



Revelation as Person

An Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "*Act and Being*"



Structure

- ▶ Bonhoeffer's life and legacy
- ▶ *Act & Being*
 - ▶ The Problem of Act & Being
 - ▶ Karl Barth's Act Theology
 - ▶ Bonhoeffer's alternative to Karl Barth – "Revelation as Person"
 - ▶ Academic roots for *Discipleship & Ethics*
- ▶ Further reading & resources



Bonhoeffer's life and legacy

- Born 4. Feb 1906 in Breslau
- 1918 – Walter Bonhoeffer dies on the western front
- 1923 – Begins theological studies at Tübingen; continues at Berlin
- 1927 – Completed doctoral dissertation „Sanctorum Communio“
- 1930 – Completed *Habilitationsschrift* „Act and Being“
- 1933 – Joins the Confessing Church movement; Hiltner becomes Chancellor
- 1935 – Confessing Church outlawed; Seminary in Finkenwalde closed by Gestapo
- 1936 – Authorisation to teach at University of Berlin withdrawn
- 1937 – Published *Discipleship*
- 1938 – Wrote *Life Together*
- 1939 – Joined Nazi resistance; German troops invade Poland; formal Allied Declaration of War
- 1940 – begins to write *Ethics*; published posthumously
- 1943 – Arrested and incarcerated at Tegel Prison, Berlin. Correspondence published posthumously as “*Letters and Papers from Prison*”
- 1945 – Transferred to Buchenwald, and then to Flössenburg
- Executed 9. April 1945



Bonhoeffer's life and legacy

“I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people [...] Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilisation may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying their civilisation. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security”.

Farewell letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, June 1939



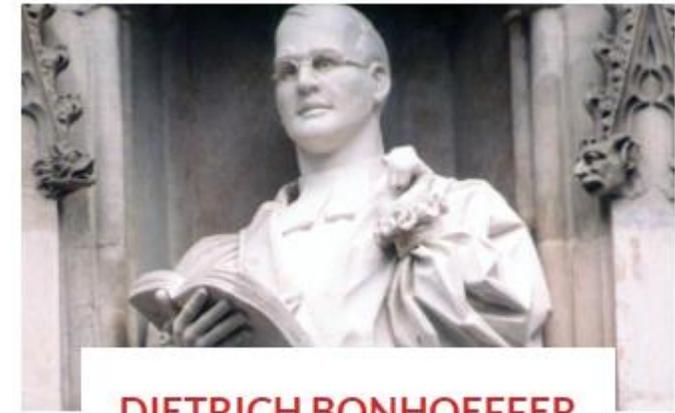
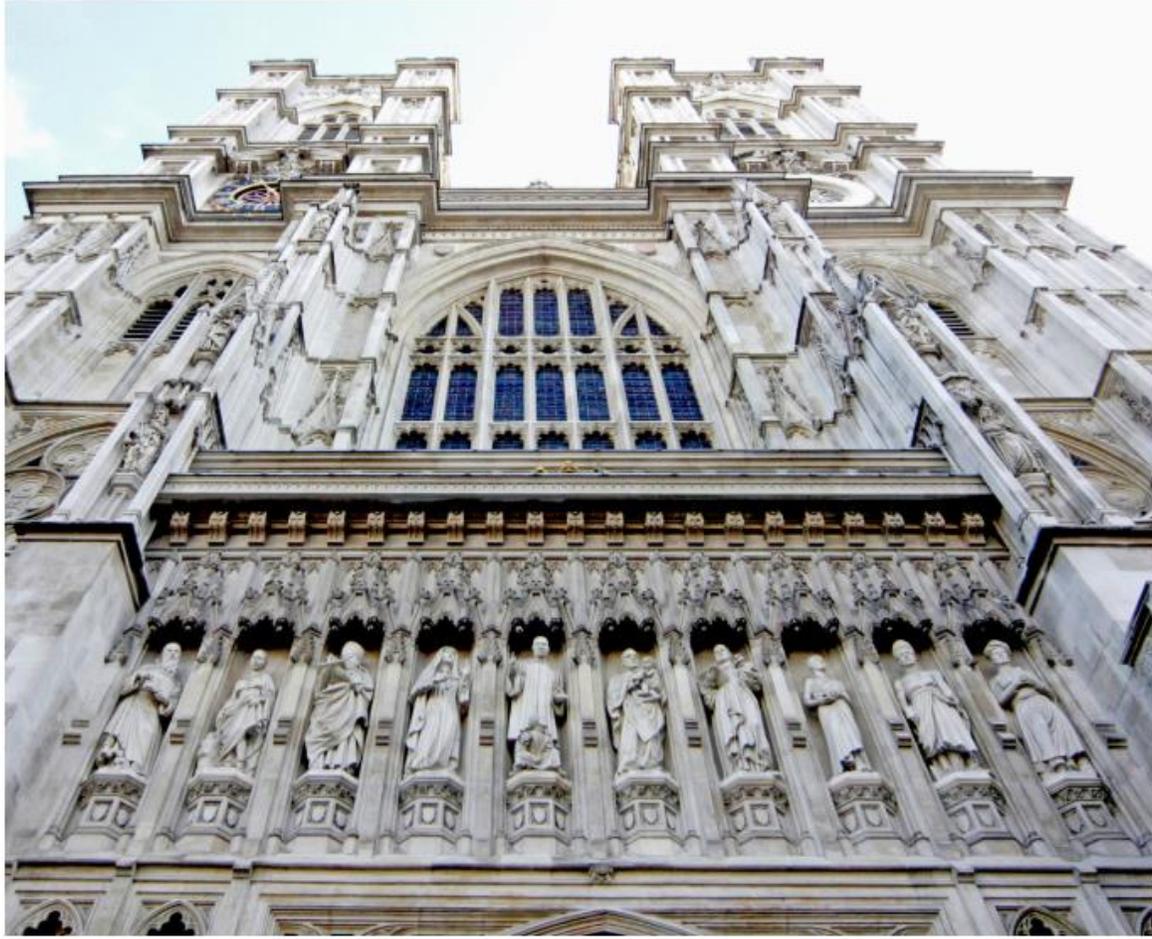
Bonhoeffer's life and legacy

“Today, immensely important things will be decided by whether we Christians have strength enough to show the world that **we are not dreamers and are not those who walk with their heads in the clouds**, that we don't just let things come and go as they are, that **our faith is really not the opium that lets us stay content in the midst of an unjust world**, but that we, especially because we set our minds on things that are above, only **protest all the more tenaciously and resolutely on this earth. Protest with words and action, in order to lead the way forward at any price** [...] We must not be surprised if once again times return for our Church when the blood of martyrs will be required. But even if we have the courage and faith to spill it, this blood will not be as innocent or as clear as that of the first martyrs. Much of our own guilt will lie in our blood”.

Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, Berlin; 19. June 1932



Bonhoeffer's life and legacy



DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Westminster Abbey's Gallery of 20th Century Martyrs, London



Bonhoeffer's life and legacy

“Without disparaging his integrity as an historical actor, or the integral way in which his thought informed his action, I would insist that Bonhoeffer’s theology is not an epiphenomenon of the fight against Nazism. Put differently, **his theology cannot be deduced from his historical struggle; it is an intellectual achievement and must be understood on its own terms.**”

Clifford Green; Foreword to Michael DeJonge’s “Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation” (2012).



The Problem of *Act and Being*

**The Problem: How should Christian theology understand revelation?
(ie. God revealing himself)**

The challenge from philosophy:
the general problem of
transcendence

- How can we know something / someone that is transcendent?

“Act-concept” of revelation

- Revelation and faith must originate in God's freedom rather than human possibilities
- “Act” characteristics: discontinuous, free, relational
- **Challenge: The problem of historical existence**

“Being-concept” of revelation

- Revelation is tied to existing objects of knowledge (e.g. the Bible) or processes of knowing (e.g. consciousness)
- “Being” characteristics: continuous, possibility, closed
- **Challenge: The problem of transcendence**

Impasse: Transcendence vs
historical existence

- Theology requires a concept of revelation that captures both characteristics of “act” and “being”



The Problem of *Act and Being*

Development of the problem of act and being in dialogue with post-Kantian philosophy (Act-philosophy & Being-philosophy)

► Kant's transcendental philosophy (Act)

- The being of reality is disclosed in the thinking act (**Act before Being**)
- **Act does not create or completely determine Being** => philosophical openness to revelation
- "The decisive boundary of the Creator's integrity is honoured in principle, that is, to the extent which this is at all possible in philosophy"

► Heidegger's *Dasein* (Being)

- Philosophy must turn away from its modern preoccupation with epistemology towards an analysis of existence.
- "**Being** is given in the thinking **act** only when thinking is understood as the **thinking of existing beings**"
- Success in forcing act and being in the concept of **Dasein** → **the existing, thinking human being**
- Act presupposes Being & Being presupposes Act
- *Dasein* solved the **philosophical version** of the problem, oriented around the self.



The Problem of *Act and Being*

Philosophy thinks from the self rather than from revelation.
However, it provides:

- Intellectual background and terminology for articulation
- Illustrations of problems that theology must avoid

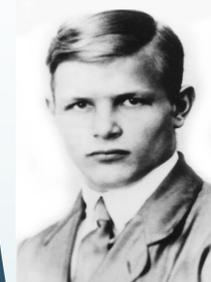
“The concept of revelation will itself restore an entirely new form to those questions and it will be clear in the process that, on the basis of that concept, the “in reference to” (*in Bezug auf*) and the “suspension” (*Aufgehobensein*) of the act in being are **basically amendable to a theological interpretation** and, therefore, of help in the understanding of the concept of revelation. We shall see that in the concept of revelation both are brought together, surmounted, and transcended (*aufgehoben*) in an original fashion”

Act and Being, p. 79



Karl Barth's Act Theology

Bonhoeffer presents Barth's theology as an **act**-concept of revelation



Formal account
of God's freedom

- God and humanity are in a relationship of **diastasis**
- Revelation is based on God's freedom to act, away from human grasp. This revelation bridges the *diastasis*. Any encounter between humanity and God occurs by God's initiative.
- Any encounter between humanity and God occurs by God's initiative.
- Revelation is fundamentally **Deus dixit** – **God spoke**; "He, not we".
- God **spoke**: Revelation is emphatically speech and therefore **act rather than being**

God is subject

- God is always a free subject and cannot be subjected to objectification.
- Confusion begins when God becomes an object to be manipulated by the human subject (Feuerbach)
- Because God must always remain subject, God can be known only through indirect revelation

Dialectic thought-
form

- Theology must at times employ a dialectic thought-form
- A method which calls for every theological statement to be placed over against a counter statement, without allowing the dialectical tension between the two to be resolved in a higher synthesis



Bonhoeffer's critique of Barth

Discontinuities

- The concept of God (revelation) & theological epistemology.
- Human existence and the existence of the church can rest only upon God, his ongoing and continuing presence and revelation.
- Historical existence of the believer, the "total I"; the sinner and the believer
- Historical existence of the church, the community of believers

Boundaries

- *Finitum incapax infiniti est* as a self-imposed boundary; a boundary in thought
- Conclusions on the possibility of revelation from anthropological bases, rather than from revelation
- The danger of moving from "boundary" to "possibility"
- A genuine boundary is a boundary in history: "There is a boundary only for a concrete human being in its entirety, and this boundary is called Christ".

Rationalism

- Assumption that God reveals God's self in accord with the rules of human reason.



Bonhoeffer's alternative: Unity of "Act" & "Being" Revelation as Person

Substantial account of God's freedom

- God is not free *from* but free *for* humanity. God's freedom consists in God binding himself to humanity in revelation

God as Person

- Definition of person derives from the fact or reality of Jesus Christ.
- It is in encountering Jesus Christ that sinners first meet revelation: "I am the truth", the death of human logos, the life of God's Logos.
- "It is the Christ of history, the whole Christ whom we ask and who answers".
- Christ binds himself personally to the church

Hermeneutic thought-form

- Theology should express its humility through its proximity to the person of Christ (in obedience)



Coordination of Act & Being

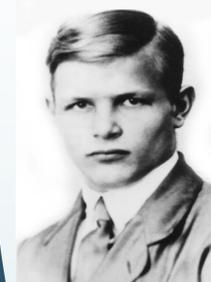
God as Person

► “Who” is Jesus Christ?

- **The crucial question is not “how”, but “who”. “Who is this person called Christ”?**
- “We say of this human being, Jesus Christ, that he is God” – the historical reconciliation of opposites. “This human is God; this God is human”.
- The person of Jesus Christ is by definition present (“being-there”)
- The person of Jesus Christ is personal (“being-there-for-me” / “pro-me”)
- The person of Jesus Christ is the historical person Jesus Christ (Lutheran tradition)
- The fact of the person of Christ is not an object; He is person, a being fully in history that nonetheless remains free to encounter humans.

► **Coordination of Act & Being**

- God as Person reveals himself (“act”) in historical continuity (“being”).
- The believer is “acted” upon by this revelation in the historical continuity (“being”) of the church
- The believer's existence in the church grounds a historically continuous existential mode of faith, with Christ as Person binding himself to the church



The Definition of Chalcedon

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,

at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, **truly God and truly man**, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; **of one substance with the Father** as regards his Godhead, and at the same time **of one substance with us** as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, **apart from sin**;

as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, **recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation**;

the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the **union**, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to **form one person** and subsistence, **not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ**; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

REFORMED:

“Person”: the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Logos.

“Union”: the union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ is a mediated, dialectical union, which “is not” in Jesus Christ but is revealed there in **“acts”**.

LUTHERAN:

“Person”: the historical God-man Jesus Christ. It is in this person that the divine and human natures are immediately united.

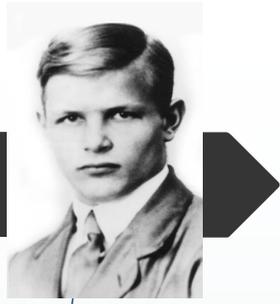
“Union”: Jesus Christ “is” (in his **being**) both God and human, for in him God and humanity are immediately united.



Academic Roots: *Discipleship*

► **Discipleship**

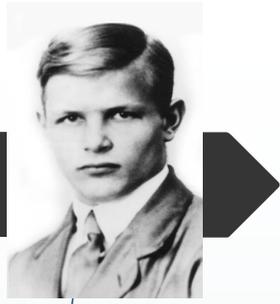
- Examination of the Christian life through the theological exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's letters.
- Argument for “discipleship” as *the* authentic understanding of faith and works by virtue of its basis in the unity of person of Christ.
- Background: Lutheran church that resists and disregards simple obedience to Jesus Christ.
- Discipleship as simple obedience: “As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and said to him, “Follow me”. And he got up and followed him (Mark 2:14).
- **Faith:** Jesus' call (being acted upon) produces a situation (being) that makes faith (act) possible.
- **Call:** the indissoluble unity between faith and obedience is made possible by Jesus' call. “The call to discipleship is a commitment solely to the person of Jesus Christ”.
- **Situation:** “**only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe**”.
- “There is only one good reason for the proximity of call and deed: **JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF**”



Academic Roots: *Ethics*

► **Ethics**

- Christ's person as the unifying ground of irreconcilable opposites
- Conceptual foundation of *Ethics*: **God and the world are reconciled in the person of Christ**; God and the world are enclosed in this name. Reality in Christ is the unity of opposites in history.
- Ethics is then to think and act from the reality of the reconciliation of God and the world in Christ.
 - "Who is Jesus Christ for us today"? => Rejection of God as *deus ex machina* and Christianity as "pure inwardness"
 - Concept of "mandates" => contexts of responsibility for ethical action and reflection.
- **Theoretical level: the good must be in conjunction with the real.**
 - Rejection of abstract ethics => Rejected the notion of an isolated, atomised individual who has an absolute criterion to choose continually and exclusively between a clearly recognised good and a clearly recognised evil.
 - Rejection of sacred-secular spheres => The action of the Christian must spring from the unity of God and world brought about in Jesus Christ, and must be performed in concrete reality.
- **Practical level: ethical action is responsible action in the world, action in accordance with reality and love**
 - Jesus Christ as the perfect embodiment of responsible action



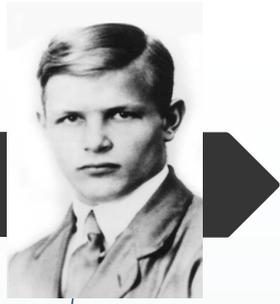
Academic Roots - *Ethics*

Theoretical level: the good must be in conjunction with the real.

“Christ is not a principle according to which the whole world must be formed. Christ does not proclaim a system of that which would be good today, here, and at all times. Christ does not teach an abstract ethic that must be carried out, cost what it may. Christ was not essentially a teacher, lawgiver, but a human being, a real human being like us. Accordingly, Christ does not want us to be first of all pupils, representatives and advocates of a particular doctrine, but human beings, real human beings before God.

Christ did not, like an ethicist, love a theory about the good; he loved real people. Christ was not interested, like a philosopher, in what is “generally valid”, but in that which serves real concrete human beings. Christ was not concerned about whether “the maxim of an action” could become “a principle of universal law”, but whether my action now helps my neighbour to be a human being before God.

God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid belief, or a law; God became human.



Academic Roots - *Ethics*

Practical level: Ethical action is responsible action in the world

“Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of the person who lives responsibly [...] He lives and bears the selves of all human beings. His entire life, action and suffering is **vicarious representative action**. As the one who has become human he indeed stands in the place of all human beings. All that human beings were supposed to live, do and suffer falls on him. In this real vicarious representative action in which his human existence consist, he is the responsible human being par excellence.”



Academic Roots - *Ethics*

Practical level: Ethical action as love

“Love – as understood by the gospel in contrast to all philosophy – is not a method for dealing with people. **Instead, it is the reality of being drawn and drawing others into an event, namely, into God’s community with the world, which has already been accomplished in Jesus Christ.** “Love” does not exist as an abstract attribute of God but only in God’s actual loving of human beings and the world.

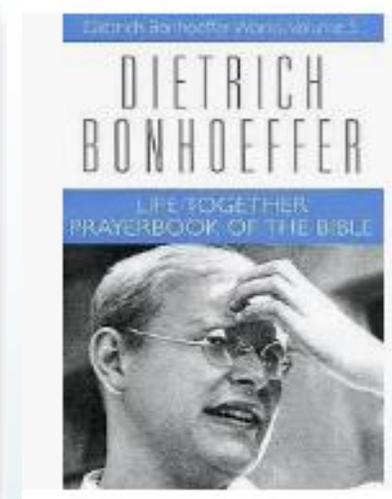
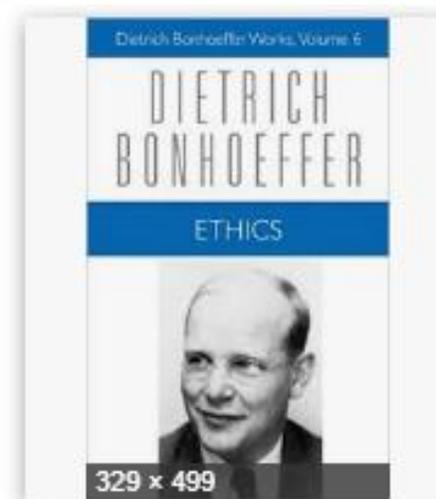
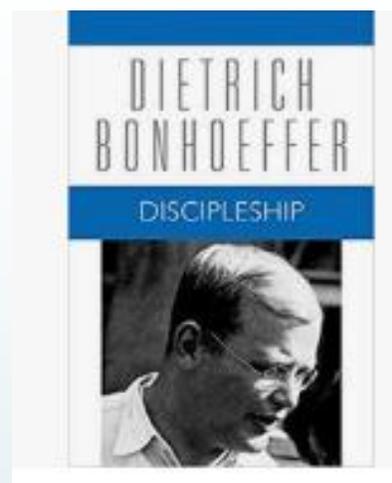
Again, “love” does not exist as a human attribute but only as a real belonging-together and being-together of people with other human beings and with the world, based on God’s love that is extended to me and to them [...] **God’s love liberates human perception, which has been clouded and led astray by love of self, for the clear recognition of reality, the neighbour and the world;** thus, and only thus, is one readied to perceive and undertake genuine responsibility”



For further reading:

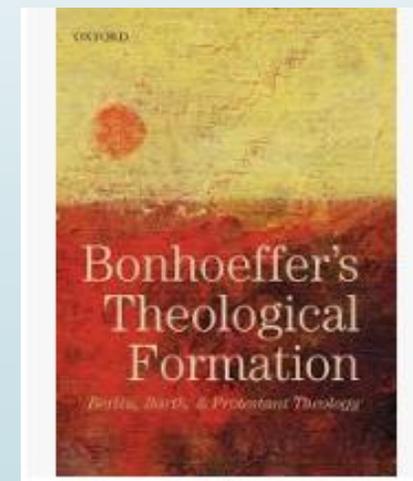
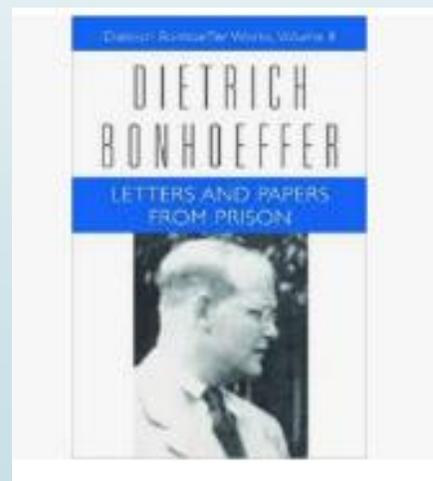
Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

- Discipleship
- Ethics
- Life Together
- Letters and Papers from Prison



Other resources:

- DeJonge (2012): Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation
- Cambridge University Press (1998): The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer



Further resources

- ▶ RZIM: <https://www.rzim.org/>
 - ▶ DACH HQ: <https://zachariasinstitut.org/>
- ▶ Festival of Thought: <http://festivalofthought.buzz/>
- ▶ Center for Faith and Work: <https://faithandwork.com/>



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