who was once

---

[73] Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 219.

[74] According to Craig Carter, Yoder's ethical perspective is that "the ideal of love has been realized in human history in the man Jesus and, because of the power of his resurrection flowing into the church through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is possible for admittedly sinful and imperfect people to bear a visible witness to the ideal of love, not in their individual piety or goodness, but insofar as they covenant themselves together into an alternative community that lives (and suffers) without resorting to violence. Yoder's critique of Niebuhr thus ultimately constitutes a critique of the authenticity of Niebuhr's commitment to key Christian doctrines." Craig Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 45.

[75] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 13.

[76] Ibid., 25.

present in "actual history" and the one who was also within culture itself, since this same Jesus is also the Son of God who:

> . . . [P]oints away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; from the many powers which men use and on which they depend to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds.[77]

Critics are quick to jump on this description of Jesus as the one who "points away from the many values of man's social life" and who "leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture."[78] By stating that Jesus directs the attention of human beings away from this world, and thereby away from culture itself, Yoder argues that Niebuhr's representation of Jesus presents him primarily as a "moralist" type of teacher "who affirms the transcendence of the spiritual" with the result that he "condemns concern for this world."[79] For Yoder, this has major implications.

One such problem with this description for Yoder is that Niebuhr's presentation of Christ as a teacher[80] supposedly pertains more to what Jesus instructed his followers to abstractly believe about God rather than establishing him as a kind of teacher who provides concrete, real-

---

[77] Ibid., 28.

[78] Ibid., 39.

[79] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 59.

[80] Bruce Guenther agrees with Yoder's evaluation of Niebuhr's Christ as this point, claiming that "Niebuhr presents Jesus primarily as an exemplary moral teacher who affirms the transcendence" while pointing people "away" from all things temporal. See Bruce L. Guenther, "The Enduring Problem of *Christ and Culture*," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (September 1, 2005): 221.

life lessons for his followers that was meant to influence their social behavior.[81] To this extent, Yoder argues that Niebuhr's Christ is severely detached from this world:

> [Jesus] does not condemn culture because it is particularly sinful, nor does he condemn aspects of culture because these portions of it are more sinful than others; in fact, he does not condemn it at all. He simply "points away from" it towards something else incomparably more important.[82]

It does not seem to be that Yoder is accusing Niebuhr of presenting his readers with a false dilemma in that Christ must be thought of as *either* a teacher of transcendental truths *or* a teacher of social ethics. Rather, what Yoder does with these remarks is simply emphasize his running theme that the way Niebuhr constructed his definition of *culture* almost necessitates that his presentation of Christ would be one who accentuates the transcendent over against the material world. In other words, Yoder accuses Niebuhr of painting a picture of Jesus who "points away from the world" because Yoder claims that Niebuhr had already defined the nature or reality of *culture* and *the world* as being quite at odds with Christ. Niebuhr's Reformed background has with it a Christology that has little to do with making Jesus culturally applicable to this world in the here-and-now. Speaking of this directly, Yoder writes:

> As we compare the Jesus of Richard Niebuhr's description to the Jesus of the New Testament and of the history of Christian thought, it becomes evident that Niebuhr has so set up the question as to make it clear from the outset that Jesus must be *by definition* inadequate. To do this, he has excised from his picture of Jesus precisely those dimensions, clearly present in the biblical witness and in classical theology,

---

[81] It is very interesting that A. James Reimer makes a similar critique of John Yoder when he writes that Yoder's Jesus was "not primarily a moral teacher with political implications, nor a teacher of spirituality who was misinterpreted politically, nor a sacrificial lamb for the purpose of atonement, but rather, in his prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, [was] someone who bore the possibility of a new human, social and political order." Following this remark, Reimer offers his summary of the core of Yoder's theology by claiming that "Christendom … by and large remained unaware of this political-social dimension of Jesus' message." As such, Reimer accuses Yoder of having an "underlining bias against metaphysical and ontological understandings of Christ." See A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (December 1, 1983): 42–43.

[82] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 59.

> which would have made impossible the interpretation of Jesus as "pointing away" from the realm of culture, and thereby as needing the corrective of a "more balanced" position.[83]

Yoder further argues that Niebuhr's presentation of Christ who is "against culture" is defined by Niebuhr as a straw man and is not a "serious historical possibility for real living people."[84] In this way, Yoder claims that Niebuhr is marginalizing the "against culture" type since its adherents take the words of Jesus seriously.

Carter picks up on this theme by claiming that as a result of Niebuhr's Christ who "points away" from everything and everyone here on earth, Niebuhr erects a sharp dualism between Jesus and the created order.[85] At the same time, however, Carter does not indicate that he has a problem with the dualism in and of itself. Instead, what is problematic for Carter is that he claims Niebuhr establishes an ethical dualism between Jesus and the world. According to Carter, it arises as:

> . . . [A] religious divide along the fault line of recognition or rejection of the lordship of Jesus Christ. It is temporary and does not arise out of creation, but of the fall. One day it will be eliminated by the redemption of all creation.[86]

So, Carter's problem with Niebuhr in this regard is that he accuses him of positing an ontological dualism. According to Carter, such an "ontological dualism" has direct consequences for ethics. He elaborates:

> It is not just that Jesus's so-called strenuous commands in the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of this teaching are hard to obey because of the prevalence of sin in the world; Niebuhr seems to believe that these commands are unrealistic given the *reality* of the world. Yet, Jesus's ministry is all about redefining what is real. The idea that

---

[83] Ibid., 60.

[84] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 60.

[85] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 64–65.

[86] Ibid., 65.

> the Sermon on the Mount could be lived on this earth by a segment of fallen humanity is rejected as impossible by Niebuhr.[87]

From Carter's perspective, living by the Sermon on the Mount is categorically rejected as being "impossible" for Niebuhr. Jesus is simply ontologically different from the rest of fallen humanity, so there is no way that people could ever imitate such a heavenly figure as him. Carter argues that this is because of the way that Niebuhr had framed his definitions of *culture* and the way that his Christology flowed from it.

In other words, Carter's critical perspective argues that in Niebuhr's alleged ontological dualism, there is an impenetrable gap between Christ and the created order, and that the consequences of what flows from it does not remain hidden in the realm of theological abstraction. Instead, there are real implications for Christians, for humanity, and for this world. Living by the precepts given in the Sermon on the Mount and imitating Jesus are simply regarded as impossibilities by Niebuhr, at least according to Carter's perspective. As a result, Christians must simply accept that engaging in war has always been and will always be a morally justifiable option. Carter claims that refusing to accept this position entails that individuals who deny Niebuhr's alleged claims about war are then lumped into the "against culture" type and that they suffer the stigma that is associated with being another "radical."

Beyond these claims, Carter further argues that given the overall influence of *Christ and Culture*, a dualism such as this one has contributed to a theological paradigm that has become represented in the actions of people who have closely followed Niebuhr's Christology of transcendence. The Sermon on the Mount subsequently becomes ignored as a possibility for Christian ethical ideals. Carter claims that Niebuhr's "almost mystical figure" of Christ is

[87] Ibid.

completely uninterested in seemingly normal aspects of human life, with the result that "the feet of Niebuhr's Jesus barely touch the earth."[88] Niebuhr's theology of transcendence allegedly ignores a theology of presence.

Adding to these attacks, Yoder argues that even though Niebuhr is claiming to be within the Christological tradition of Nicaea, his actual emphasis on the transcendence of Jesus has little or no room for his humanity,[89] and so Niebuhr is accused of actually departing from Nicene Christology in his presentation of Christ.[90]

In the end, Yoder writes that what was ultimately wrong with the question that Niebuhr "set up" about the relationship of Christ to culture was that his presentation of Christ and of culture "are so predisposed by his own particular angles on the history of the problem that there can be no right answer."[91] Yet, "at other times," Yoder writes, "there is a right answer, and it is 'transformation.'" The problem for Yoder is that "the reader has not been provided any precise understandings of the criteria which distinguish valid from invalid modes of carrying out that project."[92]

In other words, despite Niebuhr's alleged agenda of attacking the "against type," his critics accuse him of being vague with the type that he supposedly preferred, and the result is that readers have been left without having any direction of where to go in order to actually transform culture. Compared with this apparent ambiguity, what is certain, according to the critics, is that Niebuhr's legacy has assured Western readers that living by the Sermon on the Mount is not

---

[88] Carter, *Revisiting Christ and Culture*, 64.

[89] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 35, 58–65.

[90] Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 218.

[91] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 82–83.

[92] Ibid., 83.

possible within a world such as ours. Abiding by the Sermon on the Mount has been left to the "radicals" throughout history.

Niebuhr and Christendom in *Christ and Culture*

In this final section of the chapter, I shall draw attention to the ways that critics of Niebuhr accuse him of presupposing the notion of *Christendom* within his concept of *culture* in *Christ and Culture.* Before continuing, however, I must first define what can and cannot be meant by *Christendom* within this discussion.

In a broad sense, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *Christendom* as "the worldwide body or society of Christians."[93] This seems to be a typical understanding of the word. More precisely, however, the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines *Christendom* as "a collective sense of Christianity itself" or "a description of Christianity as the dominant religion."[94] While these definitions of *Christendom* are extremely similar to one another, and seem to represent normative usage in American English, it is not these connotations that Niebuhr's critics have in mind when they accuse him of having a "Christendom bent" in *Christ and Culture*. Even though these may be the standard ways that these terms are understood, critics think and use *Christendom* quite differently, so one should not superimpose these general understandings onto the definitions used by critics of Niebuhr.

With this said, the critical understanding of *Christendom* goes back more than a century to Soren Kierkegaard before individuals such as Yoder, Hauerwas and Carter began their critiques of *Christendom*. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard launched a series of attacks

[93] Angus Stevenson and Maurice Waite, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 254.

[94] Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 47.

on what he referred to as *Christendom.* His presentation of what *Christendom* entailed was drastically different from the typical usage of the word at the time, as he spoke of it pejoratively. John Lippitt offers a general picture of what Kierkegaard's criticism included. He writes:

> Kierkegaard had long been concerned with the incongruity he saw between "genuine" Christianity and what he had heard from pulpits, which he saw as a cowardly evasion of the teaching of the New Testament. This came to a head in the 1850s . . . Kierkegaard contrasts his view of New Testament Christianity with the establishment religiosity he labels as "Christendom," famously proclaiming the need to "introduce Christianity into Christendom." In the last two years of his life, this "attack upon Christendom" became venomous. In a series of articles, he accused the church of rank hypocrisy in betraying the message of the gospel, a particular target being Jakob Peter Mynster, Bishop of Zealand and Primate of the Danish State (later Danish People's) Church. In the midst of this furor, Kierkegaard collapsed in the street, dying in hospital some weeks later, on 11 November 1855, at the age of 42.[95]

Lippitt claims that Kierkegaard's attacks were "venomous." As such, Kierkegaard spoke of *Christendom* in ways far removed from the general connotation of the word, as he juxtaposed it to what he describes as "New Testament Christianity." According to Lippitt, *Christendom* for Kierkegaard is "establishment religiosity." Yet, as John Elrod indicates, Kierkegaard's notion of *Christendom* is not simply the visible entity of the state church, but is something much more:

> [*Christendom*, for Kierkegaard is] the modern liberal state which is legitimized and sanctioned by religion in the form of the Danish church. Christendom is the fall of life from the high plane of ethics to the aesthetic view of life, where pleasure is conceived of as the highest good. Christendom is the legitimating of the political pursuit of one's private interests devoid of ethical obligation to the other.[96]

Elrod's description seems to reflect what Kierkegaard has to say about *Christendom* in his attacks. To this extent, Kierkegaard describes *Christendom* in the following way:

> What Christianity wanted was chastity—to do away with the whorehouse. The change [from Christianity to "Christendom"] is this, that the whorehouse remains

[95] John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), 4-5.

[96] John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 78.

> exactly what it was in paganism, lewdness in the same proportion, but it has become a "Christian" whorehouse . . . the change from paganism is this: that everything has remained unchanged, but has assumed the predicate "Christian."[97]

According to Kierkegaard, the culture of *Christendom* is not much different than other cultures throughout the world, except that *Christendom* retains the old artifacts of previous cultures and then prescribes them with new, so-called "Christian" names. Yet, their functions within culture remain the same as they did before. Culture, for Kierkegaard, can be thoroughly "Christian" in this sense. The only changes that substantially occur within Christendom is that "everything" simply gains a new predicate in that it becomes "Christian" by name only. It is *not* that those former aspects of culture have been redeemed or transformed, or that they have become something entirely different.

Instead, such a description like the one above is indicative that they still exist for Kierkegaard, but merely receive a new name under the cultural umbrella of *Christendom*. Once this happens, they are regarded as being sanctified by the majority of the population, while at the same time "society" remains "thoroughly base."[98]

Narrowing the word down even further, Kierkegaard argues that when the church or even when individual Christians accommodate to culture, the very heart of what it means to be Christian is lost with the transition. This means that people residing within such a culture that Kierkegaard describes as *Christendom* may indeed profess beliefs and may engage in rituals that seemingly harmonize with historic Christianity. Within the culture of Christendom, however, Kierkegaard argues that the possession of abstract beliefs and the visible markers of rituals among the population may be widely accepted as the normative way in which a Christian can be

---

[97] Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 164–165.

[98] Ibid., 229.

differentiated from a non-Christian, but that such identity markers are ultimately misleading. Kierkegaard argues the reason for this is because following what "New Testament Christianity" prescribes entails more than mere external association with a group within society. This attack from Kierkegaard has been described as a "social critique"[99] directed towards "bourgeois Christendom," or which was arguably the *majority* population of the culture within Denmark at the time.[100] What is necessary for Christianity to be true Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is discipleship.

To this extent, within Kierkegaard's attacks, he repeatedly claims that characteristics that differentiated Christians from non-Christians throughout the pages of the New Testament do not exist within the culture of Christendom. Themes such as discipleship and suffering for the sake of Christ entail public manifestations of the Christian faith for Kierkegaard, whereas within Christendom, faith is reduced to the possession of abstract beliefs and engaging in rituals behind closed doors. For Kierkegaard, the prevailing assumption in the culture of Christendom is that every person within the geographical boundaries of the nation is considered to be a "Christian."

In *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, Carter describes Kierkegaard as launching the "single greatest attack on Christendom during the past two centuries."[101] As far as what *Christendom* entails, Carter explicitly expounds upon it in the book when he writes:

---

[99] Edward F. Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 283.

[100] Kierkegaard describes *Christendom* in many ways throughout *Attack upon Christendom*. However, the recurring theme seems to be that *Christendom* is primarily describing the cultural setting that represents the *majority* of the population in Denmark during his time. To this extent, *Christendom* for Kierkegaard is "Christianity in the land" that is far removed from "the Christianity of the New Testament." *Christendom* is also described as "a society of non-Christians" and that which is "thoroughly base." See Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 37, 214, 229.

[101] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 15.

> In 1951, when *Christ and Culture* was first published, Christendom was taken for granted within North American Protestantism. So it was quite natural that, rather than challenging it in his book, Niebuhr presupposed it.[102]

Some theologians speak of *Christendom* in a way that seems to harmonize well with what most people simply regard as *Christianity*, just like what fits the dictionary definition of the term. Others, like Carter, Yoder and Hauerwas are quite critical of it and do not use it interchangeably with *Christianity*.[103] However, North American Protestants, such as Niebuhr, simply assume its legitimacy. Critics claim that Niebuhr was too trapped within his own culture to even recognize it. But, in Carter's estimation, there is more to Christendom than one might suspect:

> Christendom is the concept of Western civilization as having a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (the civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to Christian faith, which is seen as the so-called soul of Europe or the West. The essence of the idea is that the assertion that Western civilization is Christian. Within this Christian civilization, the state and the church have different roles to play, but, since membership in both is coterminous, both can be seen as aspects of one unified reality—Christendom.[104]

Compared with popular definitions of *Christendom*, Carter speaks of it pejoratively in a way reminiscent to Kierkegaard. Not only does it stretch beyond its typical understanding of "a description of Christianity as the dominant religion,"[105] but contained within Carter's description of *Christendom* are presuppositions that unite the church with the civil government. According to Carter, Niebuhr assumed this perspective of *Christendom*:

---

[102] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 14.

[103] Peter Leithart provides a thorough response to individuals such as Yoder, Hauerwas and Carter in his book, *Defending Constantine.* Since the goal of the thesis is *not* to primarily engage Niebuhr, I shall sideline those criticisms that Leithart made against Yoder. If space was not an issue, Leithart's book would certainly be worthy of engagement, as even Stanley Hauerwas has spoken favorably about it. For Hauerwas' response to *Defending Constantine*, see Stanley Hauerwas, "Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom," *Christian Century* 127, no. 21 (October 19, 2010): 48–49.

[104] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 14–15.

[105] McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 47.

> It is taken for granted by Niebuhr that, since Western culture is Christian, Christians therefore have a responsibility for culture and must be realistic in relating faith in a Christ who really does not fit within any human culture to Western Christendom. Christendom is presupposed, and the problem is how to relate Christ to it.[106]

So, according to Carter, *Christendom* is that realm of Western civilization where the teachings of Christ must be accommodated in order to fit the "realistic" social structures that enable society to function and to prosper. Carter claims that Niebuhr simply presupposed this notion. His task, at least from Carter's perspective, was to be responsible and realistic with the ways he understood the relationship between Christ and culture.

Beyond this definition, Carter also describes *Christendom* as "a series of compromises made by the church with the world so that the offense of Jesus Christ is watered down"[107] which began with Constantine and the empire that he built around Christianity.[108] Even after the collapse of Rome, *Christendom*, according to this perspective, did not cease to exist as it continued to thrive in some form for centuries.[109] Carter describes this as a "bad idea"[110] as it produced the "hatred, persecution, and destruction of Jews, dissenting Christians, and non-Western native peoples."[111]

Carter argues that such atrocities were not simply a "peripheral flaw" of this understanding of *Christendom*, but were "the normal, natural, inevitable outcome of forcing Christianity on the population and using it as the ideology that justifies the ruling powers that be."[112] Carter

---

[106] Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 15.

[107] Ibid., 78.

[108] Ibid., 79.

[109] Ibid., 85–93.

[110] Ibid., 92.

[111] Ibid., 92–93.

[112] Ibid., 93.

continues by claiming that when we think of *Christendom* like this within the context of the Western world, we should be quick to reply that it was brought on by Constantine, even though Yoder's term of *Constantianism* is not necessarily tied to him as a person.

Critics further claim that given the extent of how deeply pervasive this sort of *Constantinian* or *Christendom* mentality is among Western Christians, a fundamental shift must take place in the discussion of Christ and culture that moves beyond the Niebuhrian five-fold typology. Not only is there need for more cultural awareness in the Christ and culture discussion, but there is also a need for increased cultural sensitivity, especially to others outside of the Americas and Europe.

From the critical standpoint, accusations against Niebuhr are common that claim he simply assumed that these notions behind *Constantianism* or even *Christendom* were acceptable ways for Christ to bring about change in this world. Whether the critiques come from Yoder, Hauerwas or Carter, they all seem to assert that any discussion that refuses to interact with how these presuppositions may or may not contribute to real-life consequences is simply missing the point, and is continuing to build upon Niebuhr's skewed and misleading presuppositions that further distort the true countercultural nature of the church.

The alternative for Niebuhr's critics is to rediscover and reapply the Sermon on the Mount by the church in society. Pursuing and living out the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount is one of the primary ways that this fundamental shift back to what they describe as "the New Testament" can be appropriated within any culture. Hauerwas echoes this precisely when he writes:

> [The Sermon on the Mount is] words for the colony, a prefiguration of the kinds of community in which the reign of God will shine in all its glory. So there is nothing private in the demands of the Sermon. It is very public, very political, very social in that it depicts the public form by which the colony shall witness to the world that God

> really is busy redeeming humanity, reconciling the world to himself in Christ. All Christian ethical issues are therefore social, political, communal issues. Can we so order our life in the colony that the world might look at us and know that God is busy?[113]

Hauerwas continues by providing a partial answer to his previous question:

> For us [Christians], the world has ended. We may have thought that Jesus came to make nice people even nicer, that Jesus hoped to make a democratic Caesar just a bit more democratic, to make the world a bit better place for the poor. The Sermon [on the Mount], however, collides with such accomodationist thinking. It drives us back to a completely new conception of what it means for people to live with one another. That completely new conception is the church. All that we have heard said of old is thrown up for grabs, demands to be reexamined, and pushed back to square one. Square one is that colony made up of those who are special, different, alien, and distinctive only in the sense that they are those who have heard Jesus say "Follow me," and have come forth to be part of a new people, a colony formed by hearing his invitation and saying yes.[114]

For Yoder, Hauerwas, and Carter, the words of Jesus—especially those in the Sermon on the Mount—are to be taken seriously. But these contemporary critics are not alone. Years before their voices became heard in the Christ and culture discussion, Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* placed special emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount. As such, Bonhoeffer and the critics of Niebuhr all argue that when the church begins to appropriate these precepts from the Sermon on the Mount in the cultural moment, change may indeed transpire. Yet, change, or from Niebuhr's perspective, *transformation*, is not the ultimate goal. Rather, what the critics of today claim who echo Bonhoeffer is that the goal is simply to be obedient for the sake of Jesus and his call, even if change does not occur.

As this thesis progresses, I will demonstrate that these three areas where Niebuhr encountered the harshest critique in *Christ and Culture* were addressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer—

---

[113] Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 92.

[114] Ibid.

a rough contemporary of Niebuhr—in *Discipleship*. In all three of these areas (that is, in regard to culture, Christology, and Christendom) I shall explore both *how* and *why* Bonhoeffer comes to the conclusions that he does in *Discipleship.* In the process, such an examination will not only give us a better understanding of Bonhoeffer in this period of his theological development but it will also give us the opportunity to look at another text besides *Christ and Culture* that deals with the "enduring problem" that Niebuhr describes.

In the end, Bonhoeffer will confront the enduring problem in his own way, while offering his own solutions to his own countrymen, and he will do it within his own concrete moment with situational discernment.

CHAPTER TWO

BONHOEFFER AND HIS CULTURAL MOMENT

In this final chapter, I will specifically narrow down the answer to our main question. By doing so, I will show that *Discipleship* provides such a different outcome than Niebuhr of relating Christ to culture because Bonhoeffer interprets and applies the themes of culture, Christendom and Christology quite unlike Niebuhr, at least according to the critical response towards *Christ and Culture*.

As for *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer had his own goals in mind from the onset of the book. The editors of *Discipleship* summarize a key theme in regard to Bonhoeffer's cultural situation that focuses upon his own attempts to arrive at situational specificity. They write:

> *Discipleship* was the largest and most influential book published by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his lifetime. Within its pages he confronts his readers time and again with his own stark challenges to their facile, less than Christlike ways of being Christian. What did it mean to declare oneself a follower of Jesus Christ? What were Christians to do about the seemingly "impossible demands" of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? How effective and relevant were the Matthean Beatitudes against the materialism, militarism, and ruthless dictatorship that had come to dominate Germany in Bonhoeffer's own time? How were Christians to act responsibly in the Church Struggle created by Hitler and Nazism? These were the issues that had disturbed Bonhoeffer during the gestation period of this book.[115]

Such editorial comments are reflective of Bonhoeffer's own questions that he presents to readers in the preface to *Discipleship*. There, he probes his readers to reflectively ask:

---

[115] Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, *Volume 4*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

> What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. Rather, we want to know what Jesus wants.[116]

Following these questions, Bonhoeffer narrows these kinds of questions down to a contextually specific one. He was certainly aware of how Christians were accommodating themselves to the political powers of his day, yet at the same time, they were still retaining much of their pietistic language and religious appearances. On the surface, they were Christians. Many participated in Christian worship and other Christian activities. Yet, what was missing, according to Bonhoeffer, was convincing, righteous action that was obedient to Jesus' commands.[117] This would, in turn, have relevancy to the actual needs within society if it happened. Yet there was an absence. So he asks his readers a series of questions:

> What could the call to follow Jesus mean today for the worker, the businessman, the farmer, or the soldier? Could it bring an intolerable dilemma into the existence of persons working in the world who are Christian? Is Christianity, defined as following Jesus, a possibility for too small a number of people? Does it imply a rejection of the great masses of people and contempt for the weak and poor? Does it thereby deny the great mercy of Jesus Christ, who came to the sinners and tax-collectors, the poor and the weak, the misguided and despairing? What should we say to that? Is it a few, or many, who belong with Jesus?[118]

Note that Bonhoeffer is asking his readers about what following Jesus could mean for them "today." Questions like these provide an indication that Bonhoeffer is at the least asking *how* one should live as a Christian within his own, unique cultural context. Bonhoeffer is not writing a timeless theological treatise. In fact, the questions that Bonhoeffer asks his readers resonates

---

[116] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37.

[117] Heinz Eduard Tödt, *Authentic Faith: Bonhoeffer's Theological Ethics in Context*, ed. Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth, trans. David Stassen and Ilse Tödt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 45.

[118] Ibid., 39.

with the tension that Niebuhr later described as "the enduring problem" several years later. Niebuhr introduced it as:

> It is helpful to remember that the question of Christianity and civilization is by no means a new one; that Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial, and that the problem has been an enduring one through all the Christian centuries. It is helpful also to recall that the repeated struggles of Christians with this problem have yielded no single Christian answer . . .[119]

Bonhoeffer seems to have been asking the same general questions about relating Christ to culture that Niebuhr set out to address in *Christ and Culture*, even though he asked them years before Niebuhr did with his book. The questions that Bonhoeffer raises in the *Preface* of *Discipleship* establish one of the major themes that will be found throughout the remainder of the book. These questions suggest that there is a "cost" to following Jesus in this world beyond ritual and beyond pietistic language. At least one of the implications in the *Preface* suggests that when Christians abandon the pursuit of righteous action, then they lose their social credibility. Consequently, the grace that they speak of becomes "cheap."[120]

Within this chapter, I shall demonstrate that *Discipleship* provides such a different outcome than Niebuhr did of relating Christ to culture because Bonhoeffer interprets and applies the themes of culture, Christendom and Christology quite unlike Niebuhr by focusing upon the counter-cultural impulses of the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer's goal is admittedly *prescriptive* in nature whereas (despite the critical argument) Niebuhr's goal was admittedly *descriptive*.

---

[119] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 2.

[120] Tödt, *Authentic Faith*, 45.

Bonhoeffer and Culture in *Discipleship*

Given the contemporary criticism of Niebuhr's presentation of the word *culture*, it seems to be apparent that the meaning of the word is not self-evident. Even after the years following the publication of *Christ and Culture*, theologians continue to debate its meaning and how it should be properly understood within a twenty-first century context. As a result of the possible confusion of what is meant by *culture*, I shall first define Bonhoeffer's perspective on *culture* in *Discipleship*.

As I have previously shown, Niebuhr's presentation of *culture* has encountered harsh criticism from contemporary critics like Yoder, most notably as a result that individuals like Yoder accuse Niebuhr of either using the term too broadly or in ways that other critics claim are ambiguous. Despite such criticism, Niebuhr's understanding of *culture* has arguably been a dominating voice within the discussions pertaining to Christ and culture.

Regarding this theme, Niebuhr himself acknowledged the difficulty of arriving at a definition of *culture*.[121] As previously indicated, there are places throughout *Christ and Culture* where he attempts to provide clarity about the meaning of the term, especially when he indicates that *culture* consists of "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values."[122] In this sense, *culture*, for Niebuhr, is inherently social, and since the social existence of mankind has been impacted by the fall, Niebuhr claims that *culture* is also what the writers of the New Testament "had in mind" when they wrote about

[121] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 30.

[122] Ibid., 32.

"the world."[123] From this perspective, Niebuhr is indicating that *culture* and *the world* should be considered interchangeable or synonymous terms within his project.

While there are indeed many ways to elaborate upon the specifics of what *culture* does or does not entail beyond Niebuhr, his perspective actually offers what Carson describes as a "fairly plastic concept."[124] Carson's comment indicates that Niebuhr's perspective is general and that it reflects the popular connotation of the word. Considering that I have consulted Niebuhr already in this thesis, and that his influence is vast, I shall use this concept of *culture* as a starting point to think about how *culture* is addressed in *Discipleship.*

On the onset, it is interesting to note that while Bonhoeffer does not specifically use the word *culture* (*kultur*) throughout *Discipleship,* he frequently uses *the world* in ways that often parallel Niebuhr's broad definition of *culture*. In fact, the most basic theme of *culture*, at least how the term is broadly presented by Niebuhr, is addressed very early in *Discipleship*.

In the preface to *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer presents the reader with three questions that explicitly pertain to relating Christ to culture. These questions are, however, ones that were addressed to a very specific culture, and so, they are arguably culturally contextual questions because they were specifically intended for his German audience. When Bonhoeffer asks, "What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today?"[125] the words *us* and *today* are strong signals that Bonhoeffer is providing the context for the book. Such questions were not arbitrary ones that Bonhoeffer was

[123] Ibid., 32.

[124] D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1.

[125] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37.

asking, as they are also the ones that had "disturbed"[126] Bonhoeffer around the time of his life when he wrote *Discipleship*.

Similarly, these three questions are also those which would have sparked the interest for what Kelly describes as the "average"[127] German Christians, as they were constantly hearing much of "what this or that church leader wants"[128] and hearing little of what Jesus himself had to say. To this extent, Kelly and Godsey indicate that Christians throughout Germany were accommodating their faith to the political powers of the day and were dismissing the Sermon on the Mount as containing "impossible ideals."[129] It seems as if the contextual situation that Bonhoeffer was part of at the time was one where German Christians listened to everyone except Jesus Christ. That seems to have been Bonhoeffer's impression, anyway.

From Bonhoeffer's perspective, the theme of discipleship in the 1930s for many in Germany was simply an abstract, theological concept and was far removed from living a life of sacrificial obedience to Christ. Such a social context is undoubtedly broad and is inclusive of many people, yet it is one that provides something of a rough cultural context that will subsequently shape the way that the theme of *culture* is presented within *Discipleship*.

Granted, while these three initial questions that Bonhoeffer asks his readers do not contain the terms *to follow* or *to imitate* Christ, Peter Frick claims that the questions still function as the theme of the book, despite the absence of words that echo the title of *Discipleship*. For Frick, the questions contain "the substance of the whole work [of *Discipleship*]," as they leave "no doubt

---

[126] Kelly and Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," 1.

[127] Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 129.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Kelly and Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," 3.

that what it means to follow Christ is the key point on almost every page."[130] Even though there is a cultural context with these questions, they were also questions that were deeply personal for Bonhoeffer, as these questions relating Christ to culture were those that he was asking himself at the time. In fact, one of Bonhoeffer's most regularly cited perspectives on the relationship between the church and the world comes from his pen in his *Letters and Papers from Prison.* Bonhoeffer not only reflects on this theme but also speaks of it within the context of *Discipleship*. He writes:

> In the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus* but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being . . . I remember a conversation I had thirteen years ago in America with a young French pastor. We had simply asked ourselves what we really wanted to do with our lives. And he said, I want to become a saint (—and I think it's possible that he did become one). This impressed me very much at the time. Nevertheless, I disagreed with him, saying something like: I want to learn how to have faith. For a long time I did not understand the depth of this antithesis. I thought I myself could learn to have faith by trying to live something like a saintly life. I suppose I wrote *Discipleship* at the end of this path. Today I clearly see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by it. Later on I discovered, and I am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life.[131]

The complexity of Bonhoeffer's thought in these latter moments of his life has been widely discussed among scholars throughout the years.[132] Despite all that could be said of it, the theme of "religionless Christianity" was mentioned explicitly in another one of Bonhoeffer's letters to Bethge just two months prior before this one above was written. In that earlier correspondence,

---

[130] Peter Frick, "The *Imatatio Christi* of Thomas À Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 34.

[131] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, *Volume 8*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 541–542. The selection above is taken from a letter that Bonhoeffer wrote to Eberhard Bethge that is dated July 21, 1944.

[132] Ralf Wüstenberg provides a look into this topic. See Ralf Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Bonhoeffer told Bethge that "I am thinking a great deal about what this religionless Christianity looks like, what form it takes, and I'll be writing you more about it soon."[133] Bonhoeffer's later reflections upon *Discipleship* in this letter above, therefore, come from within a context where Bonhoeffer was ruminating about "religionless Christianity" that indicate that the question of Christ and culture was still plaguing his mind. Of course, interpreters have differed in their outcomes of whether or not Bonhoeffer relegated the church to an "ecclesiastical ghetto" within *Discipleship*.[134] Whatever one thinks of this issue, one must be sure not to anachronistically conceive of Bonhoeffer's perspectives of the relationship between Christ and culture within *Discipleship* from later materials. To be sure, there might be similarities, but Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* era came at an entirely different point in his life compared to the time of his prison letters to Bethge and others.

As far as *Discipleship* is concerned, the Christ and culture question was present for him then, too. All throughout the book, Bonhoeffer is not only asking, but is also responding to what Haddon Willmer indicates is one of Bonhoeffer's recurring questions, which is, "How do *I* live a Christian life in this real world?"[135] In fact, Willmer's synopsis coincides with a statement that Bonhoeffer makes in the first chapter, as he indicates that "our church's predicament is proving more and more clearly to be a question of how we are to live as Christians today."[136] Shortly after

---

[133] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 367. The letter is dated April 30, 1944.

[134] Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 142.

[135] Haddon Willmer, "Costly Discipleship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (New York: Cambridge, 1999), 175.

[136] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 55.

this statement, Bonhoeffer describes *discipleship* (*nachfolge*) as a way of life that is rooted in grace.[137]

Considering that nearly two-thirds of *Discipleship* is an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer presents these initial questions as those which will subsequently receive contextually specific answers in light of this section of the Bible. Since the questions are contextually specific, Bonhoeffer's responses to them throughout the book are also culturally specific as economic materialism, patriotic militarism and ruthless racism are addressed, which were the very same issues that many Christians in Nazi Germany had to deal with in their lives.[138]

Therefore, the questions are not only those which are personal for Bonhoeffer, but are also those which were important for the average German Christian to consider. The editors of *Discipleship* expand upon this picture of the historical background:

> The world of Bonhoeffer's original readers . . . was in open rebellion against the limits that constituted Christian values in a civil society. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer attempts to confront the seductive lure held out to Germany's citizens, asking them to divorce themselves from what Nazi ideology portrayed as the less than fully Germanic world redeemed by Jesus Christ—a world portrayed as "polluted" by subhumans like Jews and gypsies, in addition to those out of favor with the government through their dissenting ways.[139]

Bonhoeffer's own life situation and the personal questions that he was asking within the book account for what Green describes as the autobiographical dimension of *Discipleship*. However, Green admits that this explanation alone does not provide a complete and exhaustive grid for interpreting the entirety of the book. In addition to the autobiographical aspects, Green

---

[137] Ibid., 56.

[138] Kelly and Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, 129.

[139] Kelly and Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," 16.

and others also explore the exegetical, ecclesiastical and political dimensions that are also contained within *Discipleship* and argue that the book should not be decontextualized if one is to truly understand Bonhoeffer's thought and argument.

While each of these dimensions contribute to the various ways that *Discipleship* can be interpreted, the autobiographical dimension, especially in regard to the set of questions addressed early in the book, emphasize that *Discipleship* was an immensely personal project for Bonhoeffer. It was one that also had a special place in the hearts and minds of his students at Finkenwalde,[140] as Bethge claims that "entire sections of his lectures went straight into the book."[141] Not only this, but if Bonhoeffer had the opportunity, he would have dedicated *Discipleship* to his students. In a Christmas letter that circulated in 1937, Bonhoeffer wrote the following to his former students at Finkenwalde:

> Since the book appeared in print, I have often dedicated it in spirit to all of you. That I did not do so explicitly on the title page is due to the fact that I did not want to claim your support for my own thoughts and theology—our community has another foundation.[142]

What this snapshot provides is a reminder that there is a contextually specific situation happening around Bonhoeffer, and that he is personally engaged within it. The questions that he asks early in the book are those which provide the conceptual framework for understanding the remainder of the book. He is not simply writing to the "average German Christian," but as he indicates here, he had his students in mind. His major issue for them is to help them answer the question of what Jesus wants of "us."

---

[140] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 460.

[141] Ibid., 451.

[142] Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition," in *Discipleship*, 303.

While Bonhoeffer does not elaborate on the word *culture* throughout *Discipleship*, the concept of relating Christ to culture—or, in his words, "to us," to *his* culture—is not only present, but serves as "the theme of the book," as Frick indicated. In Niebuhrian terms, *Discipleship* is Bonhoeffer's attempt to relate Christ to culture. Yet, this is not just any culture, but is a very specific one in Germany, with specific recipients in mind.

Hence, Bonhoeffer, in his attempt to relate Christ to culture, introduces *Discipleship* with his own questions that sound very familiar to the ones that Niebuhr later asks in the introduction of *Christ and Culture.* For Niebuhr, "the enduring problem" of relating Christ to culture was "by no means a new one," as he urged his readers to consider that "the repeated struggles of Christians . . . have yielded no single Christian answer."[143] In spite of the critical perspective on Niebuhr, his vision was admittedly to *describe* "typical Christian answers" to this problem, whereas for Bonhoeffer, his goal was admittedly *prescriptive* as he sought to answer the question of "what Jesus wants" for "us" by asking "a question of how we are to live as Christians today."[144]

While Niebuhr introduced his book admittedly to *describe* the "typical Christian answers," this was not Bonhoeffer's goal, as it was "not ultimately important" for Bonhoeffer to sift through "what this or that church leader wants."[145] Bonhoeffer, instead, was gravely concerned for obedience to "the pure word of Jesus,"[146] which involved deconstruction of the "dissonant sounds," the "human, harsh laws," and the "false hopes and consolations" which obscure the

[143] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 2.

[144] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 55.

[145] Ibid., 37.

[146] Ibid.

words of Jesus.[147] Bonhoeffer's concern was not to accommodate Christianity to his culture, but to give solid answers in the concrete moment even if that meant countering the majority of the opinions held by others in his culture.

Hence, even within the first few pages of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer is arguing that his project is not a general systematic text, or what he described as an "academic affair."[148] Bonhoeffer's project, instead, is a critical engagement of relating Christ to culture that reflects his own cultural and existential reality. The initial questions that he asks are not only personal questions, but are those which are representative of the kinds of questions that were being asked (or, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, questions that *should have been* asked) by the German Christian population and especially his previous students.

Beyond this, the theme of *culture* is also contained within Bonhoeffer's usage of *today* as he is using it to describe the behaviors and beliefs that were characteristic of his particular social setting. As previously stated, Bonhoeffer introduces *today* in his initial three questions but it is also contained in his remarks about "our church's predicament" which is a "question of how we are to live as Christians today."[149] He is speaking of the present tense situation happening in Nazi controlled Germany. Even though *today* is not frequently used throughout *Discipleship*, it does, however, appear in scattered places, and his chief concern with using it seems to be tethering out the meaning of faith in his present cultural context.

[147] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37.

[148] Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 153.

[149] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 55.

This is certainly the case in the *Preface* when Bonhoeffer asks the reader, "What could the call to follow Jesus mean today for the worker, the businessman, the farmer, or the solider?"[150] Such a question is an indication that Bonhoeffer is searching for answers of what those three questions mean to the "average" German Christian—that individual who was arguably caught in the crossfire, surrounded by competing voices that often contradicted one another. Out of all those people looking to be heard, Bonhoeffer's question in the midst of their voices is, "Who should be given the attention?" From the onset of the book, Bonhoeffer unabashedly claims that it is not "opinions"[151] that matter, but hearing the "call of Jesus Christ himself"[152] coming through the words of Scripture.

For Bonhoeffer, the call that Jesus gives to his followers in the twentieth century is just as active and living as it was when Jesus walked upon the earth and spoke to his disciples. This is seen in part two of *Discipleship* where Bonhoeffer asks the question, "How, then, does [Jesus'] call to discipleship reach us today?"[153] According to Bonhoeffer, "Jesus was bodily present" to his twelve disciples, and the call that he directed to them was, of course, an audible one, as he said to them, "Follow me."[154] Yet, even though "Jesus no longer walks past me in bodily form" as he did with the twelve, he is also "present with us today, in bodily form and with his word."[155] Therefore, the disciples did not have "an advantage" over individuals living in the twentieth

[150] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 39.

[151] Ibid., 38.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid., 201.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid., 202.

century, for "Christ speaks to us exactly as he spoke to them."[156] Jesus may no longer make footprints in the dirt by walking around the Sea of Galilee, but he is just as active in the world now as he was two millennia ago. This is because Jesus is present with those who are following him.

These serve as merely a few examples of how Bonhoeffer employs *today* throughout *Discipleship.* While its frequency is relatively sparse, only appearing over twenty times or so throughout *Discipleship*, a much more common word that Bonhoeffer uses to describe his cultural situation is *the world.* Compared to the infrequency of *today*, *the world* is replete throughout *Discipleship*. What seems to be significant with Bonhoeffer's usage of *the world* is that he is attempting to echo the language of the New Testament and is concerned with its relevancy for his cultural situation.

According to Bethge, the *Discipleship* phase of Bonhoeffer's life was one where he viewed "the world as a dangerous jungle that had to be traversed."[157] To be sure, this is only a short description of *the world,* but Bethge's depiction of it for Bonhoeffer underscores a significant point about how Bonhoeffer regarded his cultural situation.

Beyond these claims from Bethge, clues to how Bonhoeffer regarded his cultural situation can be seen in the preface of *Discipleship* where Bonhoeffer identifies that those obstructions making Jesus "more difficult"[158] for people to encounter were happening "today" in his own cultural situation. Just a few pages later, in his opening remarks in the first chapter, Bonhoeffer identifies that "cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church" and that it is also happening

---

[156] Ibid.

[157] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 459.

[158] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37.

"today."[159] In other words, what Bonhoeffer regards as the manifestation of "cheap grace" was a present reality happening in his very own midst. For Bonhoeffer, of course, his concept of "cheap grace" is juxtaposed to "costly grace," and while he provides details about what is meant by these often discussed phrases, within his discussion of them he argues that costly grace is that which must be protected from "the world."[160]

Such a juxtaposition presented in this way suggests to the reader that "cheap grace," or that which he regards as "the mortal enemy of our church" not only exists "today," but that it also resides in "the world."[161] In this context, costly grace is "God's holy treasure" that requires protection from cheap grace, which Bonhoeffer considers "the mortal enemy." Based upon the way he describes these terms, it would seem, therefore, that Bonhoeffer is introducing his readers to a dualism, one that would juxtapose "the church" and "the world" throughout the book and would put them at odds with each other. In other words, Bonhoeffer presents an opposition between the two, and one that appears to be irreconcilable. Perhaps this distinction is what has contributed to some interpreters describing the church as functioning as an "ecclesiastical ghetto" within *Discipleship.* But, as we will see, there may be more to Bonhoeffer's terminology than one might suspect, especially if one reads *Discipleship* through American eyes.

At any rate, in a 1936 draft for a catechism, Bonhoeffer wrote, "[the] world [in the Bible] is everything which wants to pull my heart away from God."[162] Based upon this, and the way that he treats the terms in *Discipleship*, it seems that some part of *culture*, or, more precisely, "the world" for Bonhoeffer, is unequivocally that which is in opposition to God. Language like this

[159] Ibid., 43.

[160] Ibid., 45.

[161] Ibid., 43–45.

[162] Ibid., 48.

seems to suggest that Bonhoeffer would urge others to escape culture or *the world* like those who are "against culture." Then again, seen in the broader context of *Discipleship,* Bonhoeffer's description of *the world* has a particular and subtle nuance. Bethge identifies it as the following:

> The world has not disappeared; its dominion is very evident. Yet it would be a mistake to interpret this as Bonhoeffer's attempt to escape from the world. The ghetto of *Discipleship* is not the peaceful backwater of the pietists, nor is it the otherworldliness of the visionaries, neither of whom are particularly loyal to the world. *Discipleship* is a call to battle, it is concentration and hence restriction, so that the entire earth may be reconquered by the infinite message.[163]

As early as the first chapter, Bonhoeffer begins using *the world* repeatedly. At times, it seems that Bonhoeffer intends his readers to assume a completely negative understanding of *the world.* Popular interpretations of *Discipleship* often take this perspective.

For example, Bonhoeffer indicates that it "is inevitable" that a Christian should completely *break* (*bruch*) with his former way of life.[164] According to Bonhoeffer, such a *break* should not be understood as mere emotional resignation, nor should it be regarded as simply an existential parting of ways with the thought patterns and random behaviors that may have represented an individual in the past. Instead, the *break* that Bonhoeffer describes is one that involves a clear, sharp, and external detachment that is analogous to the manner in which Abraham left his life situation upon his calling from God. Bonhoeffer uses the story of Abraham in order to emphasize that the disciple of Jesus is also "prepared to make it visible at any time."[165]

The language of a *break* from culture is not foreign to the way that Niebuhr later regarded the behaviors of those within the "against culture" type. Tolstoy, according to Niebuhr,

---

[163] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 459.

[164] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 96.

[165] Ibid., 97.

performed a *break* with culture.[166] From Niebuhr's perspective, this amounted to Tolstoy's departure from the normative and dominant streams of culture to what Niebuhr describes as a "separated community."[167] Of course, the thematic aspect of "breaking off" from mainstream Christianity was certainly expressed by Kierkegaard in his attacks, as he argued that "the New Testament obliges"[168] people to be disciples of Christ through the imitation of Christ. According to Kierkegaard, since the goals of the state and of "New Testament Christianity" are antithetical to each other, especially in the role of oaths, a "break" is necessary in order to be obedient to Christ.[169] The editors of *Discipleship* note that Bonhoeffer interacted with Kierkegaard's *Journals* on this exact theme.[170]

As for Bonhoeffer, he describes this *break* as one that is absolutely necessary. Disciples of Jesus are to make their *break* that "separates them from the world"[171] because, as he later argues, "being set apart from the world"[172] is a prerequisite to holiness. Similar phrases pertaining to separation are common throughout *Discipleship*, but if they are taken by themselves, and are divorced from their historical context, they can appear to suggest that Bonhoeffer is promoting a perspective similar to the ways that Kierkegaard created a sharp antithesis between "Christendom" and "New Testament Christianity."

---

[166] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 63.

[167] Ibid., 49.

[168] Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 130–131.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 97–98.

[171] Ibid., 94.

[172] Ibid., 254.

Despite the various and seemingly negative instances of *the world* within *Discipleship,* the editors claim that Bonhoeffer's "countercultural perspective"[173] pertaining to *the world* was rather unique to him. As such, this "countercultural perspective" was "not a flight *from* the world, but a struggle to establish a critical church presence *in* the world."[174] In a sense, therefore, this *break* was not so much a deconstruction as it was for Kierkegaard, but rather, for Bonhoeffer, it was an attempt at reformation.

Descriptions from other scholars seem to refute this perspective. For example, Green describes *Discipleship* as Bonhoeffer's "most ecclesiastical and 'anti-world' book," and Gides claims that Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* phase "shares similar themes"[175] with Niebuhr's "against culture" type in that Bonhoeffer "uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty."[176] Gides, therefore, suggests that Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* fits well into Niebuhr's "against culture" type which would put him alongside of individuals such as Tolstoy and Tertullian.

On the other hand, Jennifer McBride challenges this kind of perspective when she claims that Americans typically encounter a problem when reading *Discipleship*—and especially when reading of Bonhoeffer's comments regarding culture or *the world.*[177] What happens, according to McBride, is that the cultural disconnect between now and Nazi Germany makes Bonhoeffer's perspectives almost unintelligible to contemporary Americans. The culture from where Niebuhr

---

[173] Kelly and Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," 16.

[174] Ibid.

[175] David M. Gides, *Pacifism, Just War, and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Church-World Theology and his Changing Forms of Political Thinking and Involvement* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 365.

[176] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 45, quoted in Gides, *Pacifism, Just War, and Tyrannicide*, 365.

[177] Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87–96.

was writing, and the culture from where Bonhoeffer was writing were actually two worlds apart. Due to the vast differences it would seem on the surface that to be "against" culture in one does not necessarily mean the same thing in the other. Critics of Niebuhr have accused him of being optimistic about the role of government and society, whereas Bonhoeffer certainly had a pessimistic perspective about the Nazis and the society they were creating.

In order to demonstrate this sort of cultural disconnect, McBride argues that American readers in particular are susceptible to misinterpret what these seemingly "anti-cultural" remarks of Bonhoeffer entail. The crux of the problem, writes McBride, is one of cultural disconnect when modern readers of *Discipleship* read the book in an ahistorical way and inject a particularly American notion of what is meant by a "countercultural" perspective into Bonhoeffer's thought. Not only this, but reading *Discipleship* through American eyes puts a very American conception on how Bonhoeffer uses the words such as *the church* and *the world.* In order to see Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* more clearly, one must attempt to look at the text with German eyes during the Nazi era, which is the way the book was intended to be read.

This has implications for the Christ and culture discussion. Given the popularity of *Christ and Culture*, and its impact on American culture, could it be that such an assumption of what entails a "countercultural perspective" has been influenced by Niebuhr's presentation of it? When we as Americans hear that term, are we thinking of it in Niebuhr's understanding? Are we thinking of the "radicals" who disconnect themselves from social life? According to Niebuhr's presentation of being "countercultural" in *Christ and Culture*, whenever a Christian is labeled "against culture," or being "counter-cultural," such descriptions undoubtedly carry assumed understandings of what is or what is not implied. And they have arguably negative connotations. While McBride does not address this particular question about Niebuhr, she nevertheless

introduces a problem of interpreting Bonhoeffer's usage of *the world* and understanding his concept of *culture* that seem to be reflective of the many ways that Niebuhr described those who he claimed were "against culture."

For example, in her essay addressing Bonhoeffer's usage of *the world* in *Discipleship*, McBride presents the primary interpretative difficulty of the book as the following:

> For some Christians in the United States . . . feeling rejected by the world is a badge of Christian honor. Read out of context, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on rejection may serve to reinforce a victim mentality present within some segments of North American Christianity that promotes a belief that in our democratic society Christian identity alone necessarily positions Christians as rejected, even persecuted, by the surrounding "secular" culture . . . Certainly, one may find statements in *Discipleship* that discourage an antagonistic stance against the world . . . Still, for a North American audience that tends to view itself as religiously favored and to ground witness in an assumption that Christians are called to be the disseminators of truth and the standard-bearers of morality, Bonhoeffer's language of Christian distinction and worldly separation overpowers his few direct affirmations encouraging positive this-worldly engagement. An ahistorical reading of *The Cost of Discipleship* does little more than communicate a popular formula that Christians are *in* the world but *not of* the world—a pithy saying that nevertheless risks neglecting the central christological point that Christ and the church exist *for* the world . . . Bonhoeffer's message of separation from the world is subordinate to his message of responsible engagement within the world. Bonhoeffer intends *Discipleship* to be read as God's word for his concrete moment, for he opens the preface by asking, "What does [Jesus] want from us *today*?"[178]

Whatever one may mean when someone describes *Discipleship* as a work that is "against culture," "anti-culture," or even "counter-cultural," what is often overlooked within such descriptions is McBride's claim that "Bonhoeffer's message of separation from the world is subordinate to his message of responsible engagement within the world."[179] Context is certainly

[178] Ibid., 91.

[179] Ibid.

king, so what McBride's essay does is to emphasize the necessity of reading *Discipleship* in its own historical context.

In a similar fashion, scholars who have studied Bonhoeffer have argued that historical context involves a wide range of influences, including the autobiographical, theological, ecclesiastical, and political dimensions, among other factors. One influence should not be used against the other.

Pertaining to the autobiographical nature of influence, there are also interpretations within this perspective that seem to indicate that Bonhoeffer may have shifted—or even tweaked—his thought throughout the years, thereby making allowance for scholars to interpret these shifts as distinct phases. Bonhoeffer opens himself up to this kind of interpretation, as he alluded to it in his letter to Bethge near the end of his life. So, an implication of that letter is that Bonhoeffer's thought in regard to relating Christ to culture also underwent some modifications throughout the years.

Along these lines, Bonhoeffer's perspective of relating Christ to culture in *Discipleship*—or, in his terminology—relating *the church* to *the world*—has been argued to have shifted later in *Ethics.* There his perspective is said to have shifted from *Discipleship* where he seemingly indicated that *the church* and *the world* are within two separate realms to his view in *Ethics* where he "vigorously argued against the theological scheme of two spheres."[180] The phrase, "two spheres," certainly brings various interpretations with it. Yet from McBride's perspective, she claims that even Bonhoeffer's alleged theology of "two spheres" is much more complex than it would seem on the surface. Part of its complexity is that in Bonhoeffer's theology within *Discipleship* of relating *the church* to *the world*, Bonhoeffer has a specific historical referent in

[180] Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition," 306.

mind. McBride claims that this "primary audience" of the book was specifically Bonhoeffer's students who lived with him at Finkenwalde. Rather than maintaining that the specific audience was simply the "average" German Christian, McBride narrows the referent down further to the students at Finkenwalde. They had a very unique situation, as they were:

> . . . [E]ntering the Confessing Church's resistance to Nazi ideology and rule, a resistance defined institutionally by its refusal to incorporate into Reich church government. The question concerning God's will in the concrete moment is thus inquiry into how Confessing Church members are to remain defiant towards Nazi totalitarianism as faithful followers of Christ, especially since sustained and radical resistance to the Nazi regime was rare even within the Confessing Church. The "world" to which Bonhoeffer refers is primarily this context of totalitarianism and the seductive powers of security and concession tempting Confessing Christians and holding sway over the national church.[181]

Piecing together McBride's argument has some valuable insight for our purposes. First, as she previously indicated, Bonhoeffer's usage of *the world* is completely misunderstood if one interprets it from a purely American perspective that would otherwise coincide with the way in which Niebuhr described *the world* as being equivalent to "secular society."[182] Second, and closely related to this, is McBride's observation that interpreting Bonhoeffer's call to *break* from *the world* should not be interpreted as Bonheoffer's insistence to *break* from culture or society as a whole, but instead, it is a call to *break* from a specific kind of culture. Such a *break* from this world or this culture is not a physical escape but is a separation *from* being primarily identified with one community to being primarily identified with another, but specifically, what Bonhoeffer describes as a "new community."[183] It is a change in residence of identification. In other words,

[181] McBride, *The Church for the World*, 92.

[182] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 48.

[183] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 98.

this *break* pertains to the source of one's primary identity in that society where Bonhoeffer was living.

To this extent, McBride claims that Bonhoeffer's notion of *break* is not one "from the world itself," but instead, is one "from immediate or direct access to the world."[184] In order to support this claim, McBride gives attention to the following comments made by Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship*:

> There is no genuine gratitude for nation, family, history, and nature without a deep repentance that honors Christ alone above all these gifts. There is no genuine tie to the given realities of the created world; there are no genuine responsibilities in the world without recognition of the break, which already separates us from the world. There is no genuine love for the world except the love with which God has loved the world in Jesus Christ.[185]

For Bonhoeffer, the biblical patriarch Abraham is a model of what his notion of the *break* entails. Like the disciples, Abraham also made a "visible" break from his former way of life as he responded to God's call. Abraham "receives the call as it is given."[186] Similar to the situation of Bonhoeffer's own time—or what he described as "today" —Abraham is not one to confuse God's calling with those "dissonant sounds, so many human, harsh laws, and so many false hopes and consolations"[187] like those Germans of Bonhoeffer's time were encountering, as Abraham "does not try to interpret [the calling], not does he spiritualize it." Instead, Abraham "takes God at God's word and is prepared to obey."[188] Abraham, in turn, shuns any kind of explanation that would otherwise influence him not to take the call of God seriously.

---

[184] McBride, *The Church for the World*, 93.

[185] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 96.

[186] Ibid., 97.

[187] Ibid., 37.

[188] Ibid., 97.

Abraham did not allegorize or spiritualize the call, nor did he explain it away. He obeyed the call "literally," according to Bonhoeffer, and after his testing, Abraham was "permitted to go back to live in the same world he had lived in before."[189] On the external level, "everything remained the same," except that "everything had to go through Christ."[190]

For Bonhoeffer, then, as McBride points out, the *break* comes "not from the world itself, but from immediate or direct access to the world."[191] In other words, the *break* is from engaging the world apart from Christ.

To this extent, the *break* is not the goal. Neither is the goal simply to venture into the "new community" that Bonhoeffer describes. Rather, as McBride indicates, Bonhoeffer argues that Christ the mediator leads the church *back* into the world, so going back into it is the goal of the *break*.

For Bonhoeffer, discipleship or *nachfolge* is, at its foundation, inseparably connected with repentance. According to McBride, Bonhoeffer posits a paradox with this theme, as "Christians turn away from the world in order that they may turn toward Christ the mediator, who then leads them back into the midst of this-worldly reality."[192]

Due to the complexity of interpreting every instance of how Bonhoeffer regards *the world* in *Discipleship*, McBride admits that her interpretation does not end the discussion, since Bonhoeffer uses *the world* in various ways repeatedly throughout *Discipleship.* Hers is merely a guide to help readers and students of Bonhoeffer receive a general idea.

---

[189] Ibid., 98.

[190] Ibid.

[191] McBride, *The Church for the World*, 93.

[192] Ibid., 93.

Nevertheless, McBride's perspective seems to avoid the extremes of completely jettisoning autobiographical and historical contexts or becoming completely slavish by using context as a transparency to interpret every instance of how Bonhoeffer describes *the world* in *Discipleship.*

Despite any nuances that may remain, however, McBride's general thesis that "the 'world' to which Bonhoeffer refers is primarily this context of totalitarianism and the seductive powers of security and concession tempting Confessing Christians and holding sway over the national church" is narrow enough to help one to see that he has a certain kind of culture in mind in his attempts of relating Christ to culture in *Discipleship*. This kind of culture is not "secular society," as Americans might tend to think. Culture, for Bonhoeffer, is that historically non-repeatable power or influence of the Nazis that demanded ultimate allegiance from people. It was that which could have never been accepted at any point in time for Bonhoeffer, nor could any concessions be made to embrace it partially. In this sense, Bonhoeffer was completely against it, whether it be from the Nazis or any other group that acted like them. But this certainly does not suggest that he would have necessarily been against other cultures that existed in different geographical locations during his own time. Instead, what is being emphasized is that Bonhoeffer was completely *against* a particular kind of culture: the culture of Nazi totalitarianism.

Bonhoeffer and Christendom in *Discipleship*

Like the previous discussion of Bonhoeffer and culture, the discussion of how the topic of Christendom unfolds within *Discipleship* is also a bit complex and also presents at least a couple of interpretative challenges. As previously indicated, even though the word *culture* is absent from *Discipleship*, its theme is nevertheless replete throughout its pages. The previous section provided an argument that even though the word *culture* is not contained within *Discipleship*,

thematic aspects of what is otherwise contained within the word are replete throughout the book. Much of the same holds true for the topic of *Christendom* within *Discipleship*.

In regard to the word *Christendom,* it should be pointed out that it is absent from the English translation of *Discipleship.* However, its lack of inclusion in the book is not an indication that Bonhoeffer was not addressing thematic aspects of the word itself. As we will see, Bonhoeffer was very much engaged with a certain understanding of this word.

Yet, there is difficulty with translation issues, as even though *Christendom* does not appear in the English translation of the text, the German word *Christenheit* appears in a few places. In English editions of Bonhoeffer's writings*, Christenheit* is often translated as *Christianity*, whereas in other instances, it even appears as *Christendom.* This discrepancy is the first problem of the interpretative challenge.

The second interpretative challenge is similar. Rather than anachronistically importing contemporary definitions of *Christendom* into the text of *Discipleship*, a much more responsible method of interpretation seems to allow for Bonhoeffer himself to provide a definition of the word, first from the text itself, and if it is not available there, then from his other writings.

Then again, even looking at the ways that Bonhoeffer used the word outside of *Discipleship* is problematic, as it will be shown that he spoke of the term differently throughout his writing career.

First, outside of *Discipleship*, one of the earliest references to Bonhoeffer's usage of *Christendom* comes from a sermon that he delivered in English in 1930 while he was in New York. In the text, Bonhoeffer not only uses the English word *Christendom*, but he also provides a precise definition of it:

> If you ask me: What is Christendom? —I answer: Christendom is the great congregation of people who humble themselves before God and who put all their

> hope and faith in the love and the help of God. Christendom is a community in which people stand for each other, as a brother stands for his brother. Christendom is one great people composed of persons of every country in concord in their faith and their love because there is One God, One Lord, One Spirit, One hope. That is the marvelous mystery of the people of God. Above all differences of race, nationality, and custom there is an invisible community of the children of God. There each one prays for the others, be he or she American or German or African; here each one loves the others without reservation.[193]

According to John Anthony Moses, the elections of September 1930 that brought 107 Nazi party members into the Reichstag convinced Bonhoeffer that war was on the horizon if the Nazis continued to grow in popularity within Germany. As such, Moses writes, "the only way to avoid this was to mobilize world opinion for peace by means of the ecumenical movement" and that this was "Bonhoeffer's all-consuming project until 1937."[194] Moses argues that the cultural situation that was happening around the fall of 1930 "compelled" Bonhoeffer to concentrate more on ecumenical issues, which contributed to the way that Bonhoeffer thought of *Christendom*. Therefore, by taking that into consideration at this point in Bonhoeffer's life, it seems that he possessed a seemingly favorable perspective towards *Christendom* and its possibilities for uniting Christians worldwide.

Three years before the sermon above was drafted, Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* was published in 1927, and in it, Bonhoeffer also speaks favorably of *Christendom*. At one point, he argues that Ernst Troeltsch provided a sociological "insight" (*Erkenntnisse*) into what the English version translates as "Christianity."[195] In the German text, however, Bonhoeffer's word

---

[193] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: Harper, 1990): 188, quoted in John Anthony Moses, *The Reluctant Revolutionary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 82.

[194] Moses, *The Reluctant Revolutionary*, 82–83.

[195] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, *Volume 1*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 26; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine Dogmatische Untersuchung zur*

(continued next page)

for *Christianity* is *Christentum*. Troeltsch's *Social Teachings* is then cited, and the part that Bonhoeffer selects from it is that "repeatedly we are reminded that Christendom is a great family." In the German edition of the text, *Christenheit* is used in place of Troeltsch's English word of *Christendom.* The implication seems to be that Bonhoeffer is regarding *Christentum* and *Christenheit* as synonymous terms, even though the translators of *Sanctorum Communio* differentiate the two with the citation from Troeltsch.

Similarly, in Bonhoeffer's address to the Fanø Conference in 1934, he speaks of ecumenical *Christendom* to "call upon her Lord and ask his guidance."[196] While there is a corresponding German translation of the text, what is particularly interesting about this address is that the editors of the English edition indicate that it is "possible" that Bonhoeffer prepared the English translation of it himself. As such, the German translation has *Christenheit* as well as Bonhoeffer's (presumably) own translation of it into English that renders that word as *Christendom.*[197] Consequently, the implication is that Bonhoeffer regards *Christenheit* and *Christendom* to be synonymous terms, and he speaks of the concept again in a favorable way.

These instances are important to consider because Bonhoeffer's earlier tendency of using *Christenheit* and *Christentum* as interchangeable words seems to slightly shift later in his life. While it does not appear that he ever juxtaposes *Christenheit* or *Christendom* with a Kierkegaardian phrase such as "New Testament Christianity," he does, however, seem to take a more critical approach to *Christenheit* especially in his later years compared with the remarks he

---

Soziologie der Kirche, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, *Volume 1*, ed. Joachim von Soosten (Munich: Kaiser, 1986), 182–183.

[196] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, *Volume 13*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 302.

[197] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, *Volume 13*, ed. Hans Goedeking, Martin Heimbucher, and Hans-Walter Schleicher (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1994), 298.

makes in his earlier writings. This discussion is important because Bonhoeffer had access to Kierkegaard's attacks where he juxtaposed "Christendom" with "New Testament Christianity."

At any rate, Bonhoeffer introduces a rather discreet modification in his terminology that becomes evident in an essay that he wrote in 1939 titled "Essay about Protestantism in the United States."[198] Here, Bonhoeffer provides his own admittedly European-based interpretation of how *Christentum* has unfolded throughout the centuries in the United States. In several places throughout the essay, he juxtaposes the "churches of the Reformation" with the "denominations in America," and begins his paper by stating that "American Christendom (*Christenheit*) has no central organization, no common confession, no common ritual practices, no common church history, no common ethical, social, or political principles."[199] On the other hand, the "churches of the Reformation" exhibit many of these characteristics whereas the "denominations in America" simply do not. Such a picture of what Bonhoeffer calls American *Christenheit* is remarkably different than the ways that Christianity has been culturally manifested in Europe.

Granted, while Bonhoeffer presents sharp comparisons between what he describes as American *Christenheit* and even American *Christentum* with the churches of the Reformation, he does not juxtapose *Christenheit* with *Christentum* within this essay. As the editors of the volume note, Bonhoeffer uses *Christenheit* (translated as *Christendom* in this essay) throughout the essay in such a way as to refer to the larger unity of all Christians, or that grouping of believing people that is transnational and transcultural. Conversely, when Bonhoeffer speaks of *Christentum* in

[198] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, *Volume 15*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, and Scott A. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 438–462.

[199] Ibid., 440.

this essay, the editors note that he "refers more to the belief or faith itself."[200] This is, therefore, an indication that Bonhoeffer's terminology has undergone a transition, and that he is aware of it, even if it is remarkably slight.

As a result, when Bonhoeffer speaks of "American Christendom," the predicate "American" is functioning as a signal denoting a certain kind of cultural expression of the deeper *Christentum* that provides the unifying foundation. That foundation is the same for both America and Germany, as Bonhoeffer claims that the two have "the same word, the same commandment, the same promise, the same office, [and] the same church-community (*Gemeinde*) of Jesus Christ."[201] The decisive split between the two, however, is that American Protestantism lacks the Reformation that was granted to the churches of the Reformation in Europe,[202] and so, Bonhoeffer concludes the essay by indicating that the "decisive task today"[203] is the necessity of conversation between the churches in American and Europe. While his essay is largely a historical analysis of American *Christenheit*, at least part of his motivation for writing it seems to relate *Christentum* to "today," or, to relate Christ to culture.

At other times of Bonhoeffer's life, he does juxtapose the broader *Christentum* with at least two other words. In a 1933 letter to his grandmother, Bonhoeffer writes that the battle is between "*Germanismus oder Christentum*" and 1934, he postulates the choice of being a "National Socialist or [a] Christian" to Bishop Ammundsen.[204] Based upon the extant writings of

---

[200] Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, 440.

[201] Ibid., 439.

[202] Ibid., 461–462.

[203] Ibid., 462.

[204] Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 85.

Bonhoeffer, he does not, however, seem to have ever juxtaposed *Christenheit* with *Christentum* in the Kierkegaardian way.

Despite this absence, Larry Rasmussen suggests that Bonhoeffer continues to display characteristics up to and throughout *Ethics* that indicate that he is still committed to working out a theology for what Rasmussen describes as a "Christian civilization." It is not until Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* where he began to completely distance himself from this perspective.[205] Yet, despite Rasmussen's analysis, Bonhoeffer provides a critique of *Christenheit* in his *Ethics* that is beyond his earlier, much more favorable perspectives. To this extent, Bonhoeffer describes "two grave misunderstandings" that are "found throughout the entire history of Christendom (*Christenheit*)," claiming that:

> The first misunderstanding considers Jesus Christ to be the founder of a new ethical ideology that must be applied to the historical reality. The second misunderstanding considers Jesus Christ only as the divine sanction of everything that exists. The first case gives rise to an eternal conflict between the necessities of historical action and the "ethic of Jesus." In the second case, everything that exists is addressed without any conflict as though it were Christian.[206]

Immediately after these remarks, Bonhoeffer claims that "sometimes an 'ethic of Jesus' appears that is detached from the faith in God's becoming human in Christ and the reconciliation of the world with God through Christ," which, for Bonhoeffer, culminates in the ways that the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted throughout history. On one side of the spectrum, according to Bonhoeffer, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount lead either to "religious enthusiasm and revolution" or they become privatized, with the result that the Sermon on the

---

[205] Ibid., 85–86.

[206] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, *Volume 6*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 229; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, *Volume 6*, ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1992), 228–229.

Mount becomes detached from "dealing with the historical world." Such "platitudes," as Bonhoeffer describes them, are also those that "prevail throughout Christendom (*Christenheit*)."

Up to now, this survey on Bonhoeffer's usage of *Christentum* and *Christenheit* reveals that Bonhoeffer does not have a fixed definition of the way that he regarded the two words. If other aspects of Bonhoeffer's thought have been argued to have shifted throughout his career, this broad survey seems to suggest that the ways that he addressed *Christentum* and *Christenheit* should also be regarded as being within phases that arguably underwent transitions throughout his writings, even though they are slight.

As far as the source material of *Discipleship* is concerned, it is important to note that Bethge indicates that "entire sections of his lectures [at Finkenwalde] went straight into the book."[207] Interestingly, there are further clues to help us in some of these notes that did not make their way into *Discipleship*. At one point, Bonhoeffer makes the following claim:

> . . . [I]n his own way Luther confirms Constantine's covenant with the church. As a result, a minimal ethic prevailed. Luther of course wanted a complete ethic for everyone, not only for monastic order. Thus the existence of the Christian became the existence of the citizen. The nature of the church vanished into the invisible realm. But in this way the New Testament message was fundamentally misunderstood, inner-worldliness became a principle.[208]

What is particularly striking is that Bonhoeffer indicates that dramatic changes occurred in the history of Christianity following Constantine. According to Bonhoeffer, Constantine's "covenant with the church" produced a "minimal ethic" which presumably suggests that the ethics of Jesus were accommodated to the culture, thereby granting them social acceptability. In addition, there were further consequences that followed Constantine's reign from Bonhoeffer's

[207] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 451.

[208] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 87.

perspective, including that being a citizen of a so-called Christian empire implied that individuals living within it were assumed to be Christians. This meant that the visibility of the church faded, which led to "the New Testament message" being "fundamentally misunderstood." According to Bonhoeffer, the essence of the Christian faith drastically changed after Constantine's reign.

Bonhoeffer's comments here are extremely helpful, especially for our purposes. Even though he does not explicitly mention *Christentum* or *Christenheit* in this section, his description of the changes that have supposedly existed ever since the reign of Constantine are those very same changes which have become culturally manifested throughout the years. They are not confined to theological abstractions, or limited to the life of rituals, but are those which have affected society and the very heart of Christianity itself. To this extent, they are those changes that diverted from "the New Testament message" and are those which had a significant impact on the theme of Christ and culture. Based on these comments, it would seem that Bonhoeffer included the theme of Constantianism in his writings.

That is to say, in his notes, Bonhoeffer's comments indicate that the "covenant" that Constantine made with the church not only changed what people believed, but that it also led to a change in the various ways that people acted out those beliefs. For one, being a Christian and being a citizen became interchangeable and coterminous, so there was no need for a Christian to be distinguished from others within society in any way.

While these comments are, admittedly, not contained within *Discipleship*, they are part of those very same notes that Bethge indicated were part of the collection that contributed to the book. So, since our main objective of this section is to interpret the way that Bonhoeffer presented Christendom in *Discipleship*, these comments can provide us with clues about what to look for in the text.

The first instance of either of the two words appears in the preface of *Discipleship.* There, Bonhoeffer describes *Christentum* and simply claims that it means "following Jesus."[209] What is particularly striking about this definition is that within the first two pages of the first chapter, part of Bonhoeffer's description of "cheap grace" involves living a kind of life where there is "no difference between [the] Christian life and [the] worldly life,"[210] so there is no "necessary renunciation" of anything required, nor is following Jesus necessary. Such "grace" provides comfort, but its consolation is misleading.

The implication is set forth already: where there is no discipleship, there is no genuine *Christentum*. And this *Christentum*, for Bonhoeffer, is not simply an "idea" or a "myth,"[211] either; this *Christentum* involves following the living Christ. His presence is a reality. As Bonhoeffer writes, "Christianity (*Christentum*) without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ."[212] These comments, according to the editors of *Discipleship*, owe their influence to Kierkegaard, as he similarly indicates that one of the qualities of *Christendom* is that "discipleship . . . really provides the guarantee that Christianity does not become poetry, mythology, and abstract idea."[213] We know that Bonhoeffer had this text from Kierkegaard in his possession, and that he had made underlining marks on these words.[214]

---

[209] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, *Volume 4*, ed. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1994), 23.

[210] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 44.

[211] Ibid., 59.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Ibid.

[214] Ibid.

What is the significance of this? For one, not only does Bonhoeffer's concept of discipleship owe at least *some* of its influence to Kierkegaard, but so does his notion of *Christentum*, since Bonhoeffer indicates that genuine *Christentum* involves discipleship, and where there is no discipleship, there is no *Christentum.* Christianity is lost without discipleship.

This theme continues at other places throughout *Discipleship.* Nearly three chapters later, in "Discipleship and the Cross," Bonhoeffer returns to the theme of following Jesus. In this short chapter, Bonhoeffer describes the necessity of suffering as part of discipleship, and that by suffering for the sake of Jesus, his followers become participants in the crucifixion.[215] To this extent, the suffering that comes into the life of the disciple is not "suffering that stems from natural existence," or suffering that comes by surprise, but it is a suffering that "comes from being Christian."[216] Of course, the theme of suffering was a necessary aspect of what Kierkegaard regarded as "New Testament Christianity," as not only does he combine the themes of suffering and discipleship, but he does it in a way as to make them inseparable. According to Kierkegaard:

> What Christianity wants is . . . the following of Christ. What man does not want is suffering, least of all the kind of suffering which is properly the Christian sort, suffering at the hands of men. So he dispenses with "following," and consequently with suffering, the peculiarly Christian suffering . . .[217]

The editors do not indicate that this section of *Discipleship* has Kierkegaardian influence. However, considering that Bonhoeffer had a version of *Attack upon Christendom* in his possession,[218] these two ways of describing Christianity are extremely similar even though they

---

[215] Ibid., 85.

[216] Ibid., 86.

[217] Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 123.

[218] Christiane Tietz states that Bonhoeffer's copy was titled *Sören Kierkegaards agitatorische Schriften und*

(continued next page)

are also reflective of the theme of suffering found throughout the Gospels themselves. As for the precise wording that Bonhoeffer uses, there is no way that he could have missed Kierkegaard's description if he had possession of the book and interacted with it as much as scholars claim he did. Kierkegaard juxtaposes various themes of Christendom with "New Testament Christianity" (or some descriptions like it) very frequently.

So, Bonhoeffer seems to echo Kierkegaard here, as Bonhoeffer describes suffering as the "identifying mark" of the disciple and that those who "do not want to give their lives in suffering and being rejected by people" are those who are not disciples.[219]

In addition, Bonhoeffer claims that there is a pseudo-Christian persona, or what he describes as a *Christianness* when one rejects suffering as an essential condition of discipleship. *Christianness*, in other words, is really not being "Christian" at all. Bonhoeffer claims that "A Christianness (*Christlichkeit*) that no longer took discipleship seriously remade the gospel into only the solace of cheap grace."[220] For Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship*, therefore, not only does genuine *Christentum* not exist where there is no discipleship, but *Christentum* without discipleship is related to those false prophets who are an otherwise fraudulent expression of what amounts to being Christian. Likewise, Kierkegaard in his *Attack upon Christendom* describes the "hypocrites" as those who "play Christianity" but who do not "suffer for the doctrine."[221]

Aufsätze: 1851 bis 1855. See Christiane Tietz, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Standing 'in the Tradition of Paul, Luther, Kierkegaard, in the Tradition of Genuine Christian Thinking'," in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: German Protestant Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 59–60.

[219] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 89.

[220] Ibid., 86.

[221] Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 121–122.

Christianness (*Christlichkeit*) is false Christianity for Bonhoeffer, where the light does not and cannot shine.[222] It is elsewhere described as masquerading as a "cloak of innocence," hidden underneath a mask. It could even be a prophet or a preacher with convincing "appearances, words, and deeds."[223] Bonhoeffer indicates that the counterfeit may not even know that he himself is the one who is deceived. His self-deception is that deep and pervasive. But disciples of Jesus have confidence, as Bonhoeffer claims that Jesus liberates his true disciples from such fears of being deceived because their obedience to him will reveal the true status of their hearts.

If one thinks that the theme of obedience may yield "countless [interpretive] possibilities" as Bonhoeffer claims, he maintains that such an individual should direct his attention to the Sermon on the Mount, as there, "Jesus knows only one possibility: simply go and obey."[224] There is no confusion. Disciples are called to take Jesus at his word. The Sermon on the Mount for Bonhoeffer is not a mere "ideal,"[225] but is simply meant to be acted upon in obedience.

As the editors of *Discipleship* note, the theme of obedience to Christ, which is one that is inextricably bonded to the gift of faith, is the recurring theme throughout the book.[226] Such an observation resonates with the sparsely scattered instances of *Christentum* in *Discipleship*, as nearly all of its appearances fall within discussions pertaining to obedience. Therefore, true Christianity, according to Bonhoeffer, produces obedience, and obedience is a necessary condition, otherwise one has possession of a pseudo-faith or "cheap grace."

---

[222] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 113. There, Bonhoeffer writes, "the criterion for Christianity (*Christlichkeit*) is considered to be that the light should *not* shine."

[223] Ibid., 177.

[224] Ibid., 181.

[225] Ibid.

[226] Kelly and Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," 5.

While faith in Christ is assumed within Bonhoeffer's notion of *Christentum* throughout *Discipleship*, obedience to Christ is a necessary corollary, as it cannot be separated from it in order for *Christentum* to truly be *Christentum.* Part of problem, again, as Bonhoeffer claims, is that the majority of people within his culture are not listening to Jesus, but are, instead, becoming entangled in the "dissonant sounds" that have "so many human, harsh laws."[227] On the other hand, "when holy scripture speaks of following Jesus," Bonhoeffer maintains, "it proclaims that people are free from all human rules."[228] In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer juxtaposes what is happening with all of the uncertainties of "today" with the very ancient, but living words of Jesus.

The consequences of *not* taking the words of Jesus seriously are dire. According to Bonhoeffer, consequences have already occurred throughout history:

> The expansion of Christianity (*Christentum*) and the increasing secularization of the church caused the awareness of costly grace to be gradually lost. The world was Christianized; grace became common property of a Christian world (*christenlichen Welt*). It could be had cheaply. But the Roman church did keep a remnant of that original awareness. It was decisive that monasticism did not separate from the church and that the church had the good sense to tolerate monasticism. Here, on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace includes discipleship was preserved. People left everything they had for the sake of Christ and tried to follow Jesus' strict commandments through daily exercise. Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity (*Verweltlichung des Christentum*), against the cheapening of grace. But because the church tolerated this protest and did not permit it to build up to a final explosion, the church relativized it.[229]

Even though these comments appear early in *Discipleship,* they nevertheless spur Bonhoeffer into a scathing critique of how an increasingly secularized *Christentum*

---

[227] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37.

[228] Ibid., 39.

[229] Ibid., 46–47.

accommodated itself to *the world*. The "costly grace" that Bonhoeffer spoke of became a grace that eroded into a "principle," which, for Bonhoeffer, is said to have become a "new law" that "neither helps nor liberates" people.[230] Bonhoeffer admits that surely people and *the world* itself have "become Christian"[231] under this kind of grace, but in order to have become this kind of Christian, discipleship itself had to be forfeited. It became something else, something not Christian. In other words, for Bonhoeffer, *Christentum* without *nachfolge* is really not *Christentum* at all, even though this sort of cultural representation of *Christentum* without *nachfolge* was the most common expression of *Christentum* throughout his culture.

It is precisely within this context that Bonhoeffer seems to have been remarkably influenced by Kierkegaard. When Bonhoeffer argues that Luther left the monastery and went back "to the world," and that it was the "sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity," his language has a Kierkegaardian echo to it as this "attack" that Bonhoeffer describes is a "frontal assault (*Angriff frontal*)."[232] As the editors of *Discipleship* indicate, almost identical language is used by Kierkegaard when he spoke of Luther's action as a "direct attack (*direkten Angriff*)" where "Luther rescued 'discipleship (*nachfolge*), the imitation of Christ' from a fantastic misunderstanding."[233] Kelly not only claims that Bonhoeffer was dependent on Kierkegaard at this point, but offers an interpretation of it:

> The unfortunate result of that "misunderstanding," against which Bonhoeffer, following Kierkegaard, inveighed was that the error proclaiming justification without works was as corrupting as good works without the grace of justification. Christians

[230] Ibid., 53.

[231] Ibid., 50.

[232] Ibid., 48.

[233] Ibid.

> are not called to slink into the shadows of the hiding places provided by the power brokers of this world for those who dare not live as Christ intended.[234]

This seems to be Bonhoeffer's point: when he speaks of Luther leaving the monastery, his argument is that Luther was not liberated from following Jesus, but that his liberation came from following Jesus *in the world* even though it was one that was very hostile to the original message of *Christentum.*[235] Consequently, in this initial section of *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer begins using *the world* very frequently. While he is not specifically addressing *Christenheit*, his description of *the world* involves descriptions where the "whole world has become 'Christian' under [cheap] grace"[236] which has that very peculiar Kierkegaardian ring where the very notion of a "Christian world" is considered to be a complete absurdity to Kierkegaard.[237] Bonhoeffer denounces the very same notion, even though it is empirically the case. Europe itself was a "Christian" land. But where was *nachfolge*? It was non-existent. And so, *Christentum* itself was an illusion.

It should be emphasized that Bonhoeffer does not explicitly denounce this cultural shift in Kierkegaardian terminology by pejoratively describing it as *Christenheit*, but this negative description of the transition away from the era of the New Testament into a state of corruption has the Kierkegaardian theme of Christendom. As Elrod argues, Kierkegaard did not merely regard *Christendom* as the state church, but described it as:

> . . . [T]he modern liberal state which is legitimated and sanctioned by religion in the form of the Danish church. Christendom is the fall of life from the high plane of ethics to the aesthetic view of life, where pleasure is conceived of as the highest

---

[234] Geffrey B. Kelly, "Kierkegaard as 'Antidote' and as Impact on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of Christian Discipleship," in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 155.

[235] Ibid., 147.

[236] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 50.

[237] Kierkegaard states this in various places. See Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 33, 149, 189.

> good. Christendom is the legitimating of the political pursuit of one's private interests devoid of ethical obligation to the other.[238]

If Elrod is correct, and Christendom had its own nuances for Kierkegaard, then this is not an indication that it had the same meaning and nuances for Bonhoeffer. As I argued earlier, *Christenheit* up to this point in Bonhoeffer's life had a very positive tone as it usually seemed to have fallen within the context of discussions pertaining to the unity of believers throughout the world. Kierkegaard's usage of *Christendom*, however, is described in terms of a negative cultural manifestation of what "New Testament Christianity" plummeted into decades after its origin. Kierkegaard, therefore, speaks of *Christendom* negatively. He does not speak of it with any favor or optimism.

With Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, *Christenheit* is used in a very similar way to how he understood it years earlier when he claimed that "Christendom is that great congregation of people who humble themselves before God and who put all their hope and faith in the love and help of God." [239] This is evident near the end of *Discipleship* when Bonhoeffer mentions Luther again, yet this time Bonhoeffer claims:

> [Luther's] return rather was meant as a protest and criticism of the secularization of Christianity (*Verweltlichung des Christentums*) within the monastic life. By calling Christians (*Christenheit*) back into the world, Luther in fact calls them to become unworldly in the true sense. Luther's call to return into the world always was a call to become a part of the visible church-community (*sichtbaren Gemeinde*) of the incarnate Lord.[240]

The same feel is captured when Bonhoeffer speaks of *Christenheit* a few pages later, but there, he regards *Christians* and *Christendom* (*Christenheit*) as synonymous words. Specifically,

---

[238] John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 78.

[239] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 188.

[240] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 242; Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 258.

the way that he does this is when he writes of "a world that has become entirely anti-Christian" when:

> In the end, Christians (*Christen*) are thus left with no other choices but to escape from the world or to go to prison. But when they (*Christenheit*) have been deprived of their last inch of space here on earth, the end will be near.[241]

Out of the few instances of *Christenheit* that appear throughout *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer describes the word quite unlike the way Kierkegaard spoke of it during his attacks. There are at least a couple reasons for this perspective. First, Bonhoeffer does not juxtapose *Christenheit* with "New Testament Christianity" in the manner that Kierkegaard did repeatedly. Secondly, out of the few places where *Christenheit* appears in the book, Bonhoeffer simply uses it in the sense to convey something like *Christians.* Due to the differences in terminology, one should not assume that Bonhoeffer's critiques of his culture amounted to the same kind of attacks that Kierkegaard launched against the church in his day. So by itself, Bonhoeffer's description of the words *Christenheit* and *Christentum* does not have any similarities with Kierkegaard's usage of *Christendom* in his *Attack upon Christendom.*

However, if we think of the way that Kierkegaard regularly addresses *Christendom* in his *Attack upon Christendom*, then the corollary of that seems to closely parallel Bonhoeffer's notion of *the world.* This is especially true where Bonhoeffer speaks of the necessity of a *break* from *the world.*[242] Kierkegaard wanted to *break* from *Christendom*; for Bonhoeffer, the *break* was from *the world.* And for both of them, it was a point of no return.

Bonhoeffer's predicament was in the midst of a particular culture—*the world* as he called it—that had tremendous power and influence, one where *the world* was "totalitarianism and the

---

[241] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 247; Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 263.

[242] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 96–97.

seductive powers of security and concession tempting Confessing Christians and holding sway over the national church," as McBride indicated. But as I concluded in the previous section, Bonhoeffer had a certain kind of referent involved with his usage of *the world*, and it may very well be closely related to that kind of culture that Kierkegaard spoke of when he blasted Christendom. It was a corrupt power. Yet Bonhoeffer seemed to have been much more optimistic about the possibility of Christendom being redeemed, so his goal was a project of reformation, not deconstruction, as in the case with Kierkegaard.

So far, it would seem that Bonhoeffer with his church and world distinction is incredibly unique in his attempts of relating Christ to culture. Bonhoeffer can separate *the world* and *the church* without blurring the distinctions between the two. At the same time, he can hold an optimistic view about Christendom—or his unique culture—of being redeemed.

Bonhoeffer and Christology in *Discipleship*

In this final section, I will specifically lay out the ways that Bonhoeffer's Christology of presence contributes to his overall argument in *Discipleship*. The uniqueness of his Christology forms the foundation as to how he relates Christ to his particular culture.

Before delving into *Discipleship*, however, I shall investigate some of Bonhoeffer's final reflections. As his life was coming to an end, he confided to Eberhard Bethge that he had been in the midst of a continual struggle with a vexing question that had plagued him for years. He included this sentiment in his letter to his friend:

> What might surprise or perhaps even worry you would be my theological thoughts and where they are leading, and here is where I really miss you very much. I don't know anyone else with whom I can talk about them and arrive at some clarity. What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity (*Christentum*), or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words—whether with theological or with pious words—is past, as is the age of inwardness and of conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether. We are approaching

> a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" aren't really practicing that at all; they presumably mean something quite different by "religious."[243]

Without a doubt, Bonhoeffer's reference to "religionless Christianity" has been interpreted in various ways throughout the years. However, roughly twenty years after Bonhoeffer wrote these reflections, Bethge claimed that the "isolated use" of this famous phrase of Bonhoeffer's "obscures all that he wanted to tell us about the living God."[244] The significance of Bethge's comments function as a reminder for interpreters to look at Bonhoeffer within his historical context, especially when one considers that there seems to be no shortage of ways that interpreters have applied this concept of "religionless Christianity" to all sorts of theological arguments in the past several decades.

For now, if I am able to bypass the reference to "religionless Christianity," and instead focus upon the question that Bonhoeffer raises, it seems that the question Bonhoeffer presents is actually given in two parts: the first one is, "what is Christianity?" and the second is, "who is Christ for us today?" As the letter indicates, these questions were regularly asked by him, perhaps until the very last days of his life. Yet, they are also the kind of questions that reverberate back into the previous years of his life, especially during the years that contributed to *Discipleship*.

An example of this is that the theme of the first part of the question is specifically raised by Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* where he writes, "our church's predicament is proving more and

---

[243] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 362.

[244] Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor*, *Martyr*, *Prophet*, *Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 466.

more clearly to be a question of how we are to live as Christians today."[245] Such a statement as this indicates that Bonhoeffer does not ask his question apart from considering how Christianity is to be applied to his cultural moment. Yet, even before this question was raised, Bonhoeffer made it clear within the *Preface* that his concern for writing was not simply to probe into abstractions *about* Christianity, but instead, he makes it clear that he is interested in applying Christianity to "today" for such people as "the worker, the businessman, the famer, or the solider."[246] In other words, Bonhoeffer is interested in the real-life application of "understanding grace and discipleship."[247] Based upon his letter to Bethge years later, it seems to have been a very personal question for Bonhoeffer, but the way that he applied it throughout *Discipleship* made himself function as a representative for others. Bonhoeffer did not seem to think that he was alone with his questions of relating Christ to culture.

Of course, the way that his answer to the enduring problem unfolds is complex, as much of it directly pertains to how the church and individual Christians ought to express obedience to Jesus. However, as I indicated in the previous section, the way that Bonhoeffer primarily approached this big theme of relating Christianity to "today" in *Discipleship* was to link genuine Christianity with discipleship. It could be said for Bonhoeffer that true Christianity entails obedient discipleship. Without the former, the latter will not exist, and conversely, without the latter, the former will not exist. Discipleship is necessary for Christianity to be Christianity.

---

[245] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 55.

[246] Ibid., 39.

[247] Ibid., 55.

The second part of the question that Bonhoeffer asks in his letter to Bethge can also be found in *Discipleship.* In fact, within the first words of the book, Bonhoeffer indicates that he will be delving into the topic of "who is Christ for us today?" when he writes:

> In times of church renewal holy scripture naturally becomes richer in content for us. Behind the daily catchwords and battle cries needed in the Church Struggle, a more intense, questioning search arises for the one who is our sole concern, for Jesus himself. What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. Rather, we want to know what Jesus wants.[248]

As I have argued throughout this chapter, these initial questions that Bonhoeffer is asking in *Discipleship* are those that directly pertain to relating Christ to culture. In addition, it should be pointed out that since these questions speak of Christ, they are also questions that pertain to Christology in some way or another. In short, Bonhoeffer's initial questions provide clues that *Discipleship* will not only focus upon what Niebuhr later identified as the "enduring problem," but that Bonhoeffer will also expand upon a very specific Christology, one that is inseparable to the way he relates Christ to culture.

Not surprisingly, the topic of Christology was an important one for Bonhoeffer. In his 1933 Christology lectures, Stephen Plant argues that Bonhoeffer "realized both the centrality of Christ in theology and of the person of Christ within the Christian life."[249] Out of the many themes discussed by Bonhoeffer in those lectures, one of the major ones specifically pertained to relating Christ to human sociality.[250] For Bonhoeffer, this not only involved corporate human life but also pertained to relationships between individual people residing in different communities.

---

[248] Ibid., 37.

[249] Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 94.

[250] Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 93.

In the lectures, Bonhoeffer also presents Christ as one who is personally present today as word, sacrament and church-community (*Gemeinde*).[251] Not only does this three-fold presence of Christ continue into *Discipleship*, but the basic theological foundations of how Christ relates to human sociality also make their way into the book, especially in regard to how Bonhoeffer speaks of *the world*.

Nevertheless, as important as these lectures were for his own theological and personal development, Plant claims that they also provide a very important link to Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship and relating the Christian faith to everyday life, themes that undoubtedly receive much attention throughout *Discipleship* itself.[252] While Bonhoeffer affirms the two natures of Christ in these lectures, special attention is devoted to the weakness of Christ and its relevance to human society.[253] For example, after affirming the deity of Christ in these lectures, Bonhoeffer claimed:

> . . . [W]e may not speak of this divine being, nor of his omnipotence, nor his omniscience; but we must speak of this weak man among sinners, of his manger and his cross. If we are to deal with the deity of Jesus, we must speak of his weakness. In christology, one looks at the whole historical man Jesus and says of him, that he is God. One does not first look at human nature and then beyond it to a divine nature, but one has to do with the one man Jesus Christ, who is wholly God . . . If we speak of Jesus Christ as God, we may not say of him that he is the representative of an idea of God, which possesses the characteristics of omniscience and omnipotence (there is no such thing as this abstract divine nature!); rather, we must speak of his weakness, his manger, his cross. This man is no abstract God.[254]

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the weakness of Christ in these lectures paves the way for what would prove to be the operating Christology in *Discipleship.* Yet, the full deity of Christ is also

---

[251] Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 212.

[252] Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, 94.

[253] Ibid., 97.

[254] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 104.

present in *Discipleship*, a theme that can also be traced back to his lectures. According to Bonhoeffer:

> The starting point is the given: the human being Jesus *is* the Christ, is God. This "is" cannot be deduced. It is the presupposition of all thought, and cannot be constructed subsequently. After Chalcedon the question can no longer be "How are the distinct natures and the one person to be thought?" but strictly: "Who is this person, of whom it is testified that he is God?"[255]

In regard to these Christological comments, Green indicates that for Bonhoeffer, "no abstract notion of God apart from God's revelation in the human Jesus is permitted" and that "no abstract idea of the humanity of Jesus apart from his unity with God is acceptable."[256]

Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christ in his 1933 lectures forms the foundation for the ways that Christ is later applied to his concrete situation in *Discipleship*. Since full attention is given to the topic of Christology in his lectures, these perspectives serve as a background to how he speaks of Christ in *Discipleship*, since he does not lay out a systemized Christology in the book. Comments about Christ, however, are replete throughout *Discipleship*, but even these are best understood in light of previous statements that he made in his lectures.

To be specific, what Bonhoeffer does in *Discipleship* is ground his theology of discipleship in a Christology of presence. The theme of discipleship and a Christology of presence are inseparably connected throughout the book. Bethge brings out this point as he claims, "to be called, to go, and to follow—this is a true Christology."[257] On the other hand, "to be called and not to follow, but instead to work out a program for use in this or that situation—this is a false Christology." Bethge elaborates on these comments, claiming that such a false Christology:

---

[255] Ibid., 98.

[256] Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 208.

[257] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 455.

> . . . [L]eaves Christ out in the cold as an occasional aid toward salvation. But the call creates a new and full existence; it creates a new point of reference, and hence breaks away from legalism. It does not create constitutions and decrees, but brings human beings into relation with each other.[258]

This "true Christology," according to Bethge, results in transformation. It is not one that is confined to doctrine, nor is it one that does not have any effects on the way that Christians appropriate their faith in society and treat other people. Christ is living and is just as powerful as when he walked upon the earth. So, "true Christology" and discipleship are interconnected, but, they are interconnected to the person of Christ, not merely to an idea.

As such, discipleship, for Bonhoeffer is "a commitment solely to the person of Jesus Christ" that breaks through "all legalisms by the grace of him who calls."[259] It is important for Bonhoeffer that he distances himself from any notions of presenting a "legalistic" form of discipleship, even though he can still maintain that followers of Jesus are to prioritize his words, especially those from the Sermon on the Mount. And those words of Jesus are simply to be "obeyed" in their literal form.[260]

Because Jesus' words are to be "obeyed" and taken seriously, they are to be actually carried out by his followers within society. In this "simple obedience"[261] Bonhoeffer considers Jesus to be the absolute authority figure. This is especially seen in the second chapter of *Discipleship*. Jesus is set forth there as not being merely a moral exemplar[262] (even though Jesus should be imitated), nor is Jesus reduced to merely providing people with an ethical vision for

---

[258] Ibid.

[259] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 59.

[260] Ibid., 81.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Ibid., 57.

life.[263] Jesus, instead, is a powerful authority figure who commands obedience, but unlike other figures who may also command supreme loyalty, Jesus gives the grace to make obedience not only possible, but actual.

To this extent, Green claims that the Christ of *Discipleship* is "an overwhelming power of 'absolute authority' who demands total submission to his commands and the complete renunciation of any independent human will."[264] Of course, there is a "step" that is required to begin on what Bonhoeffer calls the "road to faith,"[265] but this first step is later spoken of as being tantamount to a human action that is empowered by grace.[266] Even the familiar theme of obedience that Kelly describes as "Bonhoeffer's salient theme throughout *Discipleship*"[267] is one that is also inseparably connected to his Christology, and is one that is made possible by grace. "This call," writes Bonhoeffer, "is his grace, which calls us out of death into the new life of obedience."[268] This is because genuine Christianity can only be defined by following Jesus, which means:

> An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship. In truth, it even excludes discipleship; it is inimical to it. One enters into a relationship with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship. Christianity without the living Jesus remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. It is an idea, a myth. A Christianity in which there

[263] Ibid., 73.

[264] Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 172.

[265] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 63.

[266] Ibid., 65–66.

[267] Geffrey B. Kelly, "Kierkegaard as 'Antidote'," 148.

[268] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 66.

> is only God the Father, but not Christ as a living Son actually cancels discipleship. In that case there will be trust in God, but not discipleship.[269]

The "living Christ" that Bonhoeffer highlights here is the "absolute authority" figure that may have been held in comparison to the counter-power of Nazi totalitarianism. According to Green, within Bonhoeffer's cultural milieu:

> Hitler is the Antichrist, a false messiah whose power literally destroys humanity. The Christ of the Confessing Church calls his community into radical, militant, and uncompromising opposition to Hitler; obedience to Christ, in whom the old humanity is crucified, gives the possibility of authentic humanity. There can be no question that this theology of Christ [in *Discipleship*] as the true power and authority offered a way of redemption to German society and posed the crucial spiritual issue of the time. Furthermore, in view of the long and deep German social tradition of authority and obedience, it spoke an indigenous language which confronted people with this theological issue. The commanding Christ of the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, had an appropriateness to the social context of Christian theology as well as a liberating, personal significance for the theologian himself.[270]

Green's comments about the historical context are helpful. Such a background as this one resonates with our previous assessments of *culture* and of *Christendom* throughout *Discipleship* because Bonhoeffer's Christology cannot be divorced from his own personal narrative and his cultural milieu any more than *culture* and *Christendom* could be separated from their historical background. As far as the autobiographical aspects of *Discipleship* are concerned, they are touched upon by what Green considers to be the "numerous statements throughout [that] correspond intimately with what Bonhoeffer revealed of his early life."[271] This seems to imply that part of Bonhoeffer's solution to his own struggles was forging a connection between the ancient faith and modern times. The result is that it was not entirely important for him to ask, "Who *was* Jesus?" but rather, "Who *is* Jesus *for us* today?" Hence, his Christology not only

[269] Ibid., 59.

[270] Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 172.

[271] Ibid., 160.

informs the way that he perceives discipleship, but also bridges this gap from the past into the concrete moment. The result is that for Bonhoeffer, one can actually follow Jesus and can be obedient to his commands, even those given in the Sermon on the Mount. Living according to Jesus' literal words is not an impossibility, but is possible and can be made actual.

Adding to this perspective that Green provides, the call of Jesus and not Hitler has the "authority to call and to demand obedience to his word."[272] Of course, Hitler is not mentioned by name in *Discipleship*, but comments that call for ultimate allegiance to Christ in a social context of competing authority figures can only be understood in this way. Who else was demanding ultimate allegiance from people in Bonhoeffer's midst? To this extent, obedience to Christ and him alone is truly countercultural, as Christianity understood in this way is against the majority of culture—at least the majority of the culture where Bonhoeffer resided.

So the Christians Bonhoeffer is speaking to during this time become "strangers in the world."[273] Due to their obedience to Jesus, they become alienated from the pull of the totalitarian regime. They become *against* that sort of culture. But this *world*, as I have shown, is to be understood within the social context of "totalitarianism and the seductive powers of security and concession tempting Confessing Christians and holding sway over the national church." From Bonhoeffer's perspective, it is certainly possible to disassociate one's main identity from this sort of *world* while simultaneously living in the midst of it. Bonhoeffer, then, adds a new dimension as to what it means to be "against culture."

As much weight as Green assigns to Christ being the absolute authority in *Discipleship*, he also notes that there exists a paradoxical relationship between this absolute authority and the

---

[272] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 57.

[273] Ibid., 104.

weakness of Christ. As far as the weakness of Christ is concerned, it pertains to the traditional Lutheran motifs of Christ's condescension in the incarnation, in his sufferings, and in the cross itself, all of which can be traced back to his 1933 lectures on Christology.

Yet, from Bonhoeffer's perspective, discipleship does not take place in a vacuum, nor is it simply affirming these doctrines cognitively, but occurs when people are living in *the world*, despite all of the obstacles. It was in *the world* where Christians no longer became hidden, but instead, became witnesses to Christ as a result of their obedience to his words. Yet discipleship, in this sense, is in many ways antithetical to *the world*. Bonhoeffer writes:

> Where the world despises other members of the Christian family, Christians will love and serve them. If the world does violence to them, Christians will help them and provide them with relief. Where the world subjects them to dishonor and insult, Christians will sacrifice their own honor in exchange for their disgrace. Where the world seeks gain, Christians will renounce it; where it exploits, they will let go; where it oppresses, they will stoop down and lift up the oppressed. Where the world denies justice, Christians will practice compassion; where it hides behind lies, they will speak out for those who cannot speak, and testify for the truth. For the sake of brothers or sisters—be they Jew or Greek, slave or free, strong or weak, of noble or of common birth—Christians will renounce all community with the world, for they serve the community of the body of Jesus Christ. Being a part of this community, Christians cannot remain hidden from the world. They have been called out of the world and follow Christ.[274]

To act in such a way is to be *extraordinary* as Bonhoeffer describes it.[275] Not only may this sense of being *extraordinary* have its origin in Kierkegaard,[276] but it may also indicate something fundamental about Bonhoeffer's Christology throughout *Discipleship.* The "so many dissonant sounds, so many human, harsh laws" that he spoke of initially in *Discipleship* were those distractions that contributed to the non-existence of discipleship in Bonhoeffer's cultural

[274] Ibid., 237.

[275] Ibid., 137–151, 176.

[276] Matthew Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of Religionless Christianity* (Pickwick: Eugene, 2011), 161.

situation. So, rather than inquiring into another source of guidance other than in Jesus, Bonhoeffer's solution to this strictly doctrinal portrayal was to not only examine the very words of Jesus, but to urge others to put them into practice, even though it meant that they would be "strangers to the world." The initial problem, according to Bonhoeffer, is that all of the sounds and laws extinguished the absolute authority of Jesus in every sphere of human life, which made discipleship—and Jesus himself—impossible.

But what is fundamental about Bonhoeffer's Christology precisely stems from the beginning of the book: the *distractions* about Jesus amount to *abstractions* about Jesus and so become far removed from his "human form." The Christological commitment of *Discipleship* not only has its roots in his 1933 lectures, but his Christology also forms the foundation of how Christians are to engage the world around them. Jesus is present in the here-and-now, and he empowers his followers to live a life of obedience to his words. As a result, Christians are by their very nature people who have been "transformed," and this, in turn, shapes the way that they interact with the world. They can truly be extraordinary. Living by Jesus' words is a possibility. And it is because underneath it all, Christ "has taken on human form," so he:

> . . . [B]ecame a human being like us. In his humanity and lowliness we recognize our own form. He became like human beings, so that we would be like him. In Christ's incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of being the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance . . . Inasmuch as we participate in Christ, the incarnate one, we also have a part in all of humanity, which is borne by him. Since we know ourselves to be accepted and borne within the humanity of Jesus, our new humanity now also consists in bearing the troubles and the sins of all others. The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings.[277]

[277] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 285.

The "transformation" that is spoken of here comes as a result of the real presence of Christ through word, sacrament and being part of the church-community. It is "not an ideal," nor is it impossible. It is not something that human beings can aspire to attain by themselves, but it comes as a gift from Christ.[278] The "transformation" produces genuine change that not only makes people "like Christ,"[279] but makes them become fully and truly human because they are being molded into Christ's very image.[280]

Since the ultimate source of their strength comes through Christ,[281] Christians are enabled to bear the burdens of others, and so, paradoxically, they become weak and become Christ to one another. For Bonhoeffer, this means that Christians should be willing to embrace suffering, even if it comes through persecution. "We are to be like Christ," writes Bonhoeffer, "because we have already been shaped into the image of Christ."[282] He continues with this theme into the book's final words where the editors note that Bonhoeffer is interacting with Kierkegaard's own reflections on discipleship when he writes:

> Only because we bear Christ's image already can Christ be the "example" whom we follow. Only because he himself already lives his true life in us can we "walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:6), "act as he acted" (John 13:15), "love as he loved" (Eph. 5:2; John 13:34; 15:12), "forgive as he forgave" (Col. 3:13), "have the same mind that was in Jesus Christ" (Phil. 2:5), follow the example he left for us (1 Peter 2:21), and lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake (1 John 3:16). Only because we *already* are made like him can we be "like Christ." Since we have been formed in the image of Christ, we can live following his

[278] Ibid., 284.

[279] Ibid., 281.

[280] Ibid., 285.

[281] Ibid., 39.

[282] Ibid., 287.

> example. On this basis, we are now actually able to do those deeds, and in the simplicity of discipleship, to live life in the likeness of Christ.[283]

Bonhoeffer's Christology fuels his most basic concept of understanding the relationship between Christ and culture. In short, if Christians are going to have any impact in any culture, Bonhoeffer argues throughout *Discipleship* that it is going to be as a result of following Jesus and of imitating Jesus. At the same time, however, the ultimate goal itself is not to aim for some kind of cultural change, but instead, the goal is to be in simple obedience to the one who lived a life of simple obedience himself. As a result of these observations, Nichols is certainly correct when he claims, "whenever we look into Bonhoeffer on living the Christian life, we are always bumping into Bonhoeffer's christology."[284]

[283] Ibid., 285.

[284] Stephen J. Nichols, *Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life: From the Cross, for the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 52.

CONCLUSION

Why does Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* provide such a different outcome than Niebuhr in relating Christ to culture? This question that I set out to answer took several pages to unfold. I noted that in *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer is dealing with similar themes and problems just like Niebuhr wrestled with years later, but, as we saw, he had an entirely different interpretation and outcome than Niebuhr especially in the three areas of culture, Christology and Christendom.

Niebuhr's perspective on culture has various descriptions of it throughout *Christ and Culture.* Despite the critical perspective on this issue and everything that they claimed was either hidden or stated in his definitions, Niebuhr's task was arguably challenging.

However, considering the time that Niebuhr was writing, he attempted to utilize as many perspectives as possible to help him. Niebuhr seemed to take as many legitimate factors into consideration as he could even though he was writing as a theologian. If anything can be said critically, perhaps it can be stated that Niebuhr simply failed to take other views of *culture* into consideration. Like many other American Protestants of his time, Niebuhr was looking and thinking about the issue from a Western perspective, and this surely limited his understanding of *culture.* Had he considered that other Christians throughout time and throughout the world were not always in a privileged position like him, and that cultural context influences the priorities, behaviors and the beliefs of people, perhaps he would have had a little more sensitivity towards the topic.

Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, was keenly aware of his culture, perhaps just as much (or maybe even more) than Niebuhr was of his. Yet Bonhoeffer's goal was not the same as Niebuhr's goal. Bonhoeffer's counter-cultural attitude was not to break from culture or society as

a whole, but instead, his attitude was to encourage other German Christians to break from a specific kind of culture. They could still be *within* culture as such, but their primary identification with it would have been that of separation from it. Niebuhr simply does not seem to provide this type of allowance for individuals or the church as a whole without marginalizing at least some of them.

Culture, and by way of implication — all cultures — for Niebuhr, is seen as a positive characteristic, whereas for Bonhoeffer, *his* culture was a usurpation of a former good thing that went awry. Bonhoeffer's concept of *his* culture, then, was negative. Perhaps Bonhoeffer's perspective would have been different if he was writing in another cultural setting and one that was favorable towards his understanding of the faith. As it stands, however, Bonhoeffer was writing in his concrete moment and had a particular referent in mind when he addressed the theme of culture.

Like Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer's views on Christology and Christendom seem to be similarly dependent upon his outlook of his cultural situation. Since both of their cultural situations differed, their outcomes also were quite unlike that of each other. For Niebuhr, the strenuous commands of Jesus were an interference to American ecumenism, whereas for Bonhoeffer, the strenuous commands of Jesus were used to unite the German Christians. With the former, the commands caused divisions and fanaticism, whereas with the later, the commands led to unification and devotion. Christendom may have been assumed by Niebuhr since it was in good standing. For Bonhoeffer, however, Christendom was not only assumed but was thought of as needing thoroughgoing reformation.

Aside from these three issues of culture, Christology and Christendom, what else led Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer to produce such different results with their outcomes? Part of the answer pertains to the motivation that Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer had in mind as they set out to answer the enduring problem of relating Christ to culture. On the one hand, Niebuhr's self-proclaimed goal (whether it is to be accepted or not) was *descriptive* in nature as he did not attempt to give readers "the Christian answer."[285] On the other hand, for Niebuhr's critics, claims such as these were not taken seriously, as critics accused him of hiding behind the veil of epistemic humility. In order to promote Niebuhr's actual agenda for writing the book, individuals such as Yoder argued that "the real point of Niebuhr's book is to argue against the radical position."[286] Whether or not this is actually true may, perhaps, never be known. However, based upon the popularity of *Christ and Culture* throughout the years, one can be assured that critics will continue to debate the book's themes and arguments into the future.

Despite the criticisms directed against Niebuhr, his goal of being descriptive by avoiding to formulate "the Christian answer" may have been reflective of his cultural situation. Unlike that of Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr was living in the midst of a country where nearly any kind of Christian expression could be tolerated. In *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr attempted to sift through the many competing voices in his culture in order to show that "there are possibilities of reconciliation at many points among the various positions."[287] When the surge of denominationalism following World War II had reached its peak, Niebuhr looked across the American landscape and simply

[285] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 231.

[286] Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 219.

[287] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 231.

focused upon the themes that could further unite Christians rather than divide them. For Niebuhr, there were various ways of understanding and appropriating Jesus Christ in such a situation. Despite the critical response to Niebuhr, his perspective was to not only consider but to also apply a plurality of perspectives to culture.

Bonhoeffer's situation was quite different. Unlike Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer's goal was admittedly *prescriptive* in nature, as he attempted to give his readers "the Christian answer." He was not concerned with "what this or that church leader wants."[288] His goal was not a pluralistic survey but an exclusive attempt to know "what Jesus wants."[289] For Bonhoeffer, the Sermon on the Mount was to be used as a directive for Christians to live by in society. So the key differences with Bonhoeffer is that he had a particular audience in mind, a clear vision of how to respond to the enduring problem, and that he was addressing a specific culture. His was not a generalization or an abstraction of what *culture* may or may have not meant. His was the specific referent of the regime of Nazi tolitarianism. Bonhoeffer envisioned that something different should mark the Christian community apart from everything else.

Compared to Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer was living within a particular culture where Christians were becoming increasingly silenced by the state. If the beliefs and practices of Christians were to be tolerated, then they had to receive prior approval from the Nazi government. Like Niebuhr, there were certainly competing voices seeking to be heard, but when Bonhoeffer searched through them, he did not hear Jesus Christ speaking. The churches were uniting under the Nazi government, and so, when Bonhoeffer looked across the German landscape, he focused upon the

[288] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37.

[289] Ibid.

themes that could differentiate the Confessing Church apart from the German Reich Church. For Bonhoeffer, there was only one way of understanding and appropriating Jesus Christ in such a situation.

Of course, Bonhoeffer acknowledges this exclusive answer to the problem of relating Christ to culture from the beginning of *Discipleship*, as he poignantly asks his readers, "What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today?"[290] When he was asking those questions, he found out that he was not the only one who had ever asked them, as he discovered that Kierkegaard was asking the same kind of questions, but did so years before in a different time, and at a different place. In a sense, therefore, Kierkegaard was functioning as Bonhoeffer's key conversational partner.

Yet Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr were both reading Kierkegaard, and were both looking at his *Attack upon Christendom.* Both, however, appropriated Kierkegaard's thoughts in their own unique ways. For Niebuhr, Kierkegaard was periphery; for Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard was center. As for Niebuhr, he was certainly aware that Kierkegaard had been seeking for a way to relate Christ to culture in his own day. However, rather than focus upon those areas of Kierkegaard that further contributed to the separatist way of thinking, Niebuhr interpreted Kierkegaard in such a way that aligned him with one of the heroes of German culture, the mighty man Martin Luther himself.

Bonhoeffer, however, focused upon Kierkegaard's question about the nature of true Christianity compared with the popular representations of it. Like Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer also appealed to Luther, but the way that Bonhoeffer spoke of him challenged the prevailing

[290] Ibid., 37.

perception of him. As far as Bonhoeffer's influence of Kierkegaard is concerned, Bonhoeffer saw how Kierkegaard not only stressed the importance of discipleship, but also how Kierkegaard argued that without it, true Christianity ceased to exist. From Bonhoeffer's perspective, discipleship was not a work of cultural and religious deconstruction, but one of cultural and religious reformation. By being committed to Jesus Christ and him alone, one's primary allegiance was directed towards him, and not the state. Like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer was not looking to accommodate any kind of belief to popular representations of the faith, and so Bonhoeffer appropriated Kierkegaard's concept of discipleship into his own concrete movement. But, since Bonhoeffer still had hopes that there could somehow be a truly "Christian civilization,"[291] he could not quite appropriate Kierkegaard's contempt of Christendom because by doing so, he would have eliminated the possibility of ever attaining this ideal. Bonhoeffer sought for reformation, especially by urging Christians to be serious about the Sermon on the Mount.

Rather than appropriate Kierkegaard's notion of Christendom, Bonhoeffer's influence of Kierkegaard's attacks involved the creation of a functional dualism between the church and his concept of *the world* which allowed Bonhoeffer to accentuate the role of Christian obedience within the realm of the church itself. Bonhoeffer's focus, at this time, was to call for a separation between the church and his concept of *the world*. Someone such as Hitler could be regarded as one who wrongfully usurped his authority.[292] Rather than retaliate against someone like Hitler, Christians are to act in obedience to their Lord by obeying the authorities, "not in order to gain

[291] Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, 85–87.

[292] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 242.

some advantage,"[293] but simply for the sake of Jesus and his call upon people. To this extent, the seemingly forgotten words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are emphasized by Bonhoeffer in order to differentiate the church and to make it visible apart from the prevailing notions that accommodated to culture that rejected not only discipleship, but ultimately, Christ himself.

Whatever one thinks about how Niebuhr regarded the Sermon on the Mount within *Christ and Culture*, what must be pointed out is that it was functionally useless for Niebuhr in offering any guidance to the real world. From a Reformed perspective such as his, the Jesus within the Sermon on the Mount did not have anything to contribute to a modern, American world such as the one that Niebuhr and others like him were living in. Jesus is certainly there for Niebuhr, but his Jesus is detached as an other-worldly, uninvolved figure who watches us from a distance.

In short, why did Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* provide such a different outcome than Niebuhr of relating Christ to culture? Perhaps it is simply that being "against culture" meant two different things because the two individuals were coming from two different worlds.

[293] Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Christ the Center.* Translated by Edwin H. Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 1. *Sanctorum Communio: Eine Dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* (1930). Edited by Joachim von Soosten. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 1. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church.* Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 4. *Nachfolge*. Edited by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1989.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 4. *Discipleship.* Edited by Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 6. *Ethik.* Edited by Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 6. *Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 8. *Letters and Papers from Prison.* Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 13. *London:* 1933–1935. Edited by Hans Goedeking, Martin Heimbucher, and Hans-Walter Schleicher. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 13. *London:* 1933–1935. Edited by Keith C. Clements. Translated by Isabel Best. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

———. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 15. *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940.* Edited by Victoria J. Barnett. Translated by Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, and Scott A. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

———. *No Rusty Swords.* Translated by Edwin Robertson and John Bowden. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

———. *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* Edited by Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson. San Francisco: Harper, 1990.

Carson, D. A. *Christ and Culture Revisited.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Carter, Craig A. *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001.

———. *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007.

Elrod, John W. *Kierkegaard and Christendom.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Frick, Peter. "The *Imatatio Christi* of Thomas À Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer." In *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, edited by Peter Frick, 31–52. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

Gides, David M. *Pacifism, Just War, and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Church-World Theology and His Changing Forms of Political Thinking and Involvement.* Eugene, Pickwick: 2011.

Green, Clifford J. *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Guenther, Bruce. "The 'Enduring Problem' of Christ and Culture." *Direction* 34, no. 2 (September 1, 2005): 215–27.

Hauerwas, Stanley. "Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom." *Christian Century* 127, no. 21 (October 19, 2010): 48–49.

———. "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological." In *The Hauerwas Reader*. Edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, 51–74. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

———. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

Kelly, Geffrey B. "Kierkegaard as 'Antidote' and as Impact on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of Christian Discipleship." In *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, edited by Peter Frick, 145–66. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

Kelly, Geffrey B., and F. Burton Nelson. *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Attack upon Christendom.* Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

Kirkpatrick, Matthew D. *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of Religionless Christianity.* Eugene: Pickwick, 2011.

Koontz, Gayle Gerber. "Confessional Theology in a Pluralistic Context: A Study of the Theological Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 4 (October 1, 1987): 413–18.

Krieder, Alan. "Christ, Culture, and Truth-Telling." *Conrad Grebel Review* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 1997): 207–33.

Leithart, Peter J. *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom.* Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010.

Lippitt, John. *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling.* London: Routledge, 2003.

Marty, Martin. Foreword to *Christ and Culture,* by H. Richard Niebuhr. San Francisco: Harper, 2001.

McBride, Jennifer. *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

McCann, Dennis. "Hermeneutics and Ethics: The Example of Reinhold Niebuhr." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 27–53.

McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Metaxas, Eric. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010.

Mooney, Edward F. "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, 282–307. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Moses, John Anthony. *The Reluctant Revolutionary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History.* New York: Berghahn, 2009.

Nation, Mark. *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Nichols, Stephen J. *Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life: From the Cross, for the World.* Wheaton: Crossway, 2013.

Niebuhr, Richard H. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951.

Plant, Stephen. *Bonhoeffer.* New York: Continuum, 2004.

Rasmussen, Larry. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

Reimer, James A. "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology." *Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (December 1, 1983): 33–55.

Scriven, Charles. *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr.* Scottsdale: Herald, 1988.

Stackhouse, John Gordon. "In the World, but . . . : Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is 50 Years Old—and Still has Something Wise to Say to Evangelicals." *Christianity Today* 46, no. 5 (April 22, 2002): 80–81.

Stevenson, Angus, and Maurice Waite, eds. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary.* 12th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Tennent, Timothy. *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century.* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010.

Tietz, Christiane. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Standing 'in the Tradition of Paul, Luther, Kierkegaard, in the Tradition of Genuine Christian Thinking.'" In *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: German Protestant Theology,* edited by Jon Stewart, 43–64. Burlington: Ashgate, 2012.

Tödt, Heinz Eduard. *Authentic Faith: Bonhoeffer's Theological Ethics in Context.* Edited by Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth. Translated by David Stassen and Ilse Tödt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Willmer, Haddon. "Costly Discipleship." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, 173–189. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Wilson, Stephen B. "Christ and Cult(ure): Some Preliminary Reflections on Liturgy and Life." *Liturgical Ministry* 12 (September 1, 2003): 177–187.

Wüstenberg, Ralf. *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Yeager, Diane M. “The View from Somewhere: The Meaning and Method in *Christ and Culture*.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 101–120.

Yoder, John Howard. “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*.” In *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, edited by Glen H. Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, 31–89. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Yoder, John Howard. *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel.* South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

———. “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1955): 101–17.

———. *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.