



## **Confessional Theology and Neo-Orthodox Theology in Germany and Opposition to Nazi Tyranny and Anti-Semitism:**

- **The Bethel and Barmen Confessions**
- **Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), Neo-Orthodoxy and the Confessing Church**

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, who called Luke the physician to be an evangelist and physician of the soul: grant that through his teaching we may know the certainty of the things which belong to your kingdom, and that all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, St. Luke the Evangelist

We talked last week about how in the nineteenth century religion increasingly lost power and voice in within the broader civil society.

- This was due in part to the further development of the English liberal tradition under J.S. Mill (which regarded the individual's pursuit of self-interest as the basic datum from which society must be constructed, with religion being reduced to an antiquarian curiosity or a socially marginal voluntary association that remained tolerable as long as it promoted altruism, benevolence and practical charity).
  - Insofar as the state now had more than a purely negative role and was supposed to promote tolerance and virtue while remaining neutral as to all particular religious claims, the state's increasing intervention in education and social welfare were of necessity based on views of human relationships and human society that had little to do with religion.

Just as religion was losing institutional and social power within the broader society, it also began to lose its authoritative voice within the individual's inner life.

- Beginning in the 1830's, some radical ideologies (e.g. those of Feuerbach and Marx) had denied the need to continue to speak of God at all (with all language about God being reducible to our language about our own selves).
- Once this reduction had gained social acceptance, one could develop models of the human person's inner life that could adequately describe human struggles and the quest for authentic identity and a flourishing life (wholeness) that were not based on religious claims and could function independently of any religious belief.

Needless to say, this was tremendously discouraging for people who held traditional religious beliefs and were somewhat uncomfortable with the liberal-nationalist outlook that dominated Europe during the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century and that, in opposition to traditional religious views, proclaimed

- the autonomy of the individual, who
  - is self-sufficient and morally complete in himself/herself and
  - has been freed from the restrictive traditions, norms and obligations of their society of origin
  - promotes the interests of the modern nation state through patriotism and affirmation and support of the national purpose.
- the benefits of personal and societal emancipation through the state's acceptance and promotion of
  - laissez-faire individualism and
  - free-market capitalism
- the marginal relevance of the church to modern civil and social processes
  - The church was seen as analogous to secular voluntary associations, through which autonomous individuals agreed to cooperate with other like-minded persons in working for benevolence and moral improvement.
    - Such voluntary organizations had a certain use in reintegrating individuals back into the social whole (as necessary to promote social reform).
  - This model was accepted *de facto* by both nominal Christians in the state church and also by many proponents of later pietism/evangelical revivalism (Gerhard Tersteegen, George Whitefield, the Cambuslang revival, Barton Stone and the Cane Ridge Revival, etc.)→One is able to grasp salvation as an individual apart from the body of the church, having “that inwardness of communion with God which is independent of men or priesthood” (Troeltsch).

### **The Rise of Neo-Confessional Movements in the Nineteenth Century**

Those who held traditional religious beliefs and were uncomfortable with the liberal-nationalist ideology described above countered by arguing

- that reflections on human nature, what constitutes a just society, etc. must be
  - cast in terms of the received Christian tradition
  - built on a corporate rather than an individualistic approach to life
    - August Vilmar: “Our age is in many ways an age of atomism. Each wants to be for himself, no one can stand to be with or under anyone else.”
    - Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872): We need a community to be fully human, for “as long as a man is alone, he cannot even be blessed.”
  - rooted in an understanding of the divinely established order of roles, duties and social relationships in the Church and in society and
  - stand opposed to the pragmatic, utilitarian approaches taken by the capitalist entrepreneurs and the rising industrial barons, which were increasingly gaining acceptance within the broader society.

- that the church must be seen not as a benevolent but socially marginal voluntary organization. Instead the Church is a divinely established vehicle for the transmission of the grace of the Gospel and of salvation in Christ, which aims to address and transform the whole of one's existence.
  - Thus, the church is more than merely the sum of the individuals who comprise it; it is at once an invisible divine and a visible “human institution, endowed with absolute, authoritative truth and the sacramental miraculous power of grace and redemption” (Troeltsch).
  - In fact, it would be more accurate to say that Christ presents himself to the world through the Church.
    - If the Church lives, it lives by the lifeblood of the Son of God, mediating Christ's presence and authority to this world.
    - Rather than being but in question by historical scholarship, the Church is itself the bearer of the divine purpose within history and the place where divine truth and lordship (holiness) find embodiment.
    - To enter the Church requires more than mere rational assent (a decision made by the self), but rather a faith that requires a surrender of the self to God and is accompanied by a divinely-given regeneration which breaks the power of sin and gives new life.
    - The church is never to be subordinated to non-Christian leaders (who wish to broaden the church by force to include persons of widely varying beliefs and practices). The church instead is the bearer of truth and freedom and creates freedom wherever the Gospel is believed. This is the true freedom and liberty and this freedom of the church is wholly different in kind than the false liberty of the liberal state, where private judgment reigns supreme but never wishes for itself to be called into question by a higher standard.
  - One must look to the tradition of the Church for insight into how to interpret aspects of the faith that are contested in the modern world.
    - Ecclesial tradition as an unfolding of human understanding that represented a clarification and development of one's understanding of previously given revelation → the development of doctrine is therefore not to be opposed to Scripture but rather is a clarification of its meaning for the people of God and informs worship and preaching.
- for an elevated view of the office of the ministry as communicating the truth of the Gospel to the Church and world in a tangible form, presenting both
  - the demand for repentance/submission to Christ as Lord and
  - the certain promise of the forgiveness of sins and renewal in Christ
as present and concrete realities that addressed the consciousness of modern man.
  - Consequently argued for
    - a reform of worship and

- greater attention to the sacramental life of the Church through a renewed appreciation of
  - baptism,
  - the Lord's Supper,
  - confession and
  - ordination to the office of the ministry for the mission of presenting Christ, and, flowing out of this,
- a new evangelization of the unreached and mission to the unchurched urban poor
  - Support for the training and employment of deaconesses as dedicated Christian workers
  - The church as a representative of the interests of the community and a bulwark against dehumanizing aspects of emerging industrialism.

### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)**

- For the purposes of this course, I have singled out a work of Bonhoeffer's that is continuous with the neo-confessional movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- There are also other aspects to Bonhoeffer which could reasonably be discussed--particularly his Christian approach to sociology in reflecting upon the Church, his association with Neoorthodoxy (Barth, the Confessing Church, etc.), his later account of "religionless Christianity"—but for lack of time these will need to be discussed elsewhere.

### *Life*

- Born in Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland), the sixth of eight children.
- His father Karl was the director of the psychiatric and neurological clinic of a hospital.
- His mother Paula was the daughter of Karl-Alfred von Hase, preacher at the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II
- In 1912, his father Karl moved from Breslau to Berlin, the capital and intellectual center of Germany.
- Dietrich decides at an early age (about 12) to study theology, which was an unusual choice in a family that was not particularly active in church attendance or piety.
- Dietrich studied at Tübingen (1923) under the New Testament theologian Adolf Schlatter and then at the University of Berlin under Karl Holl (a historical theologian associated with the Luther renaissance) and Adolf von Harnack, a liberal church historian who regarded Bonhoeffer as a protégé and potential successor.
  - To Harnack's dismay, Bonhoeffer elected to devote himself not to church history but instead to the study of dogmatic theology, esp. Christology and ecclesiology.
- Dietrich's doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum communio (The Communion of the Saints)*; supervised by Reinhold Seeberg and completed in 1927 when Bonhoeffer

was only 21 years old; publ. 1929), was hailed by Karl Barth as a “theological miracle.”

- The dissertation discussed the importance of “Christ existing as community,” i.e. it aimed to discover the nature of the concrete Christian community in which the life of following Christ takes shape.
- Since Bonhoeffer had not yet attained the minimum age for ordination and needed practical experience in ministry, he took a job as an assistant curate in a parish that provided for the spiritual needs of the German business community in Barcelona, Spain (1928).
  - Bonhoeffer’s ministry coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression and he saw firsthand the tremendous loss of hope people suffered when people lost their means of making a living and were plunged into poverty.
- In 1929-1930 Bonhoeffer visited the USA for a year of studies at Union Seminary in New York, where he studied with Reinhold Niebuhr and befriended a black student from Alabama, the Rev. Frank Fisher, and worshiped at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.
  - At this point a significant change occurred in Bonhoeffer; he later spoke of this by saying simply that he had become a Christian.
- Returning to Germany to take a position at the University of Berlin (1932-1933), he found German academic and social life very much under the shadow of the emerging Nazi movement.
  - By 1933 Nazi sympathizers had been appointed to positions of oversight in the state church and vigorous anti-Jewish policies were issued.
  - Bonhoeffer worked to mobilize others to oppose the state’s intrusion into the church and its attempts to manipulate the church and the Gospel.
    - Meeting with fairly limited support, he left his teaching post and became pastor of two German speaking congregations in London (1933-1935) and urged the European churches to speak out against German militarism and Hitler’s subversion of the German church, asking them to look beyond nationalism and national self-protection.
- Bonhoeffer later returned to Germany to become the director of an illegal seminary of the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde (in Pomerania, near the Baltic Sea).
  - Life at the seminary was ordered by a regime of
    - common prayer,
    - biblical readings,
    - meditation,
    - 
    - service to others, and Bonhoeffer’s pastoral lectures on biblical themes.
      - Besides *Spiritual Care*, this also included
        - *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) and
        - *Life Together* (1939).
  - The seminary was closed by the Gestapo.

- Bonhoeffer was later arrested, imprisoned in 1943 and executed on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer is uneasy about the way that the Church's message about Jesus Christ has been marginalized and reinterpreted in ways that fundamentally undermine its integrity.

- existential philosophies emerging from the Enlightenment and Romanticism (see e.g. p. 48 on Bonhoeffer's awareness of secularization and religious indifference and p. 49 on the philosophies issues from the liberal Romantic tradition) ;
- psychological interpretations of human behavior (see below);
- control of the church by the state and the bending of Gospel and church to suit the interests/tastes of the culture/contemporary society (culture-Protestantism)

The Word and authority of God in Christ alone asserted over against and in confrontation with human autonomy (see also p. 63).

### Spiritual care as proclamation

- The work of the Church and of its ministers is proclamation (even caring for the soul is a form of proclamation--see p. 30), principally through the office of preaching and this invites others to become subject to God (not to any human being or human message), so that God (not any human being) may act.

### Two different yet related types of proclamation: The distinction between spiritual care and preaching

- The aim or mission of spiritual care (i.e. the minister silently listening and subsequently proclaiming the Word in a counseling situation so that the Word may be actual and concrete in life) is to point to the God who alone can be trusted to provide what is truly needed, while confronting, challenging and eliminating every false hope and comfort (see p. 49).
  - This transcends the psychological task of adjusting the emotions or seeking to restore the capacity for self-care or social functionality.
  - "Christ and his victory over health and sickness, luck and misfortune, birth and death must be proclaimed" (p. 30).
- Spiritual care aims to address the person who is no longer able to hear the divine word of forgiveness in the Gospel proclamation and has therefore sought refuge in an inferior substitute, namely mere morality and self-forgiveness ("the grace I grant to myself" [p. 33]; note the connection with the autonomy by which one rebels against God and seeks self-justification).
- These substitutes must be identified and recognized by name by the afflicted person before such sins can be dealt with. "We must bring the other person to speech. One must find the point at which he has become indifferent to God's Word" (p. 40), avoiding and rejecting all excuses, pretences and hiding. (See also p. 62.)

In his book *Life Together* (p. 112) Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in

it, the more disastrous is his isolation. *Sin wants to remain unknown*. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. *The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged*. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Ps. 107:16)."

Bonhoeffer similarly comments in *Spiritual Care* (p. 32), "Spiritual care does not want to bring about competence, build character, or produce certain types of persons. Instead, it uncovers sin and creates hearers of the Gospel. "

- "Suggested changes in lifestyle are not much help; only God's offer of forgiveness can come as help" (p. 34).
- Failure to deal with unrecognized and unacknowledged sins leads one to misunderstand the forgiveness offered in the Gospel as a "cheap grace" which is superficial, transitory and can never lead to change; indeed such cheap grace is actually an evil because it encourages one to become indifferent, hardhearted, callous, spiteful toward God [accusing God] and confirmed in bold, impenitent justification of sin.
  - As a result, God's Word is no longer accepted as God's Word and "[t]he person is cheated out of a salutary life in awe of God" (p. 31).

#### Spiritual Care and the Concept of Office

- While all who have faith in Jesus Christ may be regarded as priests and therefore capable of providing spiritual care for others, the same cannot be said of the public preaching.
- Those who would be ordained as preachers of the Gospel require a special calling and commission from God, since only God can make it possible for them to preach in such a way that their words become His Word to His people. (And this happens solely because of God's faithfulness, not by human position, competence, ability, experience, virtue or personal worthiness.)
- There is thus a distinction between spiritual care and preaching and not all who offer spiritual care are qualified to preach. At the same time, those who preach may also fittingly offer spiritual care because they too are part of the universal priesthood of those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

#### Proclamation of the Law and Gospel

- Proclamation must present the Law as God's commandment and the Gospel as the means of deliverance and help. Insofar as spiritual care is related to proclamation, it must have the same structure.
- Psychologized "spiritual care" that aims only to offer advice or practical help in times of stress, anxiety, distress or crisis, for example, would be a spiritual failure because it proclaims one's innocence and tries to soothe anxiety and deal with the

felt need or perceived problem by looking for additional resources without giving oneself wholly over to the Word of God in submission and trust.

- By this means, one holds back a part (or parts) of one's life from God, not granting that God has the right to be Lord over our whole person and all the different aspects of our lives.
  - "It must become clear that everything necessary for our help is to be found in the Word of God and that it is essential for us to listen to the Word (p. 34).
  - "Only God can fill in the hole by breaking in upon a life...Comfort comes only when God becomes more important to the mourner than anything else, including questions about the fate of the dead" (p. 35).
- Only where a specific sin has been confessed and acknowledged for what it truly is (i.e., the judgment of the Law as God's standard has been accepted), can the word of forgiveness given in the Gospel be extended through Word and sacrament and the person progress to obedience.

#### Psychotherapy No Answer

- "It is similar with a sick person, who loves the condition of sickness. He enjoys being comforted and frequently takes pleasure in his need. He seeks human counsel that will support his psychological condition and soothe him. He loves discussion. But as soon as the advice turns into a commandment, or God's Word cuts off his word, he will start to argue. Then he won't want to listen anymore...No pastoral conversation is possible without constant prayer. Other people must know that I stand before God as I stand before them. I depend upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There is no immediate path to another person. The path to the Christian brother leads by way of prayer and hearing God's Word. No psychology is able to help me find the way to another person's soul. That path is grounded in the mediatorial function of Christ. Christ the mediator stands between me and God, between me and my brother. Therefore spiritual care never seeks to exercise direct psychic influence..." (p. 35)
- "The other person is a sinner whom God's mercy wants to encounter. That is the difference between spiritual care and psychotherapy, for which the method of investigation is all-important. Spiritual care puts no stock in such methods. There are no "psychologically interesting cases" for spiritual care; to approach the matter in such a way would be a disavowal of the office. What is supposed to be learned that is new beyond sin? The pastor remains premethodical and prepsychological, in the best sense naïve" (p. 36).
- Bonhoeffer goes on to argue that instead of solving problems, psychotherapy simply creates a new form of dependence, submission and control in the relationship between the patient and the doctor.
- The pastor must refuse all such attempts to create dependence upon himself (or any other human being) and point the person instead to dependence upon the



Word through faith and prayer. This is not to deny the familial love which we have for each other, but this is not where our dependence does lie or should lie. " (Only those who have received spiritual care and do make confession should be allowed to offer spiritual care and hear confessions.)

- "At the cross of Christ we learn to see ourselves and others as sinners. What sin can be greater than the godlessness which Christ took to the cross? We show an impoverished understanding of the cross of Christ if we are 'shocked' by a great sin which we learn about, for example, in confession. There are the realities all of us deal with as sinners. At the cross of Christ we learn to look such things in the eye and in this process become aware of our nearness to others. In contrast to this, the psychotherapist, even if he grounds himself as much as possible on the reality of sin, remains for the other person, (1) too distant, since he wants to overcome evil by his own powers; (2) too close, since he is too immediate in his relationship to the sick person; and (3) too erotic, since he--in distinction from the love of Christ--builds only on human relations" (p. 38).
- "The pastor can learn very little from the psychologist, basically only to observe, to evaluate, and to analyze. This is certainly not decisive for his service" (pp. 37-38).

At the same time, Bonhoeffer is willing to admit that Feuerbach and Freud were right to identify projection of needs onto the perceived world as a real problem: "Seen from a psychological perspective, the 'weak' Christ removes at a stroke the powerful God wished for by weak egos. The cosmic screen on which the religious person projects fantasies of compensatory power is chopped down. In its place stand the cross and the Christ who frees religious people from infantile dependence, sending them back to find God in their strengths, knowledge, responsibility and happiness" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 70)

Bonhoeffer also does not dismiss the role that human response can play in change of life (although as a response to God's Word and initiative): "The 'I can't' is often a psychophysical matter; it must be totally or unconditionally turned around. We must find the point at which the other person can at least make a partial beginning to change the destructive relationship under his own power. A father is difficult and unpleasant is well served when he is shown that he can change his attitude by his own power....I surmise that 'I can't' means, at bottom, 'I won't.' 'I can't' reveals an accusation against the Creator, since I appropriate to myself the right to make an exception to God's judgment. With the words 'I cannot do otherwise' I declare adultery, for example, as my nature and also as my own good law." Yet when the person is reminded and exhorted that they can, with God's help, do these things, excuses fall away and progress can be made.

## **Discussion**

(1) Read

- the Bethel Confession (August 1933) and
- the Barmen Confession on the Identity of the Church (1934)

These documents were written at the time of Adolf Hitler's rise to power and represent the responses (respectively) of the Lutheran confessional church leaders and a coalition of pastors from the Lutheran, Reformed and Union churches. From a close reading of these documents, identify the specific concerns the authors have about Nazi Germany and "Nazi Christians."

(2) Discuss relation of Bonhoeffer's concept of spiritual care to the following, noting both similarities and crucial differences:

- Pietism
- the ideals of the Enlightenment (particularly those ideals that directly contributed to secularization)
- psychotherapy (as an alternative [secular] means to understand human ills and pursue well-being)

(3) Evaluate Bonhoeffer's contribution to the debate in the modern period about the nature and mission of the church and sacred and secular accounts of well being.

- What are the strengths and potential weaknesses of Bonhoeffer's argument?