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WHAT TO DO WITH THE SWORD: THE APPROPRIATENESS OF
VIOLENCE IN CHRISTIAN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN THE THEOLOGIES OF
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts (Theology)

by

Allen Tennison

April, 1996

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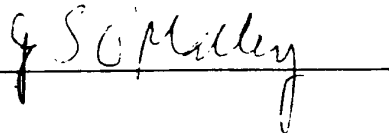
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "G. S. Miller", is written over a horizontal line.

Allen Tennison

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CHAPTER ONE: IS VIOLENCE APPROPRIATE?

Introduction

A major problem first faced by the student of civil disobedience is the determination of its definition. A look at the major proponents of civil disobedience will soon reveal differences in the way most defined the term. One of the primary differences concerns whether to allow acts of violence to fall under the label of civil disobedience. While there are no major proponents that readily support violence, there are some who see violence as an acceptable option in extreme situations. Other proponents want to make nonviolence a defining characteristic of civil disobedience.

This is no less a problem in the more select study of Christian civil disobedience. Two of the major Christian theologians and practitioners of civil disobedience in the twentieth century, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, disagreed as to the appropriateness of violence. King made nonviolence the central element of his civil disobedience. Bonhoeffer not only saw violence as appropriate under certain circumstances (very *extreme* circumstances), but was himself involved in a plot to kill the leader of his own government-Adolph Hitler. It is hoped that by understanding the positions of these two men, as well as the similarities and differences between their positions, a better understanding of the appropriateness of violence in Christian civil disobedience will be reached.

Statement of the Problem

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to construct a basis toward a comprehensive theory of the appropriate place of violence in civil disobedience for the Christian by contrasting and comparing the extent to which violence is sanctioned in relation to civil disobedience in the theologies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Sub-Problems

1. The first sub-problem is to determine the extent to which violence is sanctioned in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s understanding of civil disobedience.

2. The second sub-problem is to determine the extent to which violence is sanctioned in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of civil disobedience.
3. The third sub-problem is to contrast and compare the extent to which violence is sanctioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
4. The fourth sub-problem is to take common elements from both theologians and from that construct a basis toward a comprehensive theory of the appropriateness of violence in Christian civil disobedience.

Review of Related Literature

A study of the history of Christian civil disobedience does not solve the problem. For those who view the church broadly in history as the "people of God," examples of resistance to government go as far back as the Old Testament. In the lectures of Henri Clavier, a professor of Biblical theology, on "The Duty and the Right of Resistance according to the Bible and to the Church" given at Oxford, he traces church resistance to the state from the Old Testament to the German church resistance in World War II. According to Clavier, one of the greatest examples of resistance to authority is found with the prophets of Israel-whose obedience to the highest authority gave them the grounds to disobey all others, "Whenever God so ordered, the prophets not only resisted the State or the clergy but also the people."¹

Even the greatest individual model for the Christian, Jesus Christ, provides an example of resistance for Clavier. Jesus represents the ultimate expression of what Clavier calls the "prophetic figure. He possess every salient feature of the prophet, including the spirit of resistance to the utmost degree. There is nothing in his bold or noble behavior which suggests passivity or inertia, but there is an active opposition against any human authority which tends to usurp the sole authority of God."² About Matthew 22:21, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's", Clavier says, "The emphasis must be laid on the second part of Jesus' statement: but above all, do

¹ Henri Clavier, The Duty and the Right of Resistance according to the Bible and to the Church, (Oxford: Strasbourg-Oxford, 1956), 29.

² Ibid., 33.

not forget to 'render unto God the things that are God's' Sometimes it happens that Caesar threatens God's work with destruction. Whenever this occurs, there is nothing to be rendered unto to Caesar other than fierce opposition. . . ."³ While many critics can point out that in the early church there was very little "fierce opposition" to the state in regards to being good citizens, and that there are New Testament verses which advise strong support for government, the early church certainly did not obey the government in all areas as the very proof of their existence shows.

Whether taken from Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than man," or from the history of the early church itself, it can consistently be argued that essential to its being was a recognition that the state was not supreme and in some instances must be disobeyed on moral (i.e. religious) grounds. According to Charles Villa-Vicencio, a professor of religious studies, there has always been a confrontational element in church-state relations, "The ethical implication of radical monotheism which forced the early church to reject emperor veneration became the cornerstone of church-state relations. When obedience to civil authority means disobedience to God, the Christian is obliged to disobey civil authority. The church has affirmed this guiding principle throughout its history"⁴ Villa-Vicencio goes on to quote one early Church father, Tertullian, in his *Apology* (Chapter IV), a classic critique of civil laws and appeals to a higher order as to their justice, "For it is neither the number of their years nor the dignity of their maker that commends them, but simply that they are just; and therefore, when their injustice is recognized, they are deservedly condemned, even though they condemn"⁵

There are ample examples of early church disobedience to the state, and not just in matters directly relating to their existence as a church, but also in matters relating to individual concerns of conscience. Clavier cites Eusebuis as a source of information concerning such examples as, "a soldier named Basilides, serving in Alexandria at the beginning of the third century, refused to take an oath, saying: 'I am a Christian.' A

³ Ibid., 38-39.

⁴ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), xxii.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

centurion named Marcellus, decided to resign because he would not take part in the sacrificial meals or the Emperor's day. In such instances, the Hippolytan Cannons (n 72) prescribed disobedience."⁶

This call to disobedience against the state can be seen through the centuries of Church history, sometimes coming from opposing sides of the Church. Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologiae*, II, a, 9, 42, made public welfare the deciding factor as to the validity of a government, "A tyrannic government is not right, because it is not ordained for public welfare, but for the particular interest of the tyrant The overthrow of that regime does not have the character of a sedition Nor the opponents, but the tyrant himself is seditious" ⁷ On this point, even reformer Martin Luther (no strong supporter of Aquinas) agreed that there was a certain criteria for disobeying the government-the commands of God, "What if a prince is in the wrong? Are his people bound to follow him then too? Answer: No, for it is no one's duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men [Acts 5:29]."⁸ Clavier brings one final example of a major Church theologian supporting disobedience against the state-John Calvin-who represents a common response to this idea, "There is no doubt that for Calvin, resistance and armed resistance is a right and duty in certain circumstances; it may be God's special call but the definition of these circumstances is difficult and Calvin shuns anarchy above everything."⁹

The Church, as a whole, has never been anti-government. Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and possibly even the apostle Paul would never have supported any type of rebellion if that rebellion led to anarchy-even if the only other option was tyranny. But they all recognized, with other theologians throughout Church history, the right and command to sometimes

⁶ Clavier, 64.

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority," In Luther's Works, v. 45 of 55 vols, ed. and trans. Helmut T. Lehman, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1962), 125.

⁹ Clavier, 87.

disobey temporal authority. It is in this vein that we speak when we talk about civil disobedience as a practice of the Christian church.

Although disobedience against the state, in some form or another, has been practiced by the church for centuries, Robert Hall sees nineteenth century America as the birthplace of civil disobedience as a recognized, independent concept.¹⁰ Probably the best exponent of this concept during that time was Henry David Thoreau. In his fundamentally important essay, "Civil Disobedience," he lays the framework for his understanding of civil disobedience, which consists of individuals defying what they consider to be unjust laws on the authority of their own individual consciences. Those who disobey should be willing to pay the penalty for that disobedience, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for the just man is also a prison."¹¹ While a nonviolent man himself, according to Lynn Buzzard and Paula Campbell, Thoreau did believe violence was to be allowed in certain circumstances, as evidenced in his praise of the violent abolitionist John Brown.¹² As Thoreau makes the individual supreme in authority, the question still remains as to whether a Christian, whose final authority rests higher than individual conscience, can be violent in civil disobedience.

According to Tolstoy, one of the first Christian proponents of civil disobedience as a recognized concept, the answer is a decisive *No*. His work, The Kingdom of God is Within You, is dedicated to convincing the reader that, because of Christ's command to "resist not evil," any resistance to the state (injustice should be resisted) must be resistance without force (i.e. violence).¹³

Tolstoy's work influenced another great proponent of nonviolent civil disobedience, Gandhi. Buzzard and Campbell give a good explanation of his philosophy of nonviolent

¹⁰ Robert T. Hall, The Morality of Civil Disobedience, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 13.

¹¹ Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Other Writings by Henry David Thoreau, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch, (New York: Bantam, 1962), 94.

¹² Lynn Buzzard and Paula Campbell, Holy Disobedience, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1984), 87.

¹³ Leo Tolstoy, The Kingdom of God is Within You, trans. Constance Grant, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 184.

resistance called *Satyagraha*. Unlike traditional understandings of nonviolent civil disobedience, the end result of *Satyagraha* was not merely social change to correct injustice but also the conversion of the oppressor who causes the injustice.¹⁴ His thought has been as foundational a study in the field of nonviolence as Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience," as been to the study of civil disobedience.

Resistance to the state has been practiced by the church since its beginning. But civil disobedience as an independent concept has not been recognized for more than a century. During its short history, there has been much debate concerning the place given to violence in civil disobedience. Thoreau would allow for violence while both Tolstoy and Gandhi were set against it as a matter of principle. In the study of Christian civil disobedience we also see these two extremes, best represented in this century by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is hoped that by studying these two men and their theologies concerning civil disobedience and violence, a greater understanding of violence's appropriateness in Christian civil disobedience will be reached.

Theoretical Framework

Hypotheses

1. The theoretical understandings of the relation of violence to civil disobedience in Bonhoeffer and King are so intertwined with their theologies that they can be understood apart from the historical settings in which they were developed.
2. These two understandings of King and Bonhoeffer share enough commonality as to allow comparison between them.

Definitions

1. Civil disobedience is defined as a willful act of disobedience, on moral grounds, of the laws of state.
2. Violence is defined as a physical act of force used against a person or an object.

Presuppositions

1. Civil disobedience is an acceptable action for a Christian.

¹⁴ Buzzard and Campbell, 93.

2. There are points of contact in the theologies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer concerning the appropriateness of violence in civil disobedience.

Delimitations

1. While there are many frameworks in which to view civil disobedience, civil disobedience will be discussed only with reference to the Christian faith.
2. This paper will focus only upon the understandings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr.
3. A basis toward understanding the appropriateness of violence in civil disobedience within the context of the Christian faith will be sought, not a full exposition of how the contemporary Christian is to act in civil disobedience.

Organization

The organization of this paper will proceed along the lines set forth in the problem statement. Following the brief discussion on the problems of defining civil disobedience as it relates to violence, the second chapter will be dedicated to understanding the principle of nonviolence in the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., i.e. why he supported nonviolence as central to his conception of Christian civil disobedience. The third chapter will focus on the resort to violence in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, i.e. how he could support violence as an option for the Christian against the state. The fourth chapter will center on points of contact between the understandings of violence in civil disobedience in Bonhoeffer and King. The questions to be answered in this section are, "On what did they agree?", "Why did they disagree?" and "Can the answers to the previous two questions supply us with a basis for understanding the appropriateness of violence in Christian civil disobedience?" Finally, the last chapter will offer a summary of this paper's findings along with some closing comments.

Justification for the Study

In the United States, the church finds itself in conflict with the state over various issues, not the least of which is abortion. This is only representative of the conflict between the church and state all over the world in this century. Many groups feel that civil disobedience is not only an appropriate but a necessary step for the Christian to take. But

another question they have to face is what place will be given to violence. On this question, traditional supporters of civil disobedience are at odds. Some, like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, are strongly against violence on all counts while others (i.e. certain anti-abortion groups) may feel that violence is appropriate in certain instances.

The differing opinions in the tradition of Christian civil disobedience in the twentieth century are best characterized by two theologians who represented different sides in this debate, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. By studying the differences between these two men, and their theologies, we should be able to construct a basis toward answering the question as to the appropriateness of violence in Christian civil disobedience. The determination of violence's place in Christian civil disobedience can happen only after such groundwork is first laid. This determination, and hence the groundwork, is important not only for Christian opponents of abortion but for all members of the Church determined to act, in certain circumstances, in opposition to the state.

CHAPTER TWO:
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND THE PRINCIPLE OF NONVIOLENCE

The impact Martin Luther King, Jr. had made on America was never more evident than on April 5, 1968-the day after his assassination. Although there were riots throughout the country, the city that suffered the most was undoubtedly Washington, D.C., where, according to King biographer Stephen Oates, “711 fires blazed against the sky and 10 people died, among them a white man dragged from his car and stabbed. From the air, Washington looked as though it had been bombed; smoke even obscured the Capitol.”¹⁵

The response to his death alone is enough to reveal the place this man had in the hearts of many Americans. Of those who refused a place in their hearts, he tried to make an impression on their consciences. Martin Luther King, Jr. is recognized today as one of the greatest leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement and one of the most influential men in recent American history.

It was as a religious leader, though, that King contributed to America. Everything King accomplished-whether in leading marches, holding press conferences, writing books, or delivering speeches-was as a Baptist minister. His goals for America, the motivations behind his work, and even his explanations of his movement cannot be divorced from his religious understanding. As John Cartwright, professor of social ethics at Boston University, reminds us, “Of the variety of images that come to mind when one mentions the name ‘Martin Luther King, Jr.’, the only one that truly does justice to the whole of his personhood is simply that of a committed Christian minister . . . he based his words and deeds on his Christian convictions.”¹⁶ Even the non-Christian sources which King admitted had influenced him do not suffice in explaining his thought or work.

His contributions to Christian theology, primarily in the realm of Christian activism, are astounding and worthy of study. They have been so tremendous that it led one

¹⁵ Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 494.

¹⁶ John H. Cartwright, “The Social Eschatology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. David J. Garrow, 3 vols. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 161.

theologian to argue, concerning the debate around liberation strategies, “Anyone who examines the issue in the context of black theology soon discovers that the theological and socio-political ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr., is the inescapable, but unacknowledged, backdrop for the discussion.”¹⁷ King’s greatest contribution to this debate comes from his understanding of nonviolence—both as a method in social action and as a way of life. King’s views of nonviolence as a way of life, as seen within the context of Christian civil disobedience, are necessary for study by anyone interested either in the study of American civil disobedience or in the rights and responsibilities of a Christian in regards to civil disobedience.

As stated by Ira Zepp, in a thorough account of the influences on King’s theology, The Social Vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., “King stands in the tradition of the classical understanding of civil disobedience. Out of obedience to a higher law one can follow the dictates of his conscience and break the law. And out of respect for the manmade law of the state, one accepts the consequences of his act, a punishment of some sort.”¹⁸ King’s first introduction to the theory of civil disobedience was Thoreau’s “Essay on Civil Disobedience,” which he discovered while studying at Morehouse College. He reread the piece several times because it fascinated him.¹⁹

The work, though, only helped King by introducing him to the idea. The main influence on King was his own religious tradition, “King’s resistance is in the tradition of Israel’s prophets and the early Christians. It is rooted in the First Commandment and Peter’s affirmation in Acts 5, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”²⁰ King saw the practice of civil disobedience as a necessary action arising out of his calling as a minister of the gospel, “. . . a minister cannot preach the glories of heaven while ignoring social conditions in his own community that cause men an earthly hell.”²¹ His thinking at this

¹⁷ William R. Jones, “Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Mao, Martin, or Malcolm?” Chicago Theological Seminary Register 73, no.1 (winter 1983): 38.

¹⁸ Ira G. Zepp Jr., The Social Vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1989), 121.

¹⁹ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 91.

²⁰ Zepp, 119.

point was strongly influenced by the work of Walter Raushenbusch, author of Christianity and the Social Crisis and one of the leading proponents of the social gospel. In reading his work while at Crozer Seminary, King found a concern for the social conditions of humanity tied up with the call of the Christian religion, “The projection of a social gospel is, in my opinion, the true witness of a Christian life.”²² It was Raushenbusch who showed King that, “any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried. It well has been said, ‘a religion that ends with the individual, ends.’”²³

This concern for social conditions had further implications for King, regarding the relationship between the church and state—a much larger theological issue of which civil disobedience is but a part. If the church was called to preach salvation to the souls of men only, then it only combats the state when the state attempts to thwart the deliverance of that message to individuals. But if the church is concerned, as well, with society as a whole and the conditions of people in that society, then it is to be a voice from God to the state that helps shape the society, “The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, and never its tool.”²⁴

This was the King’s understanding behind his explanation in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Arrested because he led a protest against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, King’s actions were questioned through a letter to the editor by eight local ministers. In this reply, he stated he was there because there was injustice in Birmingham, and his job as a minister was to combat that injustice because it hurts everyone, “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of

²¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope, ed. James M. Washington, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 346.

²² King, Testament of Hope, 345.

²³ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 91.

²⁴ King, Strength to Love, (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 47.

mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”²⁵ To those who questioned why he simply did not minister to the oppressed with comfort rather than take on the oppressors himself, he replied in his earlier work that to not actively resist the oppressor is tantamount to helping the oppression continue,

“When oppressed people willingly accept their oppression, they only serve to give the oppressor a convenient justification for his acts. Often the oppressor goes along unaware of the evil involved in his oppression so long as the oppressed accepts it. So in order to be true to one’s conscience and true to God, a righteous man has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system.”²⁶ Or as King was often found of saying, “Noncooperation with evil is a much a moral obligation as the cooperation with good.”²⁷

Is there still not a moral problem, though, if “noncooperation with evil” requires breaking laws when that evil is supported by the state? King addressed this question directly in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” with his distinction between just and unjust laws, an idea which he borrowed from Aquinas.²⁸ According to King, whenever the state enforces a law that is unjust, then it actually shows a respect for the idea of law itself if the unjust law is broken. One must, though, out of respect to the authority of the state and in hope that undeserved punishment will bring community outcry, be willing to suffer the penalty for the breaking of that law, “any individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.”²⁹

²⁵ King, Why We Can’t Wait, 79.

²⁶ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 51.

²⁷ King, Testament of Hope, 48.

²⁸ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 85.

²⁹ King, Why We Can’t Wait, 86.

This is, in a nutshell, King's understanding of the nature of civil disobedience. But it still does not answer the question of how to determine the justice of a law? That determination King derives from his most basic philosophical position, personalism-the theory that personality is the ultimate reality in the universe and is the way in which to view God.³⁰ Because of its importance as a foundation, every thing that could be defined by personality (i.e. human beings) is important. Theologically speaking, everything that reflects the image of the Ultimate, God, has supreme value, "Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. Every man must be respected because God loves him. Human worth lies in relatedness to God-an individual has value because he has value to God."³¹ Any law that violates or degrades human worth is an unjust law and should be disobeyed.

It is hard to measure the impact King's childhood, growing up in segregated Atlanta, had on his thought regarding civil disobedience. While King was aware of legalized racism from a very young age,³² he always explained his understanding of it through the categories and terms he learned in his graduate and post-graduate studies. Even in King's constant attacks on segregation laws or laws that impede the practice of full citizenship by blacks, he appealed to the attack on personality, this violation of human worth, as the sign of why the law was wrong, "The denial of the vote not only deprives the Negro of his constitutional rights-but what is even worse-it degrades him as a human being."³³ Certainly his childhood gave him an insight into the societal problems of America-but it was his later studies, as well as his religious background, that helped him to explain them. He knew that, morally, any unjust law should be opposed, but it was not until after he had received his doctorate and accepted a pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama that he

³⁰ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 100.

³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 97.

³² Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man*, (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1964), 19.

³³ King, *Testament of Hope*, 22.

answered the question of how one should oppose an unjust law. This answer lies at the heart of King's intellectual contribution-the way of nonviolence.

According to professor of religion Louis Hodges, there are two ways to discuss nonviolence-as a theology or as a method. Each is very different, "As theology, nonviolence is a 'way of life,' a moral-theological principle to which one commits himself. As a form of social action, nonviolence is simply a methodological instrument As theology it is itself the goal; as method it is merely instrumental in attaining a goal."³⁴ Although nonviolence was used as a method in King's campaigns and protests, he personally chose it as a way of life. This personal choice grew out of his religious convictions, "King's presuppositions for his interpretation of nonviolent resistance was derived from Christian theology and ethics, especially Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and the concept of agape."³⁵

King's decision to use nonviolence as a method and practice it as a way of life actually grew out of his first social protest, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It was as a pastor that King became involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott where he, along with fellow ministers and civil rights leaders in the black community of Montgomery, Alabama, decided on the boycott to protest the arrest of a black seamstress, Rosa Parks, who broke the law by refusing to give her bus seat to a white man. When the peaceful year-long (and highly publicized) boycott resulted in a Supreme Court mandate ending segregation in Montgomery buses, King found himself a recognized voice on the American scene. He had led a victorious, nonviolent crusade; yet he was more recognized for his stress on nonviolence than for the success of the campaign itself. This successful end instilled in King an important lesson; he explained in Stride Toward Freedom, "our experience has shown that social change can take place without violence."³⁶

³⁴ Louis Wendell Hodges, "Christian ethics and nonviolence," Religion in Life 31, no. 2 (spring 1962) : 228-229.

³⁵ Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 48.

³⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom, (New York: Harper, 1958), 188.

During the boycott, there was no conscious decision to practice nonviolence based on some prior philosophical framework (King worked that out later). Instead, this decision was based on a prior commitment, by the entire group involved, to the gospel. King writes that in the first days of the protest, none of the words now associated with the group's method-passive resistance, noncooperation-was used by the group themselves. Instead of those phrases, "the phrase most often heard was 'Christian love.' It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love."³⁷ Even after King delved into a deep philosophical understanding of nonviolence-and taught that to his comrades-he still understand the spirit of it as being entirely Christian in nature. Many times he said of the nonviolent approach, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation and Gandhi furnished the method."³⁸

Gandhi's influence on King has been overrated to a degree. King was a believer in nonviolence because of his own religious commitment. In fact, one of the reasons King was open to using Gandhi's ideas during the Montgomery Boycott was because, "the movement was already based on the solid rock of Negro religious tradition."³⁹

While King was aware of Gandhi before the boycott, it was not until a white woman referred, in a letter to the local paper, to the resemblance his movement bore to what was occurring in Montgomery that the leaders of the boycott began to use Gandhi as an authority in their interviews with reporters.⁴⁰ King also began to study Gandhi in connection with what he was doing and, according to professors Ira Zepp and Kenneth Smith, soon found a great resource in explaining nonviolence "at the level of strategy and tactics."⁴¹ King wrote that he had despaired of the power of love at any level beyond that

³⁷ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 84.

³⁸ King, Strength of Love, 139.

³⁹ Bennett, 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Smith and Zepp, 55.

of individual use until studying the writings of Gandhi, “I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”⁴²

Gandhi himself, while being influenced mostly by his own Hindu religious tradition, derived much from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, especially from the principle of returning good for evil, “This became Gandhi’s guiding principle and the source of his many experiments with the truth.”⁴³ Another very important idea King received from Gandhi was the unity between things that are usually separated, “The refusal to separate the individual and the social, the spiritual and the secular, the ethical and the religious, God and man, struck a responsive cord in King who had for two years been molded by Raushenbusch’s theology of the social gospel.”⁴⁴

With the experience of a boycott, the influence of Gandhi, and his own religious motivation, King developed his notion of nonviolent resistance with six defining characteristics. In some of his books and many articles, King used these six characteristics in describing to the readers the nature of nonviolence as both a method and way of life.

The first characteristic of nonviolent resistance is that of resistance itself. King continually had to defend his method from those critics who called it an escape for cowards, “My study of Gandhi convinced me that true pacifism is not nonresistance to evil, but nonviolent resistance to evil . . . Gandhi resisted evil with as much vigor and power as the violent resister, but he resisted with love instead of hate.”⁴⁵

The aim of that “resistance of love” makes up the second characteristic. It “does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding.”⁴⁶ By giving nonviolent resistance this goal, it took on the character of a ministry to the

⁴² King, Strength to Love, 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 81-85.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁵ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 98.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

oppressors, as professor John Raines noticed, “A tremendous insight of King’s was that the oppressed have a moral mission to the oppressor.”⁴⁷

King’s faith in the ability of his method to influence and change those in society “was rooted in the liberal tenet that all men have an innate moral capacity which, when actualized by love, will compel them to respond in a similar fashion.”⁴⁸ King had a deep trust that even in the worst of men, “there is something in human nature that can respond to goodness. So that man is neither innately good nor is he innately bad; he has potentialities for both to put it in theological terms, the image of God is never totally gone.”⁴⁹ It was the effect of changing people’s minds that King credited as the reason for success of his campaigns and crusades, “It was successful, also, because as this group of underprivileged and deprived citizens were beaten and humiliated by police and the KKK, the conscience of America was pricked.”⁵⁰

King had a powerful metaphor for nonviolence, “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.”⁵¹ When the situation was reversed and King became one of the oppressors, in what he considered an unjust war in Vietnam, he wrote in his last book, The Trumpet of Conscience, “Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when they help us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of our selves we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers we have called the opposition.”⁵² This “sword” cut both ways.

⁴⁷ John C. Raines, “Righteous Resistance and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. David J. Garrow, 3 vols. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 738.

⁴⁸ Smith and Zepp, 66.

⁴⁹ King, Testament of Hope, 48.

⁵⁰ Zepp, 123.

⁵¹ King, Why We Can’t Wait, 14.

⁵² King, The Trumpet of Conscience,

Another characteristic of this “sword that heals,” closely related to the prior one, is that it is aimed “against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing evil.”⁵³ King recognized that if the campaigns he led against oppression instead became campaigns against the oppressor (which would include any struggle that advocated violence), then whatever victories they won would only invoke more hate from the oppressors, which was the cause of that oppression from the very beginning, “I am convinced that if we succumb to the temptation to use violence in our struggle for freedom, unborn generations will be recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to them will be a never-ending reign of chaos.”⁵⁴ This characteristic of nonviolence sprang from a unifying concept in King’s thought—the determinative relationship between means and ends. He believed that it was a mistake to separate means from the end at which they aim because the methods used will be a determining factor in the goal achieved, “Constructive ends can never give absolute moral justification to destructive means, because in the final analysis the end is preexistent in the mean.”⁵⁵ Whatever means used should be determined by the goal at which they are aimed.

What was the goal which required the supremacy of nonviolence in King’s struggle?

Everything King worked for, whether it was the abolition of segregation laws, the end to war in Vietnam or even the spiritual care of his congregation, was aimed at the realization of a human society characterized by equality, love and respect for all its members by all its members. He called this vision the “beloved community.” The centrality of this idea cannot be overstated because it “was the organizing principle of all of King’s thought and activity. His writings and his involvement in the civil rights movement were illustrations of and footnotes to his fundamental preoccupation with the actualization of an inclusive human community.”⁵⁶ King drew the idea for the “beloved community” from Christian tradition-

⁵³ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 102.

⁵⁴ King, *Strength To Love*, 6.

⁵⁵ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 92.

⁵⁶ Smith and Zepp, 119.

specifically from the belief in the eventual coming the kingdom of God.⁵⁷ Whatever was done to help bring about the coming of the kingdom must be in accordance with the way of the kingdom itself.

As the beloved community would be characterized by the brotherhood of all humanity, his movement for equality should bring together as many people as possible, “King frequently called upon Whites to help in his various campaigns. He attempted to make the base of the movement as broad and as universal as possible. He saw the movement as a preview of the interrelatedness of human existence that would characterize the Beloved community.”⁵⁸ And for those who refused to join or even fought against his movement, King felt that only nonviolence would create an atmosphere in which they would join the community once his goals had been achieved—or that nonviolence was the only way to achieve the goal of the “beloved community” because only it could create an environment where the vanquished could join with the victors. The positive way many whites in Montgomery reacted after integration became reality only bolstered his belief in this aspect of nonviolence, “much of this residue of good will has come about because of our insistence on nonviolence. There are no white homes in Montgomery that have lost or injured ones as a result of racial clashes over the buses. Casualties of war keep alive postwar bitterness; fortunately Montgomery’s whites have no such casualties.”⁵⁹ No matter how hard the battle would be, violence of any sort would undo whatever short term victories were achieved.

Violence, though, can be a very attractive option when the opposition frequently uses it against you. The fourth characteristic of nonviolence dealt with this eventuality. It had to exhibit “a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation; to accept blows from the opponent without striking back.”⁶⁰ King also hoped this aspect of suffering would yield a positive outcome in that it would convince those uncommitted to the cause to join and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 184.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 103.

even convict those committed against the cause of the error of their ways, “King relied heavily on the good conscience of the oppressor and trusted he would respond to undeserved suffering.”⁶¹ In fact, King believed from his study of Gandhi that unearned suffering was key to the solution of prejudice-it was the only way progress could be achieved because “The appeal of suffering reaches beneath the rational and the conscious.”⁶²

Suffering was important to King the minister because of its redemptive quality. Not only could it convict the oppressor and enrage the observer, it would positively effect the character of the oppressed. Because of these contributions to everyone involved, undeserved suffering was very much a part of the nonviolence method. It was certainly appealing to the Christian minister as a central element of his faith, “I have lived . . . with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. There are some who still find the Cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation.”⁶³

As stated before, nonviolence for King was a way of life and not simply a method. He tried to convey this to everyone who joined in his resistance. In a speech to student leaders of sit-in movements, he stressed that resistance and nonviolence were made meaningful with the goal of reconciliation and should be done in that spirit, “The tactics of nonviolence without the spirit of nonviolence may become a new kind of violence.”⁶⁴ This stress on the spirit of nonviolence was the fifth characteristic King attributed to nonviolence. According to him, it “avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit. The nonviolent resister refuses to shoot his opponent but also refuses to hate him.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Zepp, 117.

⁶² Ibid., 105.

⁶³ King, Strength to Love, 141.

⁶⁴ Bennett, 114.

⁶⁵ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 103.

As a counteraction to hate, the spirit of nonviolence must be rooted in love. King was afraid that many would misunderstand what he meant by love. In Stride Toward Freedom, he gives a quick lesson in the Greek words signifying love, such as eros and philo. The love King is referring to is agape. There are four characteristics of this kind of love. It starts by loving other people for their own sake alone and arises from the need of the other person to belong to the human family. Agape is an active love that will go as far as it can to restore community. It recognizes that life is interrelated and how we treat others affects ourselves.⁶⁶

King needed to stress love as a necessary counteraction to hate because hate would be a strong temptation for any of the oppressed taking part in unearned suffering. Not only would hate would breed hate-just as violence breeds violence, but it was “just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity.”⁶⁷ King was against anything that hurt personality because it attacked the very image of God. Love, by recognizing that image in all people, brings us into closer relationship with God Himself, “We are called to this difficult task in order to realize a unique relationship with God We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.”⁶⁸ Love alone could help to actualize the “beloved community” as this community was the very kingdom of God.

Since King saw the “beloved community” in this way, he had a deep trust that regardless of what happened, the kingdom of God would eventually be established. He integrated this hope in his thinking as the sixth characteristic of nonviolence. Ultimately, nonviolence “is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. Consequently, the believer in nonviolence has deep faith in the future. This faith is another reason why the nonviolent resister can accept suffering without retaliation.”⁶⁹ This faith

⁶⁶ Ibid., 104-107.

⁶⁷ King, Strength To Love, 37.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁹ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 107.

was a source of great power that would enable nonviolent resisters to endure unearned suffering in their struggle for justice.

This aspect of King's understanding of nonviolence has led one scholar, Robert Franklin, to label his system of moral thought as an "Ethic of Hope." He writes, "King's faith, his theology and ethics, were empowered by the bold, determined theological virtue of hope Revolutionary hope is available to any person who believes in the God of the oppressed."⁷⁰ King understood himself and everyone else who fought for justice as being engaged in a partnership with God, one which he termed a "cosmic companionship." But whatever label he used, it expressed the same hope that meant so much to King in his fight, "The moral order of the universe, in spite of any and all appearances to the contrary, bends ultimately toward justice; one can trust that. The basis of human hope in the 'morality of the universe' is the 'eternality of God.' There was, he believed, a 'cosmic companionship' in the struggles of moral living."⁷¹ Nonviolence as a way of life, characterized by love, courageous resistance to injustice, refusal to attack the oppressor over the system of oppression, and a willingness to suffer without retaliation, would prevail in the end because the moral God would ultimately prevail.

Despite King's well-reasoned explanation of nonviolence, his views have constantly been under attack. King himself related the disagreement many of his peers in the Civil Rights Movement had with his stress on nonviolence.⁷² He answered those objections by attempting to show the superiority of nonviolence over violence. Practically speaking, violence would never be effective because in an all-out war with white oppressors because blacks were hopelessly outnumbered, "We do not need President Johnson reminding Negro rioters that they are outnumbered ten to one."⁷³ He rejected the argument that self-defense was moral and should be a viable option in his movement, not only because it was

⁷⁰ Robert Michael Franklin, Jr., "An Ethic of Hope: The Moral Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr." in *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. David J. Garrow, 3 vols. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 358.

⁷¹ Thomas S. J. Mikelson, "Cosmic Companionship: The Place of God in the Moral Reasoning of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 18, no. 2 (fall 1990) : 5.

⁷² King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 88.

⁷³ King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 56.

set against his understanding of nonviolence as a willingness to suffer, but also because any movement organized around self-defense would so blur the line between self-defense and violence that it would invite aggression regardless of the circumstances.⁷⁴ Nonviolence was also preferable to violence because it challenged the white myth of the Negro inferiority and propensity for violence, “Even the most reluctant are forced to recognize that no inferior people could choose and successfully pursue a course involving such extensive sacrifice, bravery and skill.”⁷⁵ Ultimately, though, nonviolence was preferred because of King’s desire for the “beloved community.”

A strong criticism lodged against King have come from those who support nonviolence and see in King’s method an inconsistency because the usual result of his marches and protests was a violent response. King himself was more than aware that his crusades against local injustice would cause tension within a town-he counted on it, “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”⁷⁶ In fact, it seemed that King needed to elicit a violent response from the oppressors in order to arouse the conscience of the nation. This is why his campaign was so successful in Birmingham, Alabama where the national government had to respond to the harsh treatment protesters were experiencing and why his campaign was defeated in Albany, Georgia where the Chief of Police reacted to the protesters through nonviolence-peacefully arresting them. According to James Colaiaco, this “underscored the fact that in order to achieve victory against segregation, the provocation of racist violence was essential.”⁷⁷

In defense of King, it should be recognized that even if he counted on violence, he cannot be blamed for its occurring. He simply knew that with the depth of racism in

⁷⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁵ King, Why We Can’t Wait, 132.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁷⁷ James A. Colaiaco, “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Paradox of Nonviolent Direct Action,” in Martin Luther and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. David J. Garrow, 3 vols. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 194. Originally published in Phylon 47 (1968), 21.

America, violence would be the inevitable outcome of any effective protest, “If Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolent method was paradoxical because it often provoked a violent response, the supporters of the racist system were responsible for that paradox.”⁷⁸ King did not push for a violent response from any group; his method of nonviolence was developed to make the best out of the violent response he knew was inevitable.

More recently, King’s thoughts on nonviolence have faced strong theological opposition. Louis Hodges has objected to King’s stress of nonviolence as a theological principle because, he argues, the first duty of man is to God’s will and not his own moral ideals. He asks whether violence not might be preferable when an order of society is so unjust that its complete destruction is a lesser evil than allowing it to continue.⁷⁹ One can still be violent outwardly and remain in an attitude of love, “it is perfectly possible to avoid ‘internal violence of the spirit’ and yet to act through external physical violence.”⁸⁰

Another criticism railed against King is his apparent naïve trust in the goodness of mankind. William Jones has effectively argued that King misunderstood the nature of racism when he hoped that nonviolence will convict the conscience of the oppressor, “There is an aspect of racism that is too often overlooked: its hierarchical division of humankind into human and sub-human groups. In a similar way we ignore the ethical importance of where we draw the boundary between human and sub-human reality. To classify something as sub-human justifies treating it as less than human.”⁸¹ Both Jones and Hodges give strong critiques to King’s theory of nonviolence; and in the end, their positions against King may very well be the most realistic one.

King is regarded as something of a civil saint in modern America—that his birthday is a national holiday is a strong indicator of the sacredness of his memory. But even if his ideals serve as the backdrop in discussions of liberation, the reality is that much of the discussion involves explaining why King’s ideas are not to be followed.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁷⁹ Hodges, 232-234.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 231

⁸¹ Jones, 44-45

King attempted to impact the future of the country and the world by moving to a new level. Not content with attacking laws directly related to race, King saw that even the economic conditions supported by government could be examples of injustice when they served to hold people down economically (i.e. ghettos). He wanted to transform nonviolence into a mass civil disobedience that would interrupt the functioning of an entire city-not to destroy the city but simply to stir government officials into action, "Mass civil disobedience as a struggle can transmute the deep rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative force. To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer lasting, costly to large society, but not wantonly destructive."⁸²

If his plans worked to change American domestic policy, then they could certainly influence American foreign policy. King was an outspoken critic of the government's role in Vietnam. While he was busy planning a massive nonviolent protest against poverty that would have included all dispossessed American minorities,⁸³ he was also publicly supporting nonviolent anti-war sentiment through his speeches and articles. King felt that eventually the nonviolent movement must move to an international level where it can affect the way countries deal not only with their disposed but also with each other. But nonviolence never moved to that level as the nonviolent movement soon had to move on without King. King was highly criticized for his attack on the Vietnam War. He defended his actions, not by an appeal to philosophical maxims, but because he was a minister of the gospel, "This is a calling which takes me beyond national allegiances, but even if it were not present, I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask why I am speaking against the war."⁸⁴

In the end, it is as a Christian minister that King should be understood. His theory of nonviolence as a way to fulfill his dream of the beloved community might never be

⁸² King, Trumpet of Conscience, 14-15.

⁸³ Oates, 450.

⁸⁴ King, Trumpet of Conscience, 25.

realized. But his ideas live on, and while many see civil disobedience as appropriate and nonviolence as the most moral method in civil disobedience, it was King who formulated the doctrine of nonviolence so well that any critic of it must deal directly with him. King so aligned nonviolence with his understanding of the gospel that critics might have to deal with the claims of Christ as well.

CHAPTER THREE: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND RESORT TO VIOLENCE

To the causal reader, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of the most confusing theologians of this century. While part of that problem is certainly the intricate complexities of his theology-especially as it concerns his unfinished work, the apparent contradictions between his life and his work do not help.

He was an avowed pacifist who wrote in The Cost of Discipleship, “Every form of war service, unless it be Good Samaritan service, and every preparation for war, is forbidden for the Christian.”⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer later became a member of the Abwehr-the German Military Counter-Espionage Service.⁸⁶ He was a good Lutheran scholar who believed that the Christian had no right to revolt against the state, “. . . to renounce rebellion and revolt is the most appropriate way of expressing our conviction that the Christian hope is not set on this world, but on Christ and his kingdom.”⁸⁷ A few years after writing that, Bonhoeffer was executed for taking part in a conspiracy to assassinate the leader of his own government, Adolph Hitler. In trying to explain these apparent contradictions, this chapter will focus on one issue-Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Christian’s right to commit violence in resistance against the state. By seeing how Bonhoeffer supported this position within his theology (which was largely Lutheran), the previous contradictions should be understood.

The task of understanding how Bonhoeffer could commit to a conspiracy against the state is not an easy task. As Bonhoeffer scholar Larry Rasmussen has pointed out, for the obvious reason of secrecy, there is a lack of information in Bonhoeffer’s writings on his decision to kill Hitler.⁸⁸ But this does not mean that Bonhoeffer never hinted as to his reason for joining a resistance movement. Kenneth Morris, another Bonhoeffer scholar,

⁸⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Testament to Freedom, ed. Geffery Kelley and F. Burton Nelson, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 95.

⁸⁶ Renate Wind, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. John Bowden, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 146.

⁸⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, (New York: Collier, 1963), 291.

⁸⁸ Larry Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 131,

finds the notion that he never reconciled his part in the resistance with his theology to be absurd, “Is it really fathomable that a theologian of at least solid intellect would engage in treasonous political activities at the same time that he wrote theology without attempting to reconcile the two?”⁸⁹

The reason why it is so difficult to understand why Bonhoeffer would participate in violent resistance is that his own Christian heritage, which he reflected in much of his writings, was totally opposed to such a thing. According to Bonhoeffer friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, “Participation in this conspiracy offered the greatest difficulty to somebody belonging to the Lutheran tradition, for this tradition provided the office of guardianship, but not the possibility of revolutionary interference as a conspirator There was no precedent for what had to be done.”⁹⁰ The Lutheran tradition is very clear on the Christian’s role in the government. There is a definite separation between church and state whereby the Christian can never revolt against the state and can only disobey the state when it tries to control matters of faith. Yet even then he must accept punishment without complaint. Luther himself wrote in a treatise on church and state relations, “Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and with suffering, just as Christ, our leader, does not bear a sword, but hangs on a cross.”⁹¹

Bonhoeffer understood the relationship between church and state in light of this tradition, “The kingdom of God exists in our world exclusively in the duality of church and state. Each is necessarily related to the other; neither exists for itself. Every attempt of one to take control of the other disregards this relationship of the kingdom of God on earth.”⁹² Since the kingdom of God was present in both, the Christian is required to obey the state as well as the church, “Everyone owes obedience to this governing authority-for Christ’s

⁸⁹ Kenneth Earl Morris, “Bonhoeffer’s Critique of Totalitarianism,” *Journal of Church and State* 26, no. 2 (1984): 257.

⁹⁰ Eerhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, (London: Collins, 1975), 131.

⁹¹ Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace,” In *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Helmut T. Lehman, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 32.

⁹² Bonhoeffer, *A Testament To Freedom*, 90.

sake.”⁹³ Bonhoeffer even goes so far as to say that the Christian never needs revolution because Christ has already won everything, “The truth of the matter is that the whole world has already been turned upside down by the work of Jesus Christ, which has wrought a liberation for freeman and slave alike. A revolution would only obscure the divine New Order which Jesus Christ has established.”⁹⁴

Bonhoeffer also writes that the Christian does not have the right to commit acts of violence against the state even when it is guilty of evil. But the state has the right to commit violence in order to maintain justice, “To make non-resistance a principle for secular life is to deny God, by undermining his gracious ordinance for the preservation of the world.”⁹⁵ One reason the Christian does not need to use violence against the state is that evil, according to Bonhoeffer, will run out of steam if it finds no resistance.⁹⁶ If the Christian is attacked, he should not fight back in violence but should suffer willingly.

Bonhoeffer sees suffering as a necessary outcome of the Christian life, “Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion.”⁹⁷ Suffering is good for the believer because it helps him to see life from the side of the oppressed and helps to clarify his own understanding of the world.⁹⁸

With all these beliefs, how does Bonhoeffer justify civil disobedience to the state? The answer is found in his understanding of the nature of the church. The church is to be the representative of God on earth. For Bonhoeffer, the church is only the church when it exists to help others.⁹⁹ To that end, it is there to serve the world-like Christ, “Those whose

⁹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, (New York: Collier, 1986), 211.

⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 291.

⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 161.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison, (New York: Collier, 1972), 17.

⁹⁹ Geffery Kelley, Liberating Faith, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 171.

lives are lived in love are Christ in respect of their neighbor, but, of course, always only in this respect Such persons can and should act like Christ. They should bear their neighbor's burdens and sufferings."¹⁰⁰ When the burdens were placed there by the state, then the church had to speak out. Here Bonhoeffer is careful not to say that the church should order the state-the Lutheran separation still held fast. But the church could remind the state of its responsibilities as the state, "it will only ask whether or not the state is bringing about law and order or not."¹⁰¹ It was in the nature of being the church that the church should speak out when it saw injustice being committed by the state, "Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. The Christian is called to sympathy and action, not in the first place by his own sufferings, but by the suffering of his brethren, for whose sake Christ died."¹⁰²

In Nazi Germany the suffering brethren included the Jewish members of the German churches. When the government issued an order that the churches were to treat those members like second class citizens-no longer allowing them to hold church office-**Bonhoeffer erupted.** Along with the well-known pastor Martin Niemoller, Bonhoeffer issued a statement declaring this order, known as the "Aryan paragraph," a violation of the Reformation confessions. Furthermore, he declared, "Anyone who gives his assent to a breach of the confession thereby excludes himself from the community of the church."¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer felt that this refusal to stand for others, even if it required opposing the state as an individual Christian, negated one's discipleship, "if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, A Testament To Freedom, 59.

¹⁰¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 224.

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 14.

¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 249.

¹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 14.

This stand for others could be actualized by the church in three ways. It could remind the state of its responsibilities, aid the victims of state cruelties, or, “not just to bandage the victims under the wheel but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”¹⁰⁵ This meant that the church had the option of defying the state.

At this point, Bonhoeffer did not feel that the church would be opposing the government, but that the state had already corrupted the government by causing it to forget its responsibilities by either allowing too much law (as when they tried to command the church on spiritual matters) or not enough (by condoning violence upon the Jews).¹⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer saw himself rebelling against the state and not the government, “Thus, in some fashion, he remained thoroughly Lutheran.”¹⁰⁷

He still laid down specific guidelines as to when the Christian could oppose the government. Like Luther before him,¹⁰⁸ Bonhoeffer believed the Christian must disobey the government when it “compels him to offend against the divine commandment, that is to say, until government openly denies its divine commission and thereby forfeits its claim.”¹⁰⁹ **When it happened that obeying the government would conflict with the necessities of humanity—such as following a command to shoot Jews or even to deny them access to the church—then it created a situation where these threatened necessities, “no longer leave a multiplicity of courses open to human reason but they confront it with the question of the *ultima ratio*.”¹¹⁰ In that extreme case, the individual Christian should act against the state. Because the state was corrupting a government into not following its responsibility to take care of the necessities of its subjects, then that state was already breaking divine law. By confronting that state—even to the extreme of not merely criticizing but disobeying its laws—the Christian was showing a respect for all law itself, “Precisely in this breaking of the law**

¹⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 225.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Morris, 272.

¹⁰⁸ Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Must Be Obeyed,” In *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Helmut T. Lehman, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 111-112.

¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 342-343.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

the validity of the law is acknowledged.”¹¹¹ That did not mean the government committing injustice could now be completely ignored—the act of civil disobedience, by respecting all laws, only opposes those which directly relate to that injustice, “Disobedience can never be anything but a concrete decision in a single particular case. Generalizations lead to an apocalyptic diabolization of government.”¹¹²

The responsibility of the church to the oppressed required the church to remind the state of its responsibilities and the individual Christian to oppose whatever vehicle of injustice that was hurting the oppressed—even to the point of breaking the law. But the church should never try to supplant the government because that would be a confusion of God’s two kingdoms, temporal and spiritual. It should also never try to destroy government because that would lead to anarchy. It should both respect the government and the divine commission given it by God while remembering its own divine commission to the oppressed. This was Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian civil disobedience.

Why, then, did Bonhoeffer eventually become involved in a conspiracy against the German government and even advocate violence against that government? The answer is found in Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the *ultima ratio*. The *ultima ratio* for Bonhoeffer was an extreme position where ordinary rules of morality did not apply and that required a man to do what ever was best for the coming generation. As mentioned previously, it came about whenever the authority in charge of meeting the necessities of humanity suddenly found itself in conflict with those necessities. This created an environment when normal moral principles could not apply because their basis was now eschewed. When Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, he wrote an essay, “After Ten Years,” criticizing those who tried to follow inadequate moral guides in extreme times. He dismissed those followers of reason who place misguided trust in the reason of others (i.e. appeasers of Hitler that hoped he would listen to reason), the moral fanatics that get confused by their enemies and choke on nonessentials of morality (legalists that couldn’t agree on who the enemy was), the man of conscience who never realizes that more wicked consciences can be

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 343.

stronger than his, those who refuse to take part in crime by retreating within their own private virtue and abandoning the suffering to the criminals (the Christians that withdrew from society in order to remain pure), and the people of duty that will always do what they should by the accepted authority, even if that authority is the devil (i.e. German generals that followed Hitler even though they were opposed to his policies).¹¹³

What principles could a man follow in such desperate times? The man who stands firm in those times, according to Bonhoeffer, is the responsible man. This man is one “whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to be obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.”¹¹⁴

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of ethics is found in man’s relationship to God. Bonhoeffer criticizes all ethical systems that try to discern the difference between good and evil because that attempt originally resulted in the fall in the garden—the trading of the knowledge of God for the knowledge of good and evil.¹¹⁵ The source of ethics should be the knowledge of God—the resultant action from that being the doing of His will, “It is evident that the only appropriate conduct of men before God is the doing of His will. . . . In doing God’s will man renounces every right and every justification of his own; he delivers himself humbly into the hands of the merciful Judge.”¹¹⁶ Since God’s will is already fulfilled in Jesus Christ then, “Faith in this Jesus Christ is the sole fountain-head of all good.”¹¹⁷

Bonhoeffer’s ethics was truly a Christian one as it found its source in Christ. Consequently, Bonhoeffer’s Christology had significant influence on his ethics. This influence was so pronounced, it led one scholar, William Hamilton, to declare, “For

¹¹³ Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 4-5.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 18-19.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

Bonhoeffer, the Christology and the ethics are really one.”¹¹⁸ Rasmussen declared that Bonhoeffer’s resistance activity was nothing more than “his Christology enacted with utter seriousness. Bonhoeffer’s resistance was the existential playing out of Christological themes.”¹¹⁹ The Christian was the one who always followed Christ. According to Bonhoeffer, Christ could lead us anywhere because He could take form anywhere in the world. This idea of “Christ taking form” was the way Bonhoeffer spoke of reality-whatever actually is was the way Christ was taking form. This understanding of Christ as identified with reality formed the method of Bonhoeffer’s ethics, “It follows that Bonhoeffer’s methodological procedure can be construed along the following lines: the Christian, in a setting of resistance or any other, answers the question ‘What am I to do?’ by first answering the question ‘How is Christ taking form in the world?’”¹²⁰

There was one constant in Christ’s form and that was the object of all of his commands, “to evoke wholehearted faith, to make us love God and our neighbor with all our heart and soul. This is the only unequivocal feature in his command. Every time we try to perform the commandment of Jesus in some other sense, it is another sign that we have misunderstood his word and are disobeying it.”¹²¹ Depending on the reality in which Christians find themselves, acting in love of God and neighbor could demand a number of different actions. In this sense there was freedom for the Christian in acting because the action was dependent upon the situation as God’s will changed, “The will of God may lie very deeply concealed beneath a great number of available possibilities. The will of God is not a system of rules which is established from the outset; it is something new and different in each different situation of life, and for this reason a man must ever anew examine what the will of God may be.”¹²² This fluidity of God’s will and subsequent reactionism of Bonhoeffer’s ethics has led one scholar to label it a “contextual ethic” because it is founded

¹¹⁸ William Hamilton, “Bonhoeffer: Christology and Ethics United,” *Christianity and Crises* 24, no. 17 (October 19, 1964): 199.

¹¹⁹ Rasmussen, 15.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹²¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 252.

¹²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 38.

on the assumption that moral choices must be discerned, not on principles, but “within each specific concrete situation or immediate context.”¹²³

In short, this means that every action is open to the Christian as long as it conforms to the will of God, or the form of Christ. According to Rasmussen, because God Himself acted in extremism when he became involved in the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, “This means an openness to virtually every possibility and an elasticity of behavior are integral to the Christian life that is, determining whether the conforming action is one of ‘incarnation’ (affirmation and cooperation), ‘crucifixion’ (judgement and rejection) or ‘resurrection’ (bold creativity and newness).”¹²⁴ The Christian can discover what the will of God is in each specific situation through constant communion with God in private devotions and community dialogue. This communion leads to an increase in conformity to the image of God which is found in Christ.¹²⁵

The fluid will of God as an ethical foundation was the source of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of free responsibility. Because man could not look to concepts such as duty or conscience or even freedom to guide him in ethical decisions (as none of these were grounded in the knowledge of God), he could only make such choices in responsibility to God for his neighbors. As God’s will changed with each different circumstance, man had freedom in his actions to decide what to do, in communion with God, depending on the circumstance. This was free responsibility, “It depends on a God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith, and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture.”¹²⁶ The mark of responsibility was the concept of deputyship-man as been put in care of this world in responsibility to God.¹²⁷ The responsible man has one overriding concern in choosing how to fulfill God’s will in response to the form Christ is taking, “The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is

¹²³ James T. Laney, “An Examination of Bonhoeffer’s Ethical Contextualism,” in A Bonhoeffer Legacy, ed. A.J. Klassen. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 298.

¹²⁴ Rasmussen, 43.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹²⁶ Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 6.

¹²⁷ Rasmussen, 38.

not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to live.”¹²⁸ According to Bonhoeffer scholar Geffrey Kelley, this concern was a way that Bonhoeffer rooted his contextual ethics into something firm, “one had always to allow the projected consequences of action on both the affected peoples and the coming generation to dictate a sense of reality in planning the overthrow of a tyranny. Adoption of extreme forms of resistance to the state became subject, then, to definite criteria.”¹²⁹

With surrender to the will of God determined by the form Christ had taken in the world, the Christian acts in free responsibility to God by asking how the coming generation will be affected by his actions. He already knows the church is only what it is when it is for others. He must speak for those who suffer injustice by the state and fight for the coming generation soon to be born under that state. When the state is set against its own divine commission and the necessities of men, then the Christian finds himself in an extreme situation that may call for extreme actions in answer to the will of God. The church cannot usurp the state’s authority but it can oppose an authority that is set against man,

“The Church cannot indeed proclaim a concrete earthly order which follows as a necessary consequence from faith in Jesus Christ, but she can and must oppose every concrete order which constitutes an offense to faith in Jesus Christ, and in doing this she defines, at least negatively, the limits for an order within which faith in Jesus Christ and obedience are possible.”¹³⁰

For Bonhoeffer, the enemy to be opposed was whatever was set against the God, persons or their community.¹³¹ The responsible man must know reality to know how he should act. If the responsible man is going to oppose anything, he had better know who the enemy is. According to his most well known biographer, Bethge, Bonhoeffer was meticulous about gathering information on the activities of the Third Reich. While many

¹²⁸ Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 7.

¹²⁹ Kelley, 169.

¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 360.

¹³¹ William Jay Peck, “The Role of the ‘Enemy’ in Bonhoeffer’s Life and Thought,” in A Bonhoeffer Legacy, ed. A.J. Klassen, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 348.

people avoided learning such information, Bonhoeffer, “took considerable pains to have access to the most exclusive and reliable information. He did not want to be deprived of what was a necessary component of his responsibility for the present time and for the future.”¹³² According to Rasmussen, Bonhoeffer received his information from his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, another member of the Abwehr, and was well aware of Nazi crimes-including political murders, concentration camps, and cruelties committed in occupied countries.¹³³ Based on this knowledge, Bonhoeffer found himself in an extreme situation and quickly “felt pressured by an unwelcome choice-to be responsible either for the blood of millions or for the blood of a single tyrant. Thus, he had reached the ethical point at which the sword of the magistrate had to be used against the tyrant by the deputy power of right and order, in order to stop the spread of the tyrant’s guilt.”¹³⁴

The fluidity of God’s will and the freedom of action in that will has already been stressed. The extreme situation that Bonhoeffer found himself in was one where his actions could no longer be dictated by the law of a state that was against the command of Christ. It was time for desperate action,

“Bonhoeffer is extremely guarded about justifying such desperate action and regards it in the final analysis as the venture of the individual in free responsibility, a venture in fact justifiable *not* by law, only by *necessita*, a venture that dare not become normative behavior, a venture finally delivered up to God alone for judgement. . . . the last of last resorts.”¹³⁵

While involved in the conspiracy, Bonhoeffer pursued legal means of stopping Hitler, including a plan where his father, a well-known psychiatrist, would declare Hitler mentally insane, thus legally opening a way to replace him.¹³⁶ It was only after the failure of

¹³² Bethge, 121.

¹³³ Rasmussen, 133.

¹³⁴ Jorgen Glenthoj, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Way Between Resistance and Submission,” in A Bonhoeffer Legacy, ed. A.J. Klassen, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 174-175.

¹³⁵ Rasmussen, 46.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

these plans that Bonhoeffer began to consider using violence, finally giving his support for an assassination attempt.

It should be clear by now why Bonhoeffer was willing to allow violence. The will of God, for him, demanded that something be done for those suffering under the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer had tried to pursue nonviolent means of replacing Hitler—even joining the German espionage service to provide contacts and greater opportunity. But when it became clear that violence was the last option—and either he would be guilty of allowing the death of many by keeping his hands clean or be guilty of the death of a tyrant by engaging in murder—Bonhoeffer, a man of free responsibility, chose violence. Violence was still abhorrent to him and, even as a last resort, couldn't be justified without guilt, “. . . violence was only an extreme measure when peaceful solutions were impossible Always a resort to physical violence could be contemplated only in the *ultima ratio*, or last resort, that extreme necessity when those ‘afflicted beyond endurance’ can achieve redress by no other means. One did not seek to justify violence.”¹³⁷

Violence could only be used when there was no other way of helping those oppressed. It could certainly not be motivated by feelings of revenge for that motivation of anger would lead to a violence spread out of control when it should be kept at a minimum.¹³⁸ Anger was never a proper motivation or even feeling for the follower of Christ, anyway, “The disciple must be entirely innocent of anger, because anger is an offense against both God and his neighbor.”¹³⁹ This did not mean, though, that pure motives for committing violence would suffice either—the man of free responsibility must be able to ensure, reasonably, the successful result of committing violence or else it would be wasted and needless.¹⁴⁰

Rasmussen has found five operative guidelines in Bonhoeffer's understanding of tyrannicide. He stresses that in all of Bonhoeffer's writings, this is all that can be found,

¹³⁷ Kelley, 168.

¹³⁸ Rasmussen, 143.

¹³⁹ Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 143-144.

¹⁴⁰ Rasmussen, 139.

- “ 1) There must be clear evidence of gross misrule, showing possibly irreparable harm to the citizenry.
- 2) Active resistance and tyrannicide must respect the scale of political responsibility. The man in the lower ranks of the political hierarchy or outside it can take on heavy political responsibility only after it has been abdicated by those placed higher, or when these have been muzzled.
- 3) There must be reasonable assurance that tyrannicide can be successfully executed. The important corollary is that the act of assassination must be coordinated with the plans of a group capable of occupying, or remaining in, the key organs of the totalitarian dictatorship.
- 4) Only such force and violence as is necessary to abolish the abuses of misrule is permissible.
- 5) Active resistance in general and tyrannicide in particular can be turned to only as the very last resort, after nonviolent and legal means have been exhausted.”¹⁴¹

Even with these guidelines, violence was still not a moral action. The doer of violence was guilty of that action regardless of the circumstances that demanded its use. The man of free responsibility would willingly take on guilt in his actions primarily because his actions were still free, “The Christian lives out the claims of Christ in the concrete tasks that the mandates impose. How that is done always remains a matter of some choice and so opens the possibility of guilt.”¹⁴² This acceptance of guilt was also influenced by Bonhoeffer’s Christology. Just as Christ accepted the guilt of the whole world, so we have to be willing to accept guilt for the benefit of others, “And so conscience joins with the responsibility which has its foundation in Christ in bearing guilt for the sake of our neighbor.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴² Robin W. Lovin, “Bonhoeffer’s Reluctant Revisions,” *Ethical Responsibility*, ed. John D. Godsey and Jeffrey Kelley, (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1981) 122.

¹⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 244.

The Christian must be willing to accept guilt for committing violence if that is the only way he can free the oppressed. Guilt becomes another mark of the responsible man, “If deputyship is the master mark of responsibility, acceptance of guilt . . . is the heart of deputyship.”¹⁴⁴ The responsible man is not justified for committing violence but he simply commits his acts to the Righteous Judge. This acceptance of guilt has led his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge to proclaim Bonhoeffer “a new type of martyr . . . No longer is he the holy, heroic martyr, but one who is a dishonored witness on behalf of humanity. He does not distance himself from the world as an example of purity, but stops and shares with those who are involved in the hopes and wrong-doings of this world.”¹⁴⁵

Not everyone, though, agrees with Bonhoeffer’s acceptance of guilt, or even his ethical system. Rasmussen has been a strong critic on both counts. He argues that it does not make sense that Bonhoeffer should press for the acceptance of guilt in rebellion or violence because the only time he would allow those options was in an extreme case where they appeared to be the best choice. The responsible man should not have to be guilty for choosing the lesser of two evils.¹⁴⁶ Rasmussen feels that a large reason why Bonhoeffer had to stress guilt in rebellion is that his own Christian tradition would not allow him any other way out, “So long as Bonhoeffer operates with the resources of the Lutheran and Protestant heritage, such an outcome is predictable. The weight must fall on the duty of resistance, rather than the right, for a simple reason: the latter did not exist.”¹⁴⁷

Rasmussen has also criticized the contextualism of Bonhoeffer’s ethical methodology. He feels it is an inadequate methodology because it cannot deal with the question of how to examine the many different actions that claim to be following God’s will. As this primarily concerns the *ultima ratio*, how can it be judged when an action was necessary?¹⁴⁸ The fact that Bonhoeffer abandons the use of principles creates a vacuum by

¹⁴⁴ Rasmussen, 51.

¹⁴⁵ Bethge, 164.

¹⁴⁶ Rasmussen, 153.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

which to judge actions, “his portrayals of prescriptive and descriptive modes rule out the aids with which they can supplement relational ethics.”¹⁴⁹ Perhaps the reason Bonhoeffer stresses the guilt of our actions, even those in extreme situations, is that without principles by which to judge them, we can only accept guilt and commit judgment to God, whose will we are trying to obey.

For Bonhoeffer, the Christian is to live according to God’s will and that alone is the basis of his ethics. Because this will is for others, the Christian is to live for others—even if that means speaking out against injustice or even disobeying the state committing that injustice. Following God’s will can require even extreme actions, such as violence, in extreme situations where the state is set against its divine commission and man’s necessities. Because the ways of following God’s will can change depending on the situation, every action is open to the Christian. He becomes a man of free responsibility and is responsible for his free actions. Yet Lutheranism did not allow the Christian every possible action. So the Christian has to be willing to incur guilt in his extreme action because, at least for Bonhoeffer’s own tradition, there is no way to justify it.

The strongest criticism against Bonhoeffer’s system is that it gives us no way to judge actions as they are all dependent on how we interpret God’s will. At least in Lutheranism there was a system of principles by which to judge actions. Possibly Bonhoeffer’s best defense for his system, though, is how it played in history. He was willing, and could, fight an evil state that many Christians, because of their principles, didn’t know how to oppose, “Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment and execution were a lonely witness to where the church ought to have been: the 20th century’s Golgotha of Nazi prisons and scaffolds.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 164.

¹⁵⁰ Kelley, 154.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARD A BASIS OF UNDERSTANDING

A crucial question that remains to be answered is whether or not it makes logical sense to compare and contrast Bonhoeffer's and King's understanding of the appropriateness of violence in Christian civil disobedience. Is it not possible that these two men, though closely related in years (only 23 years separated their births), were so far apart culturally and the crises that each faced was so different that if they were switched in history-with King facing the Nazi regime and Bonhoeffer chafing under the segregation laws, each would have developed as the other had in the same situation-King would promote violence as a last resort with Bonhoeffer being against it even then?

While it is impossible to determine beyond doubt how each could have reacted in those circumstances, it seems highly likely that based on the theologies each developed, they would have reacted similarly regardless of their history. King would have still fought nonviolently and Bonhoeffer would have still advocated violence as a means of last resort (although it is probable that based on his "operative guidelines" discussed in the previous chapter, he would never have had to resort to violence in mid-20th century America). While it may be argued that they would have developed their theologies differently based on their history, our concern is to compare and contrast their theologies as they actually were. They were developed to the point that each theology, lifted out of its historical context, can be studied on its own merits and related to other cultural situations. There are a number of striking similarities between the two theologians. Both Bonhoeffer and King came from culturally prominent families. According to the foundational biography on Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Bethge, Bonhoeffer's family was of the intellectual and culturally elite in Germany. His maternal great-grandfather was a well-known historian who "was appointed to a professorship at Jena by Goethe" while his paternal grandfather had been "President of the High Court at Tübingen."¹⁵¹ His father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was one of the most respected psychiatrists in Germany¹⁵², and his older brother, Karl-Fredrich,

¹⁵¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al., (London: Collins, 1970), 3.

¹⁵² Wind, 4.

one of its most brilliant physicists.¹⁵³ The awareness of his family's history and achievements in German society gave Bonhoeffer the burden of being in a family with "a deeply-rooted sense of being guardians of a great historical heritage and intellectual tradition."¹⁵⁴

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s family certainly did not have the standing in society that Bonhoeffer's family did as that would not have been allowed in early Twentieth century America. But King's family did have about as much standing as a black family could attain in Atlanta. His maternal grandfather, as pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, has built it into one of "black Atlanta's most prestigious Baptist churches. He served in various offices of the National Baptist Convention, received honorary doctorate from Morehouse (his alma mater) and . . . became a charter member of a strong local chapter of the National Association of Colored People and served as its president" where, in that position, he successfully led a boycott to shut down a highly racist white newspaper.¹⁵⁵ Martin Luther King, Sr. came up from being the son of an alcoholic sharecropper to earn his high school diploma, bachelor of divinity and doctor of divinity degree-all gained after he became a pastor. He took over his father-in-law's church and "eventually raised membership from six hundred to several thousand, complete with six choirs. Meanwhile, . . . he became director for a Negro bank and amassed interests in other enterprises."¹⁵⁶ And also like his father-in-law, Martin King, Sr. served on the Atlanta chapter's Executive Board of the NAACP, where he led hundreds in a voting-rights march to City Hall,¹⁵⁷ successfully fought to equalize black teachers' pay and desegregate elevators in the courthouse, and served as a member of the Interracial Council of Atlanta.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 8.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Oates, 6-7.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Besides their grand heritage, King and Bonhoeffer came from families with similar social dynamics. Bonhoeffer had a very strong father who had the final say in family matters,¹⁵⁹ and for whom Bonhoeffer worked much of his life to please.¹⁶⁰ Yet his mother was also a very strong and important influence on Bonhoeffer in the more “motherly” ways through compassion and tenderness.¹⁶¹

King’s father was an extremely strong-willed individual who ruled his family with a loving, but strong fist. Coretta Scott King, in her informative work, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr., related that even before she married Martin Luther King, Jr., she had to win over his father, “One thing that worried me was that I knew that Martin’s big problem in deciding whom to marry was his great love and respect for his father. Whatever he might say about deciding for himself, I recognized that his father might be the determining factor, because of the strong influence he had on his son.”¹⁶² King, Jr. also adored his mother, who he called “Mother Dear”, and who expressed herself in tenderness “behind the scenes” in the King household.¹⁶³

Both King and Bonhoeffer started their careers in theology quite early. Bonhoeffer earned his doctorate at the age of twenty-one when his dissertation on the nature of the church was accepted by the university of Berlin (he wrote it while still doing other class work and teaching a youth group).¹⁶⁴ King finished his dissertation on the nature of God when he was twenty-five, during his first year as a senior pastor.¹⁶⁵ They both felt the need to pastor first rather than teach in a University, although each one could have easily become

¹⁵⁸ Coretta Scott King, My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 82.

¹⁵⁹ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Wind, 8.

¹⁶¹ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 7.

¹⁶² Coretta King, 63.

¹⁶³ Oates, 5.

¹⁶⁴ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 58.

¹⁶⁵ Oates, 60.

a University instructor if they were so inclined. After graduation, Bonhoeffer went to pastor in Barcelona, Spain.¹⁶⁶

Their theological educations were also similar in character. They both profited greatly from the study of liberal theology. For Bonhoeffer, his instructors were some of the world's most respected liberal theologians, including Adolph von Harnack and Karl Holl; his school itself had been founded by the father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher.¹⁶⁷ King admitted that the liberal theological education he received in college met a need he had found lacking in his own religious upbringing, "Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I had never found in fundamentalism."¹⁶⁸

However, both King and Bonhoeffer also saw the need to modify liberalism or even reject some of its tenets outright. King found a necessary corrective to liberal theology in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, who showed him "the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence. . . . I realized that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism."¹⁶⁹ The discovery of Barth gave Bonhoeffer a new fervor in studying theology, "He now took real joy in his work; it was like a liberation. . . . Much more than intellectual pleasure was to be derived from the brilliant rebel and controversialist Karl Barth"¹⁷⁰ and he soon found himself defending the ideas of Barth against even Adolph Harnack.¹⁷¹ Yet even with these correctives, liberal theology was still the background against which both King and Bonhoeffer developed their own theological understandings and positions.

Aside from their family or their education, another striking similarity between the two men was the role they took in trying to involve the church in their struggle against the state and society. To a large extent, both failed. King had been greatly surprised when, in

¹⁶⁶ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 68.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 44-45.

¹⁶⁸ Martin King, Strength to Love, 135.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

¹⁷⁰ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 50.

¹⁷¹ Wind, 35.

the middle of his involvement in the civil rights movement, he discovered that the help he had counted on receiving from the white churches, and even some black churches, would not come,

“Early on, Martin King expressed disappointment with the white church in its failure to participate to an appreciable degree in the Montgomery boycott. He was to express that disappointment so often that it almost became a whine, a childish petulance, as though he hoped that some God-given miracle *would* make the church the shrine of good he had been raised to think it was. But in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin King was in the process of struggling with himself, making himself accept that the church was as he finally saw it—real, hard, and with priceless vested interests in maintaining the racial status quo.”¹⁷²

Bonhoeffer was constantly frustrated that the German Church seemed to, as a whole, accept the Third Reich’s policies towards the Jews. Even in working with the ever shrinking German church in protest to the Nazi Regime, the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer sometimes found himself taking a solitary stand against the Third Reich while larger groups in the movement hoped to reach a reconciliation with Hitler.¹⁷³ He summed up his frustration with the church in his *Ethics*,

“The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁴

While all the similarities between the two men suggest possible points of contacts between their theologies (as theologies are, in part, developed or determined by the forces and circumstances through which theologians develop), there are enough differences between the two men to give weight to the argument that one would be hard pressed to find

¹⁷² John A. Williams, *The King God Didn’t Save*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), 120.

¹⁷³ Wind, 130-131.

¹⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 114.

much useful information from the comparison of their theologies. While they both came from prominent families within their own culture, certainly Bonhoeffer did not grow up under the same strain created by racism that King did. King's family could claim to live a middle class lifestyle by early twentieth century African-American standards while Bonhoeffer's family enjoyed an upper class respect and certainly an upper-middle class lifestyle by anyone's standards. They had what would probably be termed today "overclass" status, "In the Bonhoeffer household, names which others knew only from *Who's Who* or from dictionaries were in the visitor's book or the family chronicle"¹⁷⁵.

Yet Bonhoeffer was very sensitive to plight of the oppressed in his lifetime. Ironically, during the short time he spent in America, he became concerned about the treatment of the black population (he regularly attended a black church and, through a black friend and fellow student, was instructed about the realities of life in Harlem) and the impact American racism was having on the Church (and vice-versa). In regards to the youth, "He noted with dismay that the so enviable integration of the white churches into the life of the community was in fact an obstacle to the solution of the racial problems; and . . . was disturbed by the . . . estrangement of the younger coloured generation from the faith of their fathers, who had accepted all this discrimination so patiently."¹⁷⁶

Another striking difference between the King and Bonhoeffer was their religious and non-religious upbringing, respectively. King grew up in the church as a pastor's son. It marked the boundaries of his early world, "The boy was at church all day Sunday and part of the afternoons and evenings on weekdays. The church defined his little-boy world, gave it order and balance, taught him how to 'get along with people.' Here M.L. knew who he was-'Reverend King's boy,' somebody special."¹⁷⁷ In contrast, Bonhoeffer grew up in a home that, while not against the church, would certainly not have been seen as a highly religious family, "the Bonhoeffers did not have any special link with the church. Karl Bonhoeffer's rationalism and Paula Bonhoeffer's vitality cut them off from a church in

¹⁷⁵ Wind, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 109-110.

¹⁷⁷ Oates, 4.

which ‘the mold of a thousand years lies under the gowns.’ In addition, the old empiricist Karl Bonhoeffer had more or less completely given up on religion,” although Paula, Dietrich’s mother, did try to give all the children a religious education at home.¹⁷⁸ In fact, Bonhoeffer’s decision as a child to become a theologian did not exactly please his family and the need for independence from the “scientific” professions of his family may have been one of Dietrich’s underlying motivations in studying theology.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, King also sought, as a young man, to distance himself from his father and thus made a decision not to work in any religious area¹⁸⁰-although that changed for him at college when he found himself admiring some of his religious instructors.¹⁸¹

While they both became theologians, their careers were remarkably different. Martin Luther King, Jr. was more than a religious thinker or public orator-he was a public image, a moral celebrity and legend in his own time who led an entire movement of people. Thus, King’s theology and methodology in civil disobedience were developed for a movement. Bonhoeffer was a well-received theologian and author among the theological academia but, at least towards his own actions in the government conspiracy, took responsibility only for himself. Also, because he was “Martin Luther King, Jr.” from the time of the Montgomery boycott when he became a recognizable figure, to his untimely death, King was always in the public eye. He made certain choices about his personal life, such as the decision to get rid of the gun he kept in his house (given to him by a church member),¹⁸² because of the public spotlight. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, strove to stay anonymous in his actions as a conspirator (obviously) even if it led some of his associates and friends to wonder if he, as a member of the Abwehr, had not given into working with the Third Reich. Karl Barth himself, a close acquaintance of Bonhoeffer’s, felt doubts about Bonhoeffer when he heard that Dietrich was in Switzerland as an agent of the

¹⁷⁸ Wind, 26.

¹⁷⁹ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 22-23.

¹⁸⁰ Oates, 14.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸² Coretta King, 133.

Abwehr, “Could it be right and proper for anyone like Bonhoeffer, a Confessing pastor who was banned by the Gestapo, to cross the Swiss frontier, with valid papers in the middle of the war? How did he come to do that? Could it be that, after all the German victories, even Bonhoeffer had changed his mind?”¹⁸³

These last two contrasts between King and Bonhoeffer certainly could lead to different perspectives in their theologies. King did not have the “luxury” of making a individual protest only-he was leading a people and had to act as he wanted his entire movement to act. Also, being in the spotlight gave more urgency to how King acted as it would surely be looked upon as an example for the entire civil rights movement. Bonhoeffer could act individually and, in fact, felt that the resort to violence had to be made individually. Originally, he did feel that any revolutionary action committed by Church members must first be agreed upon by a church council. Yet after years of disillusionment with his church Bonhoeffer did see revolutionary action as falling under the responsibility of the individual.¹⁸⁴

But it is still highly unlikely that King, in the same position, would have chosen violence-he rejected it categorically as an action open to a Christian. Even among the Nazi resisters there were those who would have agreed with King. The head of the upper class resistance group, the Kreisau Circle, Helmut von Moltke, a friend to Bonhoeffer, had refused to be part of any plot against Hitler’s life, “To the very end he maintained his principle of objection to violence. To him that was a manifestation of ‘the beast in man.’ Violence, in his view, bred violence.”¹⁸⁵ If Bonhoeffer had found himself in King’s position, he still might not have rejected violence outright for the individual in extreme cases. Bonhoeffer had an avid desire to study nonviolence under Gandhi himself, in order “to become better acquainted with the ethical practice of passive resistance.”¹⁸⁶ He was familiar with the methods and philosophical understanding that King shared and still accepted

¹⁸³ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 631-632.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁸⁵ Louis L. Snyder, Hitler’s German Enemies, (New York: Berkley, 1990), 132.

¹⁸⁶ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 192-193.

violence as a means of last resort. He still believed that the Christian who committed violence was guilty, but sometimes to assume that guilt was to avoid a greater one, “Dietrich even went so far as to declare himself ready to make an attempt on Hitler’s life. However, before that he would deliberately leave the church. He left no doubt that any use of force is and remains guilty. But he insisted that there can be situations in which a Christian must become guilty out of love of neighbor.”¹⁸⁷ Even though the conspiracy failed, it did take the violent force of the Allies to bring down the Nazi Regime. Those means were certainly more in line with traditional Lutheranism than Bonhoeffer’s approach, but his resort to violence could have worked. If it had, many lives would have been spared.

It has been noted that while Bonhoeffer was faced with, seemingly, a choice between violent response or prayerful waiting for Germany’s eventual defeat, King did not push nonviolence merely because his situation could handle that kind of commitment. As there were those in Bonhoeffer’s times who would have agreed with King, there are those in King’s times and situation who would have agreed with Bonhoeffer. There were times in King’s life when his nonviolent message could not be heard over the painful and angry voices of those who called for violence as a way of achieving real victory. Malcolm X felt that King’s message was dangerous because, “it encouraged whites to commit criminal acts against blacks without fear of retaliation.”¹⁸⁸ During the civil rights movement, according to black theologian James Cone, there was evidence that the civil rights groups that were most frequently attacked were those that advocated nonviolence (i.e. Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Freedom Riders), while the groups that let it be known they were prepared to fight (i.e. Black Muslims) were generally left alone, “Most whites knew whom to ‘mess with’ and whom to leave alone.”¹⁸⁹ Many critics have taken to task King’s trust in the ability of the oppressors to change due to conscience, “King’s faith that all men would respond to nonviolence was rooted in the liberal tenet that all men have an innate moral capacity which, when activated by love, will compel them to respond in a similar

¹⁸⁷ Wind, 144.

¹⁸⁸ James H. Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America, (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 261.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

fashion.”¹⁹⁰ While King was thinking more in terms of a historical process, he did hope to influence as many oppressors in the *now* as possible. His critics saw that view as being naïve, “King . . . translated ‘power’ as redemptive love and suffering—a super-Christian concept which meant nothing to the white bigot. Indeed the men King came up against viewed the brutality they visited upon him and his followers as . . . the will of God.”¹⁹¹

During King’s lifetime, many rejected his nonviolent approach. One minister remarked to a writer during the Selma march, “‘There is something morally wrong about allowing a man to beat you when you are in the right . . . The good man must strike back and chastise the evil-doers (the police).’”¹⁹²

King’s crusades did not always produce or sustain the results that could win over people. His first victories occurred through the intervention of the federal government—not the conversion of local towns. Eventually, even those victories no longer occurred. Before his death, King had tried to wage a nonviolent crusade, not against an openly racist Southern town, but against an unjust Northern system that keep people down economically, “Chicago was a failure . . . for his Christian, nonviolent attack upon complex socio-economic problems. Chicago was final evidence that *The System* that controls the ghetto would not yield power to the nonviolent and civilized. Only those who were willing to burn and loot had the power to get things done.”¹⁹³ Because of the apparent failure of his nonviolent approach to accomplish what it promised, it led others to embrace a more “radical” approach, i.e. a more violent approach, “His failure to achieve moral gains made others see that the gains could only be political.”¹⁹⁴ The difference between King and the proponents of violence was that they were willing to entertain any approach that could accomplish their goals—King’s philosophy would only entertain nonviolent approaches. Thus, he continually

¹⁹⁰ Smith, 66.

¹⁹¹ Louis Lomax, “When ‘Nonviolence’ Meets ‘Black Power’,” in Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile, ed. by C. Eric Lincoln, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 173.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁹⁴ Williams, 216.

strove to recreate his nonviolent method when it seems to falter in certain towns (such as Albany or Chicago), while others began to look to violent approaches. King always had to battle, in his day, those who would have agreed with Bonhoeffer and vice-versa. But this does not mean that in their theologies, as in their lives, there was not some commonality.

Similarities shared between the thought of Bonhoeffer and King can already be seen. Their common background in liberal theology, and criticism of the same, has already been shown. They also both supported the idea of separation between church and state-though for different reasons. Bonhoeffer supported the separation as part of his theological heritage, "There are those two kingdoms which as long as the world continues, must neither be mixed together nor yet torn asunder. There is the kingdom of the preached word of God, and there is the kingdom of the sword."¹⁹⁵ King grew up under the American ideal of separation between church and state. Both felt, though, that such a separation did not mean the church could not stand against the state.

Bonhoeffer saw the church and state as being instituted by God for God's purpose. In his Ethics, he writes of how Luther rebelled against a Church tearing itself away from Christ and sided with the secular authorities in the cause of a better Christianity. Accordingly, he says we must also side with the Church in the cause of a better secularity when the state attempts to tear itself from Christ-in who the two have unity, "It is only in this sense, as a polemical unity, that Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms is to be accepted and it was no doubt in this sense that it was originally intended."¹⁹⁶ Thus the Christian must support both the Church and the state until one or the other will deny its created intention. At that point, Bonhoeffer writes that the Christian must disobey-yet this disobedience must not be committed haphazardly nor indiscriminately, "His duty of obedience is binding on him until government directly compels him to offend against the divine commandment, that is to say, until government openly denies its divine commission and thereby forfeits its claims."¹⁹⁷ It was because of this understanding that Bonhoeffer

¹⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 95.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 199.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 342-343.

could actively be involved in a conspiracy against his own government, “It is important that Bonhoeffer did not feel that there was any contradiction or break involved in his thinking over, and being satisfied with, the Church’s ‘mandate’ while he was deeply involved in the conspiracy. On the contrary, the break for worldly business that he had made freed him for what needed to be done in the Church’s spiritual field.”¹⁹⁸

For Bonhoeffer, the command to disobey the government came to the Christian when the government had rejected its divine mandate and now called on the Christian to disobey God. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this rejection of the divine mandate was evident whenever the government went against the “necessities of humanity” which the government was called to protect and provide.¹⁹⁹ The Christian, in compliance with any government that did such thing, would find himself or herself disobeying God’s call to minister to the oppressed. It was only when Bonhoeffer became convinced that he would either have to disobey God or resist the state that he took up the role of a conspirator, “it was only when worst came to worst, and Bonhoeffer the theologian had tried other ways to escape from his dilemma, that he took his stand and no longer ruled out that kind of resistance. As soon as tyranny, in the name of those whom it ruled, threatened the lives of its neighbors . . . he felt that on moral grounds the hour for conspiracy had come.”²⁰⁰

King never took on the role of a conspirator, but like Bonhoeffer, he was actively involved in disobeying the state on moral and theological grounds. He too believed in the separation of church and state, and like Bonhoeffer, believed that the church also had a mission to the oppressed, “the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed.”²⁰¹ When writing to eight local ministers from Birmingham who

¹⁹⁸ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 679.

¹⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 238-239.

²⁰⁰ Behtge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 699.

²⁰¹ Martin King, Stride Toward Freedom, 37.

questioned King's actions, he explained he was only following his calling as a minister, "Just as prophets . . . carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town"²⁰² This answering of the call required the Christian to disobey any unjust law. Like Bonhoeffer deciding to rebel against whatever went against the necessities of humanity, King also developed his own criteria by which to determine an unjust law. Because of his basic philosophical position, personalism-which defined all reality by personality, he rejected as unjust any law that degraded human personality, which he considered to be the sign of God's image.²⁰³ Segregation certainly fit that bill. But, according to King, so did violence-which could both physically and spiritually destroy the image of God in humanity through murder and hatred. He was set against violence as a theological principal.

Both King and Bonhoeffer were for Christian civil disobedience whenever the government turned from its divine mandate (which for Bonhoeffer meant that the state was set against human necessities and for King meant that certain laws aimed to destroy human personality or personhood), and thus opened up the possibility for the Christian to disobey God by either supporting the state or simply ignoring its mission to the oppressed. While Bonhoeffer did believe guilt was incurred through violence, he never was against it as a theological principal. It is nonviolence as a theological principle that is the contrasting point between King and Bonhoeffer in their theologies and methodologies of civil disobedience. This is the real source of conflict between the two men.

There are three theological and philosophical differences between King and Bonhoeffer which lead to the acceptance of nonviolence or the allowance of violence as a theological principal. The first difference is simply their understandings of God-and reality. As stated, King's basic philosophical position was personalism, which maintained that, "Personality is a manifestation of ultimate reality, and the locus of ultimate reality is a

²⁰² Ibid., Why We Can't Wait, 78.

²⁰³ Ibid., 85.

‘Supreme Personality,’ a form of superior intelligence apart from which nothing has existence or meaning. A visible and sensible life is a manifestation of the invisible, creative nature of the Supreme Person.”²⁰⁴ This philosophy would not allow for violence or any other thing that would hurt the image of God, personality, in man.

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of God was also based on his understanding of reality, but whereas reality was defined by personality for King, Bonhoeffer understood reality to be the form of Christ. Yet there was nothing to root this understanding of reality in because Bonhoeffer understood the form of God to be very fluid, taking shape wherever God willed-which could be anywhere.²⁰⁵ This gave the Christian freedom, as all actions were open now that God’s will was fluid. The only constant to God’s will is God’s love for all, and the Christian who obeys God will reflect that love in his or her actions.²⁰⁶ This meant that Christian freedom must be one of responsibility towards others, especially the oppressed. Because loving actions were so needed during the Nazi reign, Bonhoeffer could declare with authority that to be an obedient Christian, one must stand for those oppressed by the government, **“Only those who cry out for the Jews may sing the Gregorian chant.”**²⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer would only consider violence when faced with such a situation that it was the only way left for him to help the oppressed. It revealed that, ultimately, the final test of what actions the follower of God should choose is not based on a prior ethical system such as duty or even conscience (as the best possible action might violate both) but the final test is to ask the question of, **“how the coming generation is to live. It is only from this question, with its responsibility towards history, that fruitful solutions can come, even if for the time being they are very humiliating”?**²⁰⁸

King himself was guided against violence by love and because of his respect for the future. King saw love and violence as incompatible. He easily fits into the category of

²⁰⁴ Smith and Zepp, 102.

²⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 38.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Letters and Papers from Prison, 14.

²⁰⁷ Wind, 113.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

nonviolent proponents described by Daniel Stevick, “It is apparent to upholders of nonviolence that violence is, by intention, destructive. Violence is not a means taken in hand except to destroy property, community, personhood, or life itself. If nothing is destroyed, violence has not done its appointed task.”²⁰⁹ But Stevick also points out that there can be a moral ambiguity surrounding violence²¹⁰-an issue King may not have given due consideration. King saw violence as an “either-or” problem-and in the movement he was leading and the injustice he confronted, it most likely was. Yet King’s rejection of violence went further than the situation he himself responded too. For King, it was a lifestyle. King saw violence and violent actions as having consequences on the type of future they created-a consideration Bonhoeffer would have appreciated. Any violence used to bring about certain consequences would create a future that had been built, to some extent, on violence. And any such future would also contain violence. King believed that act of violence would merely serve to perpetuate violence-and that did not fit in with his dream of the beloved community. If the criticism can be raised against King that he did not properly consider the possible moral ambiguities of violence, an equal criticism may be raised against Bonhoeffer that he did not appreciate the relationship between means and ends that King did (although it could also be said, in Bonhoeffer’s defense, that most if not any end would be better than what Hitler offered.)

While there are no significant studies comparing Bonhoeffer and King, Larry Rasmussen has written a very insightful article comparing Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest who engaged in civil disobedience in the United States to protest the Vietnam War. Like King, Berrigan rejected violence against people because of his understanding of the relation between means and ends. And Rasmussen points out that Berrigan was influenced by a source very familiar to King and Bonhoeffer, “The disagreement may be on the relation between ends and means, with Berrigan following Gandhi in saying that means are a rehearsal of ends and thus cannot be out of character with

²⁰⁹ Daniel B. Stevick, Civil Disobedience and the Christian, (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 128.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

the ends sought. Bonhoeffer says, in effect, ‘Yes, normally, but not always.’²¹¹ Rasmussen writes that ultimately the difference between the two men is in how they view the relationship between actions and the ends achieved as well as the character of the one acting, “Bonhoeffer’s (ethic), however, is much more focused upon strictly political consequences over a shorter haul, and is not seen as a central element of some larger meaning beyond those consequences, certainly not as a lifestyle of the moral process of emerging prototypical men.”²¹² The same difference is found between King and Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer once agreed with King on this relation between means and ends, but for him originally, that meant a rejection of even resistance to the state—because as a Lutheran, that was evil, “The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. Resistance merely creates further evil and adds fuel to the flames.”²¹³ But Bonhoeffer lived in highly desperate times, and when he realized that as a Christian he had responsible freedom, he rejected this attitude toward resistance, which then allowed the possibility of violence.

His times were made more morally desperate by his knowledge of what was occurring to the Jews, than the times occupied by Berrigan (although this has been strongly debated between certain groups and Berrigan himself felt that the Vietnam War was comparable in atrocity to Hitler’s treatment of the Jews)²¹⁴ and King (although many were suffering and being killed, to some extent, because of the actions or lack of action at the local and the federal levels of government). Bethge writes of the weight placed on the German resistance by the knowledge that the Third Reich was gathering Jews and placing them in death camps, “For those who were already deeply enough involved in deception to be within reach of a lever in the government machine, the deportation was an incentive to

²¹¹ Larry Rasmussen, “Daniel Berrigan and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Parallels and Contrasts in Resistance,” *Dialog* 11, no.4 (autumn 1972): 268.

²¹² Larry Rasmussen, “Daniel Berrigan and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Parallels and Contrasts in Resistance,” *Dialog* 11, no. 4 (autumn 1972): 264-272.

²¹³ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 157-158.

²¹⁴ Rasmussen, “Daniel Berrigan and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 268.

haste.”²¹⁵ Because Bonhoeffer and his compatriots knew that they were racing against the clock to stop the Hitler, means and end did not seem like an important consideration when they were faced with the daily execution of thousands of innocent people.

King also lived in a time when people were beaten, jailed or killed for little or no reason, and with the approval of the state, either directly as with some local governments or indirectly as with the complacency of state or national laws. There was a moral urgency to his mission, but he felt that no end should be reached except the best-and that required, at least, moral means. Bonhoeffer, in his “haste,” did consider all the nonviolent means possible, finding them all ineffective. And any end reached by violence, to Bonhoeffer, could be better than allowing the Nazi Regime to continue. But regardless of whether his reasons were correct, this difference between King and Bonhoeffer remains, “Bonhoeffer’s, however, is much more focused upon strictly political consequences over a shorter haul, and is not seen as a central element of some larger meaning beyond those consequences, certainly not as a lifestyle of the moral process of emerging prototypical man.”²¹⁶

Bonhoeffer sought to end a regime that was against the very divine mandates it should have followed-King sought to create an end through means equal to it that would be in line with the beloved community about which he believed should come.

It was because of King’s concern in the creation of this community that he felt a desire to change his oppressors as well as deliver the oppressed. One of the main tenets of his nonviolent philosophy was the desire to prick the conscience of the oppressor for his or her benefit, “it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. . . . means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.”²¹⁷

Bonhoeffer did not see a mission to convert the oppressor because the ones he sought to defeat had already shown an inability to listen to reason. Even King knew that

²¹⁵ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 651.

²¹⁶ Rasmussen, “Daniel Berrigan and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 272.

²¹⁷ Martin King, Stride Toward Freedom, 102.

some people would never be converted by nonviolence because their hatred ran so deep, “When King spoke of ‘converting’ oppressors, he was thinking of a long-term process rather than an immediate personal response.”²¹⁸ Bonhoeffer did have an end he was trying to reach—it was more of the way things had been before the Nazis came to power than the new sort of world that King envisioned. Thus, Bonhoeffer could afford to aim at the short-term political goal through violence—the end he was hoping for, a return to “normalcy,” was already based, to some degree, on violence.

As a Lutheran theologian, Bonhoeffer believed that the state did have the right to use the sword, and the church could not enforce nonviolence on the state, “We should be dreaming of a utopia with laws which the world would never obey.”²¹⁹ King did dream of the coming of that utopia, and felt that his actions would determine the shape of the future. Thus, he could and should seek to win over the oppressors, while Bonhoeffer, seeking to stop head elements of an entire government, did not worry about their conversion as much as he acted for their end, “He does not calculate his actions on the basis of their true course on some moral trajectory, nor does he keep in view a purpose of action such a witness to a better order, or pricking of consciences, or keeping civil morality in a barbaric ethos, or embodying the moral configuration of the ‘new man.’”²²⁰

This difference in seeing the special relationship between means and their end, as well as differences concerning the moral mission to the oppressor and in their understandings of God, added to reflect their difference concerning nonviolence as a theological principal. King rejected violence because it hurt the image of God in man, defeated any chance to convert the oppressor, and would never result in bringing about his beloved community. Bonhoeffer allowed violence because he had freedom to do so as a Christian (even though it incurred guilt), he was not concerned about the conversion of Nazi hierarchy, and violence was an acceptable mean towards the end at which he aimed,

²¹⁸ Adam Fairclough, “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change,” in Martin Luther and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. David J. Garrow, 3 vols. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 194. Originally published in Phylon 47 (1986), 336.

²¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 160-161.

²²⁰ Rasmussen, “Daniel Berrigan and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 270.

the end of the Third Reich. Violence was also, by all appearances, the only means left open to achieve that end.

This difference, nonviolence as a theological principle, existed between King and Bonhoeffer. While Bonhoeffer fought for justice and the restoration of a state that recognized the divine orders, King fought for a new way that would be based on love, and his understanding of love would not allow violence. As Cone observes, “the Christian-Gandhian idea of love replaced justice as the dominant theme in his theo-political perspective.”²²¹ Bonhoeffer, in his view of the Christian’s freedom, allowed for violence, if in the end it was the only option open. He agreed with one theologian, “Violence denies respect for law and order and heralds the abandonment of both. Violence is thus a live option for Christian social action only when the destruction of order itself is an apparent lesser evil than the continuation of the existing order.”²²² King would accept no order where violence was needed, and thus he would never use violence to achieve the order of which he dreamed—the beloved community.

²²¹ Cone, 214.

²²² Hodges, 234.

CHAPTER FIVE: IN CONCLUSION

As written earlier, resistance to the state has been practiced by the church since its beginning. However civil disobedience as an independent concept has not been recognized for more than a century. During its short history, there has been much debate concerning the place given to violence in civil disobedience. Thoreau would allow for violence while both Tolstoy and Gandhi were set against it as a matter of principle. In the study of Christian civil disobedience, we also see these two extremes, best represented in this century by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The purpose of this study was to construct a basis toward a comprehensive theory of the appropriate place of violence in civil disobedience for the Christian by contrasting and comparing the extent to which violence is sanctioned in relation to civil disobedience in the theologies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To achieve this end, four smaller ends needed to be reached.

The first end was to determine the extent to which violence is sanctioned in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s understanding of civil disobedience. It was found that King gave violence no place in civil disobedience; instead he advocated a philosophy of nonviolence. Both Thoreau and Gandhi had a tremendous influence on the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. It was to Thoreau that King gave credit for introducing him to the theory of civil disobedience.²²³ It was through the study of Gandhi that, according to Smith and Zepp's insightful work on King, he came to see how nonviolent resistance could be used as a strategy in civil disobedience.²²⁴

Ultimately, though, neither of these men were King's final resource and influence in his understanding of civil disobedience. It was not as a social activist that King developed

²²³ Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom, (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 91.

²²⁴ Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 138.

his understanding, but it was developed in his role as a Christian minister. Cartwright correctly notes, “Of the variety of images that come to mind when one mentions the name, ‘Martin Luther King, Jr.’, the only one that truly does justice to the whole of his personhood is simply that of a committed Christian minister . . . he based his words and deeds on his Christian convictions.”²²⁵ His understanding of nonviolent civil disobedience was developed from his understanding of the Christian message and life.

King’s civil disobedience was truly a Christian civil disobedience. He wrote that it was the role of the Church to act as the “conscience of the state” and call it to accountability whenever the state supported injustice.²²⁶ He felt that in his role as a minister, he should go so far as to openly defy the state whenever he found injustice—even when that injustice did not directly concern either him or his congregation, “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”²²⁷ King decided whether a law was just or unjust based on its impact on individual human personality—whether it encouraged or degraded people as human beings. Human personality was important to King because he believed it was there that the stamp of our Creator could be found. To degrade it was to degrade God’s image.²²⁸

The question that most concerned this study was how King felt civil disobedience should be carried out. The center of his understanding of civil disobedience was nonviolence, and like Gandhi’s understanding, it was to be a way of life. This choice for nonviolence as a way of life grew out of King’s religious convictions. According to Smith and Zepp, “King’s presuppositions for his interpretation of nonviolent resistance was derived from Christian theology and ethics, especially Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and the concept of *agape*.”²²⁹

²²⁵ John H. Cartwright, “The Social Eschatology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. David J. Garrow, 3 vols. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 161.

²²⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 47.

²²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can’t Wait, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 79.

²²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here?, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 97.

²²⁹ Smith and Zepp, 48.

King developed his theory of nonviolent resistance with six defining characteristics. In most of his books and many of his articles, he used these six characteristics to explain to the reader what he meant by nonviolence. The characteristics were a courage to resist, a desire to win over opponents and not humiliate them, a direction aimed against the system of injustice but not the oppressors, a willingness to suffer, an abandonment of hatred, and a hope that universe was on the side of justice and that in the end nonviolence would prevail.²³⁰ This hope was based, according to Mikelson, on his trust in the “cosmic companionship” between God and those who fight for justice.²³¹

Even if God was on his side, King did not lack for critics of his system. Jones has criticized King’s hope that the way of nonviolence would prick the conscience of the oppressors (i.e. seeing people suffer violence without retaliation). He feels King has not understood a central tenet of racism, “its hierarchical division of humankind into human and sub-human groups. In a similar way we ignore the ethical importance of where we draw the boundary between human and sub-human reality. To classify something as sub-human justifies treating it as less than human.”²³² Hodges, a knowledgeable critic, has objected to King’s stress of nonviolence as a theological principle because the first duty of man is to God’s will and not his own mere ideas. He asks whether violence might not be preferable when an order of society is so unjust that its complete destruction is a lesser evil than allowing it to continue.²³³

The second end of this paper was to determine the extent to which violence is sanctioned in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of civil disobedience. Bonhoeffer felt that in special circumstances the Christian should use violence in resistance to the state, even though he or she would incur guilt for such action. Dietrich Bonhoeffer agreed with

²³⁰ King, Stride Toward Freedom, 102-107.

²³¹ Thomas S.J. Mikelson, “Cosmic Companionship: The place of God in the Moral Reasoning of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” The Journal of Religious Ethics 18, no. 2 (fall 1990): 5.

²³² William R. Jones, “Liberation strategies in black theology: Mao, Martin or Malcolm?,” Chicago Theological Seminary Register 73, no.1 (winter 1983): 38.

²³³ Louis Wendell Hodges, “Christian ethics and nonviolence,” Religion in Life 31, no. 2 (spring 1962): 228-229.

that statement made by Hodges as he was involved in an attempt to assassinate his country's leaders in an effort to destroy their regime. One of the major problems in understanding Bonhoeffer's view of violence is that, in his own role in the conspiracy to kill Hitler, he never openly wrote about his plans. But, as Morris as pointed out in an excellent article on Bonhoeffer's understanding of resistance, it would be unfathomable to comprehend that such a theologian would not try to integrate his actions and theology- especially as he was writing his works at the same time he was involved in the conspiracy.²³⁴

The answer to why Bonhoeffer accepted violence as an option is found in his ethics. We must understand his ethics by understanding his Christology, because as Hamilton shows, the two are united in Bonhoeffer.²³⁵ For Bonhoeffer, a Christian's life is to be lived in love- and that is evidenced by living like Christ for others, "Such persons can and should act like Christ. They should bear their neighbor's burdens and sufferings."²³⁶

This desire to live for others is only magnified for the Church, which must continually live to give evidence of the love of Christ to the victims of injustice in this world.²³⁷ This means that the Church has the responsibility to act as the conscience of society- including the state. If the state is guilty of injustice, Bonhoeffer gives the Church three options. It can preach to the state, aid the victims of injustice, and "not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself."²³⁸ Sometimes, this requires breaking the law. Bonhoeffer is adamant that such criminal activity should only be committed in extreme situations when the activities of the state are in "violent conflict" with the needs of man.²³⁹

²³⁴ Kenneth Earl Morris, "Bonhoeffer's Critique of Totalitarianism," Journal of Church and State 26, no. 2 (1984): 255-272.

²³⁵ William Hamilton, "Bonhoeffer: Christology and Ethics United," Christianity and Crises 24, no. 17 (October 19, 1964): 195-199.

²³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Testament to Freedom, ed. Geffery B. Kelley and F. Burton Nelson, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 59.

²³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, (New York: Collier, 1963), 145.

²³⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, ed. Edwin Roberston, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 225.

²³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, (New York: Collier, 1986), 238-239.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of how Christians should commit such civil disobedience was based on the unity between his ethics and Christology. The question of ethics is not, "How do I do good or be good?" but "What is God's will?"²⁴⁰ The will of God is constantly changing because life is constantly changing, "The will of God is not a system of rules which is established from the outset; it is something new and different in each different situation of life, and for this reason a man must ever anew examine what the will of God may be."²⁴¹ Laney has labeled Bonhoeffer's system "ethical contextualism" because it avoids the use of principles in deciding how to act and is instead focused on each specific situation.²⁴² The way to determine the will of God in each situation is to be guided by love for God's creation and to ask, when faced with an obscure ethical choice, how your action will affect the "coming generation."²⁴³

Because there are no set principles in Bonhoeffer's "ethical contextualism," then nonviolence has a principle is automatically ruled out. There may be times when violence is the best option for the future generation. Kelley writes that while Bonhoeffer was willing to consider violence, it would only be as a measure of last resort "when peaceful solutions were impossible."²⁴⁴ In fact, in reading Bonhoeffer, one becomes aware of some very specific rules that he lays down concerning the use of violence in civil disobedience. Rasmussen has found five "operative guidelines" in Bonhoeffer's work concerning violence, including the need for "clear evidence of gross misrule," a "reasonable assurance that tyrannicide can be successfully executed," and a limit to allow only such violence "as is necessary to abolish the abuses of misrule."²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 188.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

²⁴² James, T. Laney, "An Examination of Bonhoeffer's Ethical Contextualism," in A Bonhoeffer Legacy, ed. A. J. Klassen, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 294.

²⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, (New York: Collier, 1972), 7.

²⁴⁴ Geffery B. Kelly, Liberating Faith, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 168.

²⁴⁵ Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 145.

Rasmussen has also been one of the strongest critics of Bonhoeffer. He attacks the contextualism of Bonhoeffer, saying that the methodology in his ethics is inadequate because it cannot explain how to examine the many different actions that claim to be God's will. By refusing to allow principles to guide our actions, Bonhoeffer has also cut off any reference by which to judge those actions.²⁴⁶ At least with King, one had an overriding idea by which to decide and determine what was to be allowed.

The third end of this paper was to contrast and compare the extent to which violence is sanctioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both King and Bonhoeffer hold to civil disobedience as the prerogative of the church in response to injustice committed by the state. But King is committed to nonviolence as a principle and thus will never allow Christians to react violently in civil disobedience. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, is committed to the idea of an ever changing will of God which would allow for violence as a means of last resort.

The ultimate difference between the two men is found in their acceptance or rejection of non-violence as a theological principle. This acceptance or rejection is based, at least, on three theological principles-their understanding of God either in terms of Personality (which for King is concrete) or Reality (which for Bonhoeffer is fluid), their understandings of the relationship between means and ends, and their acceptance or rejection of a moral mission to the oppressor.

The final purpose of this paper was to take common elements from both theologians and from that construct a basis toward a comprehensive theory of the appropriateness of violence in Christian civil disobedience. Yet the elements that decide violence's appropriateness are those very things (relation between ends and means, understanding of God, etc.) on which King and Bonhoeffer disagreed. Ultimately, those elements will determine whether nonviolence should be a theological principle-and it is only theologies that include nonviolence as a principle that can say, at all times, that violence has no place in civil disobedience. Otherwise, there will indeed be circumstances, whether hypothetical or actual, where violence is the better (if not the best) option in

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 151.

comparison to all others. If one would hold that there is no circumstance under which a Christian can violently resist the state, then nonviolence must become a theological principle-and it is possible that nonviolence as a theological principle will have bearing on more than civil disobedience, including treatment of criminals by the state and service in the military.

In the end, the only connecting element between Bonhoeffer and King that has bearing to the question of violence's appropriateness in civil disobedience is the question of nonviolence as a theological principle. The important matter is that both King and Bonhoeffer decided that question based on their theology rather than simply finding the answer through their circumstances or historical settings alone.

The justification for this study was the prominence given to the question of violence in recent years due to certain Christian groups and/or persons using violence in protest to abortion. Dr. Anthony Campolo, a popular Evangelical speaker and teacher, has dedicated a section to this topic in his book, Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat? And 14 other polarizing issues. Mentioning the fact that abortions do drop in number after a violent attack on a clinic, Campolo makes the statement, "If you are really into the pro-life movement, you have to quietly rejoice in these consequences and thank God for them, even though you probably feel some regret over the people who were killed."²⁴⁷ After briefly discussing the debate over abortion, Campolo makes a case against violence aimed at abortion doctors and clinics with the argument, "Now, getting back to those militant pro-lifers that shoot up abortion clinics, I have to say that, regardless of any good they *think* they are doing, they are greatly hurting the pro-life cause. The battle over abortion will not be won by bullets."²⁴⁸ Yet Campolo does not believe that violence against abortion clinics is wrong solely for practical reasons, as he states in the only other argument he presents in opposition to violence, "I think shooting up abortion clinics is not what Jesus would do if He were among us today."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Tony Campolo, Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat? And 14 Other Polarizing Issues, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 97.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 104.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 104.

An underlying theme of this study has been the belief that the issue of violence should not be decided merely on the basis of practicality alone. The issue should be decided on theological grounds. Even after making a practical argument against violence in one instance, Campolo also alludes to a theological argument against that particular instance of violence with an appeal to Jesus as the ultimate example. Both King and Bonhoeffer would have agreed with Campolo's appeal to Jesus, and both would have probably agreed with his stance as well. But only King could have made an appeal against violence in all instances because of his insistence in nonviolence as a theological principle. Bonhoeffer, who does not share that insistence, can only argue against violence in particular instances and for various reasons, much like Campolo.

It is not yet decided in this paper whether violence should be allowed in Christian civil disobedience. But certainly the precedent is there if one should so decide violence is appropriate under certain circumstances. The precedent is also set for those who wish to reject violence categorically. The main difference between the two is whether or not non-violence is to be accepted as a theological principle. Whether the reasons to accept or reject it as a theological principle are based on a certain understanding of God, or the relationship between means and end, or any other reason, the decision must be made by the individual Christian himself. With precedents set for both the acceptance and rejection of non-violence as a theological principle, the best that can be hoped is that the Church will prove to be a place open to those struggling to make such a decision-both for comfort and guidance.

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