

MICHAEL PASQUARELLO

Heard Any Good Sermons on Torture Lately?

When I set out to write this essay I thought it might be interesting to survey and compare sermons that have recently been preached on the subject of torture. While some preachers have addressed this moral issue as a matter of serious concern for Christians, I think it is safe to say that the vast majority of pastors in America have chosen to remain silent. Perhaps a more appropriate title for this essay might be, “Why have we not heard any good sermons on torture lately?”

Fleming Rutledge, an evangelical Episcopalian who spends the majority of her time in a ministry of itinerant preaching and evangelism, speaks from the perspective provided by the Gospel in addressing the moral issue of torture.

it is time to make the transition from American values to the universal Christian gospel. From the standpoint of Christ Jesus, any talk of ‘deserving’ [the grace of God] is treacherous territory. Everybody seems to love the hymn ‘Amazing Grace,’ but not everybody understands what it means . . . Amazing grace can be understood fully only from the standpoint of the Christian gospel. The teaching of Jesus about love for enemies makes no sense if it is detached from his death and resurrection. If it were not for Good Friday and Easter, we would be justified in putting his teachings in a nice gilded box that we could bring out for admiration on ceremonial occasions and kept respectfully on a shelf the rest of the time.¹

Rutledge rightly states that, because of the Gospel, we cannot make Jesus into a nice religious teacher, of either conservative or liberal leanings, as many have done in our time. When the cross is detached from his life and ministry we are unable to take his teaching seriously as a way of being and living given form by God. This is because the Christian faith rests on a unique, unrepeatable event that has fundamentally altered the way we understand reality. “The cross shows us that in Christ Jesus we see God exchanging his divine life for the life of his enemies.”²

The questions raised by Rutledge challenge us to begin thinking about torture within the vision of reality given by the Gospel of Jesus Christ who calls, transforms, and empowers us to live truthfully; that is, according to the truth of God made known in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God. Rather than addressing the issue of torture directly, I want to begin with the Gospel, considering how its message might enable us to speak and live more truthfully in light of the message of the cross. In other words, it may be that we will not hear sermons on moral issues such as torture until the church becomes more attentive to the Gospel as mediated by the Apostolic faith through the canonical witness to the person of Jesus Christ who takes visible form in the church.

To demonstrate what this might mean, I will look to the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a leader of the confessing church in Germany from the early 1930's until execution in 1945. As a theologian turned pastor, Bonhoeffer's ministry was devoted to calling the church to ground its being and life on God's Word, centering itself on Jesus Christ in order to stand against the idolatrous claims made by the Third Reich of Adolph Hitler. For Bonhoeffer, a confessing church was very different from what has become popular in America; that which might be described as either an accomodationalist or activist church. An accomodationalist church pursues "relevance" as it's primary aim, devising strategies for translating Christianity to be more contemporary, or "with the times," thereby making sense of life by fitting the Gospel into the familiar assumptions, understandings and experiences of "reasonable" people. On the other hand, the activist church aims to show or prove that Christianity can still be made useful to the modern world as a good resource, tool, or program for either personal improvement or social change. Both forms of church are very popular in our time, and may be seen practiced in both evangelical and mainline congregations.³

Bonhoeffer and those joined with him in the confessing church began elsewhere. They did not start by focusing on the possible effects or results that are produced by the Gospel according to the terms and values dictated by the world. They began and ended with the source, substance, and goal of the Gospel, Jesus Christ himself, since they were convinced that the church's political outlook and moral vision ought to be determined by its primary loyalty to Jesus Christ instead of its commitments to the self, nation, or culture. In 1934, Bonhoeffer worked with theologian Karl Barth to draft the Barmen Declaration as an act of Christian confession to this end. It begins with these words,

I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me (John 14:6). It continues, "Truly, truly, I say to you, anyone who does not enter the sheep fold by the door but climbs in by another way, that person is a thief and a

robber. I am the door, if anyone enters by me, the will be saved" (John 10:19).

Then follows this confession,

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides the one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.⁴

In stark contrast to much of the preaching and practice of the church in our time, the Barmen Declaration articulates a profoundly nonutilitarian (i.e., scriptural and theological) vision of the Gospel. This difference helps to illumine the theological and moral crisis which prevents us from seeing that addressing a practice such as torture is exceedingly "relevant" for the church's witness to the Lord who was "crucified under Pontus Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried." In other words, a confessing church - rather than an accommodationist or activist church - will seek the truth of revelation as an end in itself, rather than as a pragmatic device for accomplishing goals and producing results independently of faith; that is, in a way which departs from Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture. The way of confession will see Christ as an object of love, awe, and obedience - rather than an object of use, control, and manipulation, even if done for the sake of "reaching people" or "changing the world" - as is claimed today.

Bonhoeffer's life and witness helps us to see that a confessing church will seek faithfulness without equating it with effectiveness. A church which confesses Jesus Christ will no longer see itself - as Christ's visible body in the world - as instrumental to ends such as a changed society or improved individuals, but will instead see itself as a people whose being and existence is the work of God, those whose faith and mission consist of witnessing to the truth and reality of the Gospel through the grace of the Holy Spirit who judges, forms, and transforms the church into the image of Christ. In other words, preaching which acknowledges that practices such as torture are fundamentally at odds with the reality of Jesus Christ will be grounded in, and expressive of, an ethos formed by fidelity and witness to the reality of the Gospel - rather than those forms of religious speech that, in our time, are described as "effective communication."

In his incomplete book, *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer makes clear that it is God who speaks the final or ultimate word on our life, and that those things that are "penultimate" must be seen and measured in light of God's word of grace. For when God's final Word is disposed with in favor of the "penultimate" - the things before that which is final - it is reduced to the quality of what is

calculable, as a merchandise, robbed of its divine power and is thereby no longer a gift. Bonhoeffer then describes two false ways of seeing the penultimate and ultimate.⁵

One way is what he calls “the radical.” This is to see only the ultimate, so that the penultimate, the things of this life and world, are lost to our view. In this way, God’s final word of mercy becomes the “very harshness of the law, so that everything in our human life is sin and denial.” The alternative view is that of compromise in which the ultimate - God’s final word - is separated from the penultimate things of this life. In other words, God’s word of grace simply justifies or underwrites things as they are. By way of contrast, Bonhoeffer points to the Incarnation in which the reality of God and the reality of humanity, the ultimate and penultimate, are reconciled in Jesus Christ.

What is earnest and serious is not some kind of Christianity, but it is Jesus Christ Himself. And in Jesus Christ there is neither radicalism nor compromise, but there is the reality of God and humanity. There is no Christianity in itself, for this would destroy the world; there is no man in himself; for he would exclude God. Both of these are merely ideas; only the God - Man Jesus Christ is real, and only through Him will the world be preserved until it is ripe for its end.⁶

Bonhoeffer insists we must learn by God’s grace to see and speak of the world and our life as human creatures in light of the Incarnation, since we are neither purely spiritual beings nor autonomous human creatures capable of living without God in the world.

Significantly, this must also include our bodily life, which is a gift to us from God and therefore deserves its own preservation. “Since it is God’s will that there should be human life on earth in the form of bodily life, it follows that it is for the sake of the whole man that the body possess the right to be preserved . . . The life of the body, like life in general, is both a means to an end and an end in itself.” This is an important point. The body is not only the “penultimate,” something which can be discarded at the time of death, since Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. The body is also an end in itself. And while subordinated to a higher purpose, it is nonetheless true that, “If the body were only a means to an end man would have no right to bodily joys . . . This would have far reaching consequences for the Christian appraised of all the problems that have to do with the life of the body; housing, food, clothing, recreation, play, and sex.”⁷

This leads Bonhoeffer to the freedom of bodily life, “which includes protections against arbitrary infringement of the liberty of the body.” He discusses slavery and rape before taking up torture. His definition is worth quoting in full.

Torture of the body is to be distinguished from that of corporeal chastisement of which the purpose is to educate the

mentally immature to a state of independence. It is also to be distinguished from that of retributive punishment through which one who is guilty of a base crime against the body of another has his dishonor brought home to him by the injury done to his own body. By torture of the body we mean in general the arbitrary and brutal affliction of physical pain while taking advantage of a relative superiority of strength, and in particular the extortion by this means of some desired admission or statement. In such cases, the body is misused, and therefore dishonored, exclusively as a means to the achievement of another man's purpose, whether it be for the satisfaction of his lust for power or for the sake of acquiring some particular information ... Torture is, in any case, generally an ineffectual means of discovering the truth; though, of course, this argument can have force only in cases where it is really the truth that is sought for.⁸

Bonhoeffer was concerned with the way torture inflicts the most extreme dishonor on a human being and has the effect of creating intense hatred and a desire to restore such wounded honor by the application of bodily force. In other words, bodily dishonor will seek to avenge itself on the body of its tormentor. For this reason, the violation of one's bodily freedom contributes to the destruction of a creation's moral foundation and order.

Writing from prison in 1943, Bonhoeffer reflected on the previous ten years of the church's struggle to render truthful confession and bear faithful witness to the Gospel. He acknowledges that what was missing - from a Christian point of view - was the kind of "large heartedness" displayed by Christ himself. It was Christ who, according to the Scriptures, bore the sufferings of all humanity in his own body as if they were his own, accepting them by his own free will. Bonhoeffer notes that we are not Christ, nor are we called to redeem the world by our own deeds and sufferings, since we are not lords but instruments in the hand of the God of history. And while we are not Christ, we may share in Christ's large heartedness with both freedom and responsibility, demonstrating a real sympathy which springs from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer since, "Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior." In other words, Christians are called to sympathy, to acts of justice and mercy by the suffering of others for whose sake Christ suffered; the One whose fellowship we share with them.⁹

Bonhoeffer concludes with a remarkable passage on the "view from below," asserting that the time has come for learning to see great events from the perspective of "the outcast, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled - in short, from the perspective of those who suffer." For Christian people, this perspective can occur without either bitterness or envy, as a way of seeing with new eyes, "matters great and small, strength and weakness,

sorrow and joy, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice, and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible.”¹⁰

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer had already described the form of life which characterizes the church as it is shaped by the Word incarnate in Christ through the activity of the Spirit and daily prayer, mediating on the Word, and bodily discipline.

To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ is not an ideal of realizing some kind of similarity with Christ which we are asked to attain. It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19). It is Christ’s own form which seeks to manifest itself in us. Christ does not cease working in us until he has changed us into Christ’s own image. Our goal is to be shaped into the entire form of the incarnate, the crucified, and the risen one. Christ has taken on human form. He became a human being like us. In his humanity and lowliness -we recognize our own form. He became like human beings, so that we would be like him.¹¹

Because Christ unites humanity to himself in the life of his Body, it is the Holy Spirit who makes the words of Scripture “relevant” - in relation to the reconciliation of God and the world - through the church’s embodiment of the reality of the incarnate Word in its language and life, “The truthfulness which we owe to God must assume a concrete form in the world. Our speech must be truthful, not in principle but concretely. A truthfulness which is not concrete is not truthful before God.”¹² However, the temptation to abstract language, joined with desire for human autonomy, separates the church’s language from the concrete, visible form of life sustained by Christ’s presence in history, thus creating a form of “Christianity without Christ” which serves only to stimulate more desire for abstract forms of religious “relevance.” Bonhoeffer rightly contends such strategies render words incapable of truthful expression. His description speaks powerfully to our time.

It is a consequence of the wide diffusion of the public word through the newspapers and wireless that the essential character and the limits of various different words are no longer clearly felt and that, for example, the special quality of the personal word is almost entirely destroyed. Genuine words are replaced by idle chatter. Words no longer possess any weight. There is too much talk. And when the limits of the various words are obliterated, when words become rootless and homeless, then the word loses truth, and then indeed there must almost inevitably be lying. When the various orders of life no longer respect one another, words become untrue.¹³

Bonhoeffer perceived that the temptation to make our lies true was prompted by a kind of Christian, ecclesial self-preservation which produces forms of popular “religion” that presumably appeal and correspond to the needs of the individual human psyche. Such “privatized” religion represents

a withdrawal of the church from the concrete, bodily affairs of public life, thereby serving the limited purpose of “making individuals happy in the depths of their being,” but without asking the most decisive theological question of “whether it is true, of whether it is the truth” revealed by God in the person of Christ.

For it could be, of course, that while religion is a beautiful thing, it is not true, that it is all a nice, pious illusion - but still an illusion. But whoever so speaks [making the question of truth secondary] only sees religion from the perspective of human beings and their needs, not from that of God and his claims. Only the one who has staked his or her life on Christ as the truth is in a position to judge whether Christ speaks and is the truth. Truth is recognized only in the course of living it.¹⁴

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer again took up the matter of the church's conformance to the image of Christ - the truthful unity of Christian thought and action - as a requirement for seeing, living, and speaking the truth according to reality, the reconciliation of God *and* the world revealed in Christ. Such conformance is achieved by neither establishing programs nor applying “Christian principles,” but is only realized in being drawn by divine grace into the form of Jesus Christ through the ministry of Word and sacrament and by prayer and action for justice. His words help us to see that if preachers are to address moral issues such as torture, their vision of God and the world must first be illumined by the reality of crucified truth indwelling the church as that part of humanity in which Christ has taken form in solidarity with the weak, the humiliated, and the enemy to stand against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power.

We are sick and tired of Christian programmes and of the thoughtless superficial slogan of what is called ‘practical’ Christianity as distinct from dogmatic Christianity. The primary concern is not with the forming of a world by plans and programmes. Whenever they speak of forming [the Scriptures] they are concerned only with the one form which has overcome the world, the form of Jesus Christ. But here again is not a question of applying directly to the world the teaching of Christ or what are referred to as Christian principles, so that the world might be formed in accordance with these. For indeed in it is not written that God became an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or a law, but that God became man. This means that though the form of Christ certainly is and remains one and the same, yet it is willing to take form in the real man, that is to say, in quite different guises. What Christ does is precisely to give effect to reality. He affirms reality. Whoever sees Jesus Christ does indeed see the world and God in one.¹⁵

Michael Pasquarello III is Granger E. and Anna A. Fisher Professor of Preaching at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

End Notes

¹ Fleming Rutledge, “My Enemy, Myself: A Sermon” in ed. George Hunsinger, *Torture is a Moral Issue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 117

² Rutledge, “My Enemy, Myself: A Sermon” 118.

³ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 115.

⁴ Trans. Arthur Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 239.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979) 125.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 127

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 151-52.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 185.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Collier Books, 1971) 14.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, 17

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. Reginald Fuller, rev. Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1977) 341.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 364.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 367

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and Word of God*, ed. Manfred Weber, trans. Eugene F. Boring (Peabody: Hendrikson, 2004) 35-36.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 80-81.