

## SO MANY DIFFERENT DIETRICH BONHOEFFERS

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I, like many other scholars, have often wondered how there could be so many different Dietrich Bonhoeffers. Jeffrey Pugh in his recent book, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times*, notes this problem: "And here is where one of the great ironies rests, because persons all across the theological spectrum claim Bonhoeffer, believing firmly that his life and witness support their theological and social position."<sup>1</sup> According to Pugh, who is not an evangelical,<sup>2</sup> "It is not surprising that the liberal wing of Christianity claims Bonhoeffer, for in many ways he aligns with their perspective. . . . What may be more surprising," Pugh continues, "is that the radical right also claims Bonhoeffer as one of their own."<sup>3</sup> Pugh is disconcerted, not only that abortion clinic bombers and murderers of abortionists have appealed to Bonhoeffer for support, but also that President George W. Bush invoked Bonhoeffer to justify the American invasion of Iraq. Pugh is also highly critical of Georg Huntemann's attempt to recast Bonhoeffer as a theological conservative in *The Other Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1993).

Recent books about Bonhoeffer continue the trend of praising and admiring him, regardless of the author's own theological perspective. Several recent works by evangelicals have either portrayed Bonhoeffer as a quintessential evangelical, or at least consider him close enough to evangelicalism to be a worthy influence on evangelicals. When Eric Metaxas, an evangelical author of a recent biography about Bonhoeffer, was asked by *Christianity Today* if Bonhoeffer was an evangelical, he affirmed it, replying that Bonhoeffer "was as orthodox as Saint Paul or Isaiah, from his teen

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 6.

<sup>2</sup>When I use the term evangelical in this essay, I am using it to designate a conservative theological movement that stresses the authority of Scripture, the importance of individual conversion and redemption, and activism, such as good works and missions (see David Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005], 21-23). By conservative I mean that evangelicals embrace the doctrines of the traditional Christian creeds and reject higher biblical criticism.

<sup>3</sup>Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*, 6-7.

years all the way to his last day on earth."<sup>4</sup> If this is so, then why do most theological liberals, many of whom have little respect for evangelical theology, continue to see Bonhoeffer as one of their own? As I shall explain, recent works about Bonhoeffer by non-evangelicals either ignore the evangelical interpretation of Bonhoeffer or else dismiss it as misguided.

Stephen Haynes guides us sure-footedly through the maze of Bonhoeffer interpretations in *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (2004). He agrees with Pugh about the incredible variety of Bonhoeffer interpretations current among Bonhoeffer devotees. Haynes states, "In fact, one can find Bonhoeffer's name attached to virtually every mainstream theological movement that has flourished during the past three decades."<sup>5</sup> For Haynes this is not merely theoretical. His own interpretation of Bonhoeffer shifted as he gravitated from evangelicalism to theological liberalism. As a young evangelical college student, he read *The Cost of Discipleship*, which brought him to view Bonhoeffer as a committed disciple of Jesus. Later, as he began to question his evangelical upbringing, he saw Bonhoeffer "as a theological visionary who had peered beyond the borders of Christian orthodoxy." Later, however, as Haynes embraced a more liberal theological perspective, he came to view Bonhoeffer "as a theological liberal who articulated a prophetic critique of modern culture."<sup>6</sup> It is clear from his various writings on Bonhoeffer that Haynes still considers Bonhoeffer essentially a theological liberal, broadly defined (as do most Bonhoeffer scholars).<sup>7</sup>

The most important chapters in Haynes's book are the three that explore in detail the interpretations of Bonhoeffer as a theological radical, a theological liberal, and a theological conservative, respectively. Radicals are mainly the death of God theologians, conservatives are primarily evangelicals, and liberals include most currents between these two. Haynes thus uses the term *liberalism* broadly to include various theological streams in the main-line churches in the United States and Europe, including Barth's dialectical theology or neo-orthodoxy (thus he is not denying that Barth, Bonhoeffer, and other neo-orthodox theologians were rejecting nineteenth-century-style theological liberalism).

Haynes explains that until the 1960s Bonhoeffer was generally viewed in the Anglo-American world as a theologian embracing neo-orthodoxy or dialectical theology. However, in the 1970s this

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<sup>4</sup>Eric Metaxas interviewed by Collin Hansen, "The Authentic Bonhoeffer," *Christianity Today* (July 2010), at [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/july/7.54.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/july/7.54.html), accessed October 25, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 10.

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

<sup>7</sup>Haynes, like many theologians and church historians, often uses the term *liberal* broadly to denote those who accept the validity of higher biblical criticism, including dialectical theologians, such as Karl Barth.

picture changed, as theological radicals such as John A. T. Robinson drew inspiration from Bonhoeffer to criticize neo-orthodoxy (as well as most other theologies). The image of Bonhoeffer as a radical gained ground because of the popularity of Bonhoeffer's enigmatic theological ruminations in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which is Bonhoeffer's most popular work among theological liberals and radicals. When HarperCollins compiled a list of the hundred best spiritual books of the twentieth century, *Letters and Papers from Prison* finished in the top ten, while *Cost of Discipleship* finished further down the list.<sup>8</sup>

Radicals, especially the death of God theologians, appreciated a number of elements in Bonhoeffer's theology and appealed to him as a forerunner of their theology. They exulted in his many paradoxical statements in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, such as, "Before God and with God we live without God."<sup>9</sup> Other theologians consider Bonhoeffer a harbinger of postmodernism, especially because of his critique of metaphysics. One theologian, Ronald Thiemann, argues that Bonhoeffer "develop[ed] a theology and an ethics that are non-foundational and situational."<sup>10</sup>

Many Bonhoeffer scholars, however, reject the interpretation of Bonhoeffer as a radical, viewing him instead as theologically liberal (again, broadly defined to include neo-orthodoxy). Various prominent Bonhoeffer scholars, such as Larry Rasmussen and Geoffrey Kelly, have used Bonhoeffer to critique the religious right and American conservative politics. The infamous Vietnam War protestor, Daniel Berrigan, took a biography of Bonhoeffer with him when he fled the FBI, and he considered his own political activism analogous to Bonhoeffer's.<sup>11</sup> Liberation theologians, such as Beatriz Melano, followed Bonhoeffer by adopting a contextualist ethics. Melano, who studied theology under Bonhoeffer's friend, Paul Lehmann, claimed she learned "an ethic based on the life and thinking of Bonhoeffer—not only how to do theology in one's particular context, but also to follow an ethic that was contextual, not normative, an ethic related to the changing reality in the world."<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer was a powerful influence on liberation theology, so much so that Haynes calls him "the grandfather of liberation theology."<sup>13</sup>

In his chapter on the conservative appropriation of Bonhoeffer, Haynes explains that up to the early 1970s American evangelicals were cautious toward Bonhoeffer. However, after that time Bonhoeffer's reputation grew among evangelicals, so that by the

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<sup>8</sup>Haynes, *Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 105.

<sup>9</sup>Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, July 16, 1944, in *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1954), 241–42; (Eng. trans.; *Letters and Papers from Prison* [trans. Reginald Fuller et al.; New York: Macmillan, 1971], 360).

<sup>10</sup>Haynes, *Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 25–26.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 38–44.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

1990s they considered him a “cult hero.” Today major evangelical leaders and magazines regularly invoke Bonhoeffer as a glowing example of Christian activism. They—and most evangelicals—know Bonhoeffer’s theology primarily from his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and they admire his opposition to Nazi racism, his concern for the disadvantaged, and his opposition to abortion, among other things. However, according to Haynes, “It is no surprise that Bonhoeffer’s prison writings are rarely featured in evangelical portrayals of the German theologian.”<sup>14</sup> Haynes thus considers the conservative interpretation of Bonhoeffer at least in part the product of their selective reading of Bonhoeffer.

In his chapter on the conservative interpretation of Bonhoeffer, Haynes briefly discusses my book, *The Myth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Is His Theology Evangelical?* (1997), which he claims was the first attempt by an evangelical scholar “to revoke Bonhoeffer’s conservative credentials.”<sup>15</sup> Haynes agrees with my critique of the evangelical image of Bonhoeffer, since it exposed quite a few elements of Bonhoeffer’s theology that are hard to square with evangelical theology, such as 1) the strong influence of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard on his theology; 2) his enthusiasm for Bultmann’s theology; 3) his identification with Barth’s theology; and 4) his negative view of apologetics. Haynes then points out another big problem for the conservative interpretation of Bonhoeffer: his involvement in the ecumenical and peace movements, neither of which is highly regarded in most evangelical circles. Haynes’s final judgment on the conservative interpretation of Bonhoeffer is damning:

It is tempting for Bonhoeffer scholars and non-evangelical Christians to dismiss the evangelical Bonhoeffer as a figment of the conservative religious imagination. And to a large extent this may be so; but it is a powerful figment nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

It is powerful, indeed, as is evidenced by Eric Metaxas’s recent popular biography of Bonhoeffer. Metaxas is neither a theologian nor a historian, and unfortunately, it shows. He does not have a firm grasp of Bonhoeffer’s historical context, nor does he seem to understand German theology. Victoria Barnett, editor of the English edition of Bonhoeffer’s *Works*, is correct when she states that Metaxas “has a very shaky grasp of the political, theological, and ecumenical history of the period.” She then calls Metaxas’s portrayal of Bonhoeffer’s theology “a terrible simplification and at times misrepresentation.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., ch. 4, quote at 89.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>17</sup>Victoria Barnett, review of Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, in *Association of Contemporary Church Historians Newsletter* 16/3 (September 2010), at <http://journal.ambrose.edu/ojs/index.php/acchquarterly/article/view/46/92>, accessed September 2010.

For one thing, Metaxas's biography is littered with historical mistakes. Some are merely annoying, but do not substantially affect his historical interpretation, such as his claim that the Social Democrats had a majority in the German parliament in 1918, or that Hitler was democratically elected into office, or that Bonn is located in Switzerland, or his large overestimate of deaths during the Night of the Long Knives.<sup>18</sup> However, more substantial mistakes give pause to Metaxas's claim that he is going to help us understand Bonhoeffer in his historical context. For instance, he does not seem to understand that the German president Paul von Hindenburg had ruled by emergency decree long before the Reichstag Fire in late February 1933; he claims that "Germany was not yet a police state" in August 1934 (tell that to the concentration camp inmates imprisoned since March 1933); and he confuses events at the Protestant Church's Old Prussian Synod meeting in September 1933 with those at the national synod later that month.<sup>19</sup> He also falsely claims that the Barmen Declaration repudiated anti-Semitism, a serious mistake, since many scholarly works criticize the Confessing Church for not mentioning anti-Semitism in the Barmen Declaration (and Barth later regretted that he had not included it).<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, Metaxas has read some of the voluminous literature on Bonhoeffer, and many of the events of Bonhoeffer's life he relates accurately. One major lapse, however, that directly affects his argument, is his claim that

From the beginning of his time until the end, Bonhoeffer maintained the daily discipline of scriptural meditation and prayer he had been practicing for more than a decade. . . . Once he got his Bible back he read it for hours each day.<sup>21</sup>

Bonhoeffer flatly contradicted this in letters to his student and confidant Eberhard Bethge. In January 1941, June 1942, and March 1944 he wrote letters to Bethge, admitting that he went days and even weeks without reading the Bible much, though sometimes he would read it voraciously.<sup>22</sup> He wrote:

I am astonished that I live and can live for days without the Bible—I would not consider it obedience, but auto-suggestion, if I would compel myself to do it. . . . I know that I only need to open my own

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<sup>18</sup>Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 33, 119, 144, 231.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 149, 187, 242.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>22</sup>Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, January 31, 1941, and June 25, 1942, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; 5 vols.; Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1958 ff.), 5:397, 420.

books to hear what may be said against all this. . . . But I feel resistance against everything "religious" growing in me.<sup>23</sup>

In *Letters and Papers from Prison* Bonhoeffer stated, "Once again I'm having weeks when I don't read the Bible much."<sup>24</sup> Metaxas will not be excited to learn about this change in Bonhoeffer's devotional reading of the Bible because he does not want to admit that Bonhoeffer had budged even the slightest from his earlier views when discussing the need for "religionless Christianity" in his letters with Bethge. Bonhoeffer's devotional practice, however, did change, and this change occurred long before he was imprisoned.

In my view, an even greater problem is the lack of theological and philosophical understanding exhibited in Metaxas's book. His confusion of Matt 10:17-42 with the Sermon on the Mount is a minor slip, but it is the sign of a much larger problem.<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer was an extremely complex and sophisticated thinker who had a thorough grounding in Continental philosophy and German Protestant theology. Most evangelicals do not understand Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, or Heidegger, all of whom exerted considerable influence on Bonhoeffer's theology. Many scholars have discussed these influences on Bonhoeffer, but Metaxas never even mentions their impact on Bonhoeffer's theology. Yet Bonhoeffer taught an entire course at the University of Berlin on Hegel's philosophy of religion; one of his earliest lectures on ethics is saturated with Nietzschean philosophy; he recommended to his fiancée that she read Kierkegaard; and his book, *Act and Being*, is a response to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. One cannot understand Bonhoeffer without understanding the intellectual context of early twentieth-century Germany.

Metaxas does correctly identify Barth as the greatest theological influence on Bonhoeffer. However, he never adequately explains what Barth taught. In fact, his bibliography does not contain a single work by or about Barth, nor does it contain any works about German theology, except for books directly about Bonhoeffer. All that Metaxas seems to know about Barth's theology is that he attacked the liberals, and since Metaxas opposes liberalism, he cheers Barth on, not realizing that evangelical theology is not the only alternative to nineteenth-century-style theological liberalism. He never explains how Barth's neo-orthodoxy differed from orthodoxy; indeed, he does not seem to think it did. Worse yet, Metaxas does not even mention Bultmann, the neo-orthodox and existentialist theologian who clearly rejected all miracles and called for the demythologization of Scripture. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer castigated Bultmann's critics, which is not something

<sup>23</sup>Bonhoeffer to Bethge, June 25, 1942, in *ibid.*, 5:420.

<sup>24</sup>Bonhoeffer to Bethge, March 19, 1944, in *Widerstand und Ergebung*, 163 (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 234).

<sup>25</sup>Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 536.

many evangelicals would do. As most Bonhoeffer scholars recognize, a proper understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology can only emerge once one understands neo-orthodox theology, especially Barth's contribution.

I was very surprised that Metaxas hardly provides any analysis of Bonhoeffer's writings. Most of his biography focuses on Bonhoeffer's activities, especially his involvement in the plot to kill Hitler. However, Metaxas does not seem to understand Bonhoeffer's ethical reasoning that underlay his decision to become involved in the conspiracy. According to Metaxas, "Bonhoeffer knew that to live in fear of incurring 'guilt' was itself sinful. . . . he knew that to act freely could mean inadvertently doing wrong and incurring guilt."<sup>26</sup> The problem here is with the word "inadvertently." Bonhoeffer argued in *Ethics* that responsible action, such as killing Hitler (which he does not directly mention in his manuscript, of course), can sometimes be a sin that would bring guilt on the perpetrator, even though it is the morally responsible action to take. Bonhoeffer thought that killing Hitler would bring guilt on himself and others, but it was a sin that was required by the situation they found themselves in. Many Bonhoeffer scholars admit that Bonhoeffer's ethics is contextualist or situation ethics, but Metaxas does not seem to grasp this in his discussion of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought or his involvement in the plot to kill Hitler.

Another recent biography paints quite a different picture of Bonhoeffer. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen is a German theologian whose father knew Bonhoeffer. Though he makes a few historical mistakes, he clearly understands the theological context of Bonhoeffer's work. In examining the influences on Bonhoeffer, Schlingensiepen claims that Bonhoeffer seemed more interested in philosophy than theology during his first year of university study. In the mid-1920s Bonhoeffer became "electrified" by Barth's theology. Schlingensiepen carefully explains that Barth founded a new theological position outside the nineteenth-century dichotomy of liberal higher criticism and biblical literalism. This new position accepted the validity of biblical criticism as an intellectual enterprise, while simultaneously denying its relevance in gaining revelation from Scripture. Bonhoeffer wrote in an early essay, "None of us can return to a pre-critical time."<sup>27</sup> We have, then, in this biography, a clear picture of Bonhoeffer as a neo-orthodox (or dialectical) theologian.

While discussing the heavy influence of Barth on Bonhoeffer, Schlingensiepen also discusses some discrepancies between them. Bonhoeffer was an independent thinker, and he did not slavishly follow any other theologian. He and Barth had some disagreements over ethics, and Bonhoeffer famously criticized Barth in *Letters and*

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 424.

<sup>27</sup>Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dieterich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (trans. Isabel Best; London: T & T Clark, 2010), 30.

*Papers from Prison.* Schlingensiepen also explains at length Bonhoeffer's appreciation for Bultmann's theology. In July 1942 Bonhoeffer wrote to one of his students:

I belong to those who have welcomed [Bultmann's] writing. . . . To put it bluntly, Bultmann has let the cat out of the bag, not only for himself but for a great many people (the liberal cat out of the confessional bag), and in this I rejoice. He has dared to say what many repress in themselves (here I include myself) without having overcome it. He has thereby rendered a service to intellectual integrity and honesty. Many brothers oppose him with a hypocritical faith (*Glaubenspharisäismus*) that I find deadly.<sup>28</sup>

To be sure, Bonhoeffer did not accept Bultmann's theology completely, either. However, Bonhoeffer's criticisms of Bultmann and Barth were friendly critiques from within their camp, not hostile attacks by an outsider.

Schlingensiepen has a firm grasp on the essentials of Bonhoeffer's ethics, which Bonhoeffer considered his most important work. He explains that Bonhoeffer rejected all eternally valid principles, telling Christians simply to listen to God's concrete commands for the moment. Schlingensiepen correctly explains that Bonhoeffer recognized that killing Hitler would be murder and thus sinful, but he nonetheless thought it the most responsible course of action.

Another German theologian to examine Bonhoeffer's theology is Sabine Dramm in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to His Thought* (2007). Her portrait of Bonhoeffer is similar in many ways to Schlingensiepen's. However, because she is examining Bonhoeffer's theology rather than writing a biography, she provides a closer interpretation of his writings and examines the philosophical and theological influences on Bonhoeffer's theology in greater depth. There is a significant translation problem that might cause some confusion to the uninitiated. Dramm repeatedly calls Bonhoeffer an "evangelical," but she is using this term in its German sense, where "evangelical" is synonymous with "Protestant" (and most German Protestants are liberal theologically). She clearly does not mean to imply that he is an evangelical in the American sense of the term.

Indeed she paints Bonhoeffer as a theological liberal, not as a kindred spirit to American evangelicals. She argues that the strongest influences on Bonhoeffer's theology were Luther, Kierkegaard, and Barth, but she also analyzes the influence of other leading thinkers on Bonhoeffer's thought, including Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, and Heidegger. Nietzsche's ideas were evident in Bonhoeffer's ethical thought, while Dilthey exerted a powerful influence on his prison writings, which Dramm considers the most important and influential part of Bonhoeffer's

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 279.

corpus. Bonhoeffer grappled with Husserl and Heidegger in his work, *Act and Being*.<sup>29</sup> She correctly explicates his approach to Scripture as ambiguous, since he accepted the validity of liberal biblical criticism, while rejecting liberalism's tendency to jettison many Christian teachings.<sup>30</sup> Toward the end of his life Bonhoeffer still admitted to a colleague that he was a "'modern' theologian who still carries the heritage of liberal theology within himself."<sup>31</sup>

Evangelicals will likely be surprised at Dramm's convincing interpretation of Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*. She quotes a letter that Bonhoeffer wrote to a colleague in 1934, where he stated, "You know, I really believe—you may be surprised by this—that the whole point of the Sermon on the Mount is decision."<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer's primary concern was not the content of the Sermon on the Mount; rather its defining feature was, for him, its call to make a decision. The existentialist theologian Kierkegaard was a significant influence on Bonhoeffer's decisionist thrust in *Cost of Discipleship*. This focus on making an existential decision rather than appropriating the content of Scripture was confirmed by Bonhoeffer's allergy to any fixed moral principles. Dramm notes that in his ethical writings Bonhoeffer repudiated any "ironclad principles," "inflexible ethics," and "fixed moral principles."<sup>33</sup> She claims, however, that Bonhoeffer avoided complete arbitrariness in morality by founding his ethics on love (which is precisely what Joseph Fletcher did in *Situation Ethics*).<sup>34</sup>

In addition to examining Bonhoeffer's major works, Dramm provides a valuable service by analyzing several important issues raised by Bonhoeffer that are often not treated in much depth. One chapter analyzes his doctrine of salvation, showing that Bonhoeffer—like his mentor Barth—embraced universal salvation. Another chapter details Bonhoeffer's rejection of body-soul dualism. In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer stated, "Every human being is a being with a body and remains so eternally. To be a body and to be a human being are inseparable."<sup>35</sup> She engages the argument over Bonhoeffer's pacifism, arguing that he was a pacifist, but not an absolute pacifist. Finally, she argues that Bonhoeffer "was the first theologian to consistently welcome secularization instead of complaining about it."<sup>36</sup> He was thus far removed from theological

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<sup>29</sup>Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to His Thought* (trans. Thomas Rice; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), 29–30, 37, 75, 83, 111–12, 212.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, ch. 4.

<sup>31</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 25–26.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>34</sup>Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 211.

conservatism, which is why he criticized orthodox Lutherans for "the attempt to preserve the church as the Institute of Salvation."<sup>37</sup>

The evangelical theologian Mark DeVine admits in *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at All Costs* that neither Bonhoeffer nor his mentor Barth was an evangelical. He correctly explains that Bonhoeffer continued to consider higher biblical criticism valid, but he does not regard this as important as Bonhoeffer's dedication to Scripture as the source of revelation. While admitting that "[t]here are good reasons for a certain evangelical wariness regarding Bonhoeffer," the primary thrust of the book is to allay evangelicals' caution and interpret Bonhoeffer as conservatively as possible. DeVine confesses that "much that I find attractive in Bonhoeffer's thinking for evangelicals often has its source in Barth's influence."<sup>38</sup> Though undoubtedly some evangelicals agree with DeVine's sympathetic approach to Barth's theology, many evangelicals reject Barth's theology outright. DeVine never indicates, however, that Bonhoeffer's theology was in many respects less congruent with evangelical theology than Barth's, especially Barth's later position in his *Church Dogmatics*, which Bonhoeffer criticized.

DeVine's work, as the title suggests, is not interested in interpreting Bonhoeffer's theology in its own historical context, but rather seeks "to exploit aspects of Bonhoeffer's life and work that speak to concerns relevant to evangelical Christians."<sup>39</sup> Indeed DeVine relies on Bonhoeffer's popularity among evangelicals to advance positions that DeVine favors, even if he has to shoehorn Bonhoeffer's position into more conservative theological footwear. For instance, DeVine argues that when Bonhoeffer discussed religionless Christianity in his prison writings, Bonhoeffer "called for a critical grappling with, understanding of, and resistance to the rise of secularism. He decried the invasion of secular modes of thought within the church."<sup>40</sup> This is the exact opposite of the interpretation of Dramm and many other Bonhoeffer scholars. I must say that in this case and in quite a few others, I find DeVine's interpretations rather strained.

To offer another example, DeVine opposes the common evangelical understanding of trying to hear the will of God. He is annoyed with evangelicals trying to hear the voice of God when they need to make decisions, such as what job to take, whom to marry, etc. He disparagingly calls this "illumism" and enjoins evangelicals to follow Bonhoeffer by finding the will of God solely through Scripture. In this case, DeVine does not seem to have a firm grasp on Bonhoeffer's view of the relationship between Scripture and ethics. Bonhoeffer did not think that Scripture provided content for ethical

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>38</sup>Mark DeVine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at All Costs* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 150–51, 173.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

decision making. It also seems highly ironic to me that DeVine's main argument against "illuminationism" is that Bonhoeffer rejected it; DeVine does not provide any scriptural support for his position (though he does briefly rebut what he sees as misinterpretations of two passages of Scripture used by those defending "illuminationism"). This seems contrary to the main point of his argument, which is that we should focus exclusively on Scripture when making decisions. Even if DeVine were interpreting Bonhoeffer accurately, which I doubt, why should Bonhoeffer's opinion count here? This is emblematic of DeVine's attempt to harness Bonhoeffer's authority in evangelical circles to press his own agenda.<sup>41</sup>

Another key example is DeVine's insistence that Bonhoeffer would support the war on Saddam Hussein. Ironically, in spite of calling *Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* Bonhoeffer's most important works, here he rejects Bonhoeffer's pacifism as expressed in *Cost of Discipleship* in favor of Bonhoeffer's later position that killing can be a morally responsible action if its effects are positive. Instead of interpreting Bonhoeffer's ethics as contextualist or situation ethics, as most Bonhoeffer scholars do, DeVine claims that Bonhoeffer altered his position on pacifism, and he believes he is following Bonhoeffer's later position.<sup>42</sup>

DeVine never mentions that quite a few other Bonhoeffer scholars have rejected the idea that Bonhoeffer would have supported the invasion of Iraq. Jeffrey Pugh in *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* explores the ways that Bonhoeffer's theology challenges America's war on terror. Indeed Pugh—like most Bonhoeffer scholars—implicitly rejects many of DeVine's interpretations of Bonhoeffer, and with good reason. Pugh correctly identifies the contextualist nature of Bonhoeffer's ethics: "Because the reality was always changing Bonhoeffer never offered absolute and timeless ethics or actions, rather the real situations he found himself in profoundly directed his actions." He also explains that Bonhoeffer was not concerned about individual salvation, which again shows how far removed Bonhoeffer's theology is from American evangelical thought and practice.<sup>43</sup>

If you are as perplexed as I am by all these different Bonhoeffers, then perhaps Joel Lawrence's *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed* will provide some enlightenment.<sup>44</sup> While it may be aimed at the "perplexed," it is certainly not a guide for dummies, since it is written at a relatively high level of theological sophistication. Lawrence does not divulge his own theological position in this book, but since he teaches at an evangelical seminary, presumably he is an evangelical. However, while focusing on important themes in

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., ch. 2.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 137–40.

<sup>43</sup>Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*, 87, quote at 160.

<sup>44</sup>Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

Bonhoeffer's theology—Christology, ecclesiology, and the world—he does not provide extended treatment of themes that are of central importance to evangelicals—Scripture, salvation, etc. On the topics he examines, Lawrence is a surefooted guide to Bonhoeffer's theology, and his focus on Christology and ecclesiology will not give most evangelicals much to worry about.

However, Lawrence's chapter on Bonhoeffer's view of God as a suffering God is problematic. To be sure, Lawrence's interpretation of Bonhoeffer in this chapter is accurate, but it does not make Bonhoeffer seem all that compatible with evangelical theology. He informs us that Bonhoeffer opposed viewing God as a metaphysical entity. It is hard for me to wrap my mind around the notion that God could be nonmetaphysical, since I—like most evangelicals—reject existentialism, which exerted a powerful influence on Bonhoeffer. Perhaps a nonmetaphysical God—whatever that means—can be squared with evangelical theology (but probably not).<sup>45</sup>

Thereafter Lawrence spends a great deal of time elaborating on an even more problematic formulation: Bonhoeffer's notion that God is a suffering God, not a God of power. Once again, Lawrence is accurate when he claims that Bonhoeffer believed "that God isn't a strong God to whom we turn in our hour of need, but is a weak God, who we stand by in his hour of need."<sup>46</sup> However, is this really a biblical position? He notes that Bonhoeffer cited Matt 8:17 as an instance of Christ helping us through his suffering, not through his power. However, this is an odd exegesis of that passage, because even though v. 17 does refer to Jesus' suffering, the previous verse tells us that the suffering of Jesus was the basis for his miraculous healing. Thus, Jesus was demonstrating the power of God in this passage, Bonhoeffer's exegesis notwithstanding. Most evangelicals still see God as a God of power who answers their prayers in their time of need. They, like Paul, want to know Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings, but also in the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10). If this is so, they are rejecting Bonhoeffer's insistence that God is not a God of power.

Finally, another brief work that aims at interpreting Bonhoeffer for a nonacademic audience is Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*. The authors focus on five themes, which they see as the crux of Bonhoeffer's theology: "(1) Christ existing as community, (2) costly grace, (3) *Stellvertretung* ('vicarious representative action'), (4) ethics as formation, (5) and religionless Christianity."<sup>47</sup> Four chapters deal with these topics, and then a final chapter addresses the divergent interpretations of Bonhoeffer that abound today. Haynes and Hale's work is an excellent summary of Bonhoeffer's theology, though the cartoon

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., ch. 5.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>47</sup>Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 77–78.

illustrations are distracting and sometimes misleading. Contra the view of Bonhoeffer as an evangelical (which Haynes forthrightly rejected in his earlier book), they present Bonhoeffer as a theologian "charting his own course in the charged space between liberalism and dialectical theology."<sup>48</sup> I believe this is an accurate view of Bonhoeffer: Though he was heavily influenced by Barth, on the whole he remained more liberal than Barth.

In their conclusion, Haynes and Hale state, "Few if any historical figures have come to mean so many different things to so many different people."<sup>49</sup> Why is this so? Undoubtedly, part of the problem is a selective reading of Bonhoeffer. Evangelicals focus primarily on *Cost of Discipleship*, while liberals tend to prefer his *Ethics*, and radicals enthuse over his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Those who read widely in his corpus sometimes interpret Bonhoeffer's theology through the lens of their favorite part. However, there is a further problem: Bonhoeffer and his contemporaries imbibed intellectual currents that problematized language. Neither Bonhoeffer nor most German theologians believed in such things as propositional truths, timeless or universal morality, and absolutes. They not only rejected a literal reading of Scripture, but they rejected a literal rendering of all language, including their own. This view of language and interpretation that Bonhoeffer imbibed from Continental philosophy is what makes it so incredibly difficult to pin down Bonhoeffer's theology.<sup>50</sup> No wonder, then, that today we have many different Dietrich Bonhoeffers.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>50</sup>For more discussion on this point, see Richard Weikart, "Scripture and Myth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Fides et Historia* 25 (1993): 12-25.