

GTW Winter 2021

Discipleship According to Bonhoeffer

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Week 10

2 Peter 3

1 Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. **2** I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

3 Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. **4** They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” **5** But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. **6** By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. **7** By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. **8** But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. **9** The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. **10** But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. **11** Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives **12** as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. **13** But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. **14** So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. **15** Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. **16** He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

17 Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. **18** But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

Responsibility

(Preparing the Way of the Kingdom of God)

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

John the Baptist,

Quoting Isaiah 40:3 in John 1:23

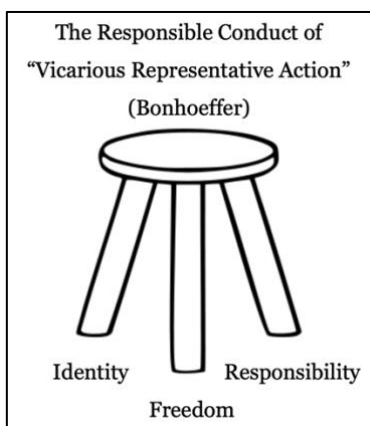
Recall, Bonhoeffer presents an ethic that is built around a) a living relationship with Jesus Christ, b) focused primarily on the reconciliation of God with his people, and that is c) empowered by the Holy Spirit, which alone produces *true responsible action*.

In Week 7 we looked at **common ethical theories**, primarily the realism categories of deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism, but also the non-realism category of cultural relativism, and the underlining “virtues” of egoism and emotivism therein (to name a few).

In Week 8 we studied our **identity** as existing in participatory relationship regarding oneself, one’s neighbor, and God. *Ownership* and *Responsibility* were two key words in our conversation on identity.

Last Week, **in Week 9**, we studied the relationship between the ultimate and penultimate and our **freedom** to rightly order our lives around the ultimate, the Kingdom of God.

Tonight, **in Week 10**, we conclude our semester together by learning that Christian **responsibility** leads Bonhoeffer to developing a system of decision making using the term, “vicarious representative action.”



By the time we reach the end of this outline, **our conclusion** will be that acting out of proper identity, freedom, and responsibility – while living in relationship with Christ before the Father – provides the structure of the responsible life according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Definitions and Context:

- **Identity** (Week 8): Child of God, living under the curse of the fall
- **Freedom** (Week 9): The freedom of a child of God is a bound freedom to the call of Christ to pursue first and foremost the Kingdom of God.
- **Responsibility** (Week 10): The believer is a being that is both *intrinsically free* as an image bearer of God and *intrinsically bound* to the responsibility of being commissioned by God to participate in His reconciliation of the world through Christ (See “The Great Commission” in Matthew 28).

Vicarious Representative Action:

- **Bears the guilt of sin**
- **Bears witness to the kingdom of God by suffering for the life of the world**
- **Risks itself in faith**
- **Replaces traditional ethical theories**

Vicarious representative action bears the guilt of sin.

- For Bonhoeffer, the dark complexity of sin renders all classical ethical categories unable to bear the weight of true responsible action.
 - Therefore, a vicar is needed who can destroy the complexity and provide clear, simple solutions. Jesus Christ, the Incarnation, is the perfect vicar and the only solution to the demand of the law for believer to stand blameless before a holy God.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. – Galatians 2:20

- Bonhoeffer implores the believer to fully consider and then operate out of the mindset of having died with Christ. Only then is the believer able to rid himself of **the self-righteous tendency to preserve “the purity of a clear conscience.”**¹
 - Bonhoeffer rejects that true responsible action and a personal clear conscience can always coexist within the context of the fall.
- It is important to distinguish between “bearing guilt” and “being guilty.”
 - Bonhoeffer looks to passages like 2 Corinthians 5:21 as the foundation for the acceptability and necessity of bearing guilt *as mediators* that offer a guilty world to a holy God for complete redemption.

“In vicariously taking responsibility for human beings and in his love for the real human being, Jesus becomes burdened with guilt; indeed, he becomes the one upon whom ultimately all human guilt falls. Jesus does not (avoid the guilt of humanity) but bears it in humility and infinite love.”²

¹ Bonhoeffer, “History and Good [2]” in *Ethics*, 197.

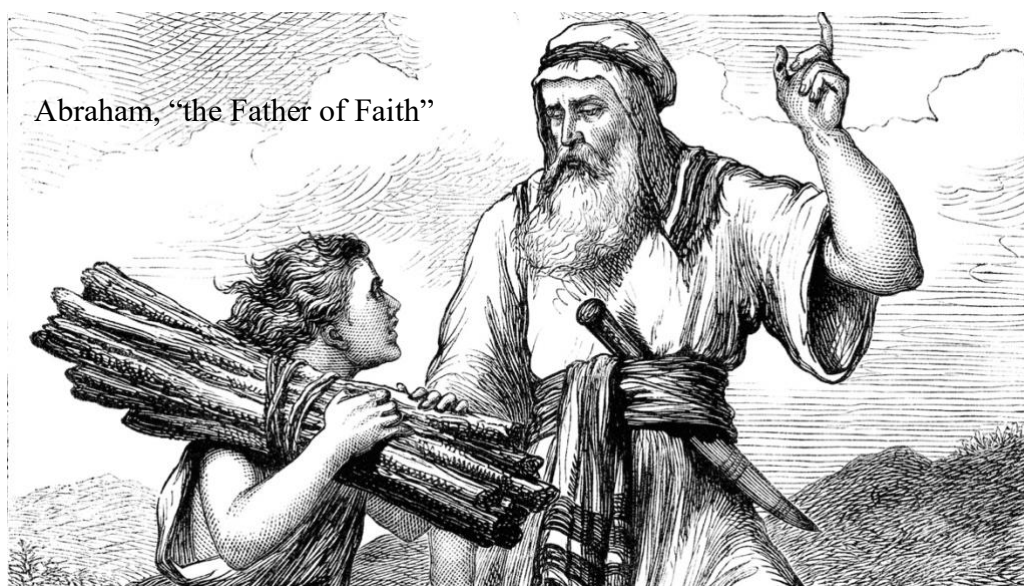
² Bonhoeffer, “History and Good [1]” in *Ethics*, 157.

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” - 1 Peter 2:24

Christ does not become guilty, *but he does **bear the guilt** of the world as he stands firmly as mediator in the reconciliation of all of creation back to God. What is needed is not a conscience responsible to the self, but a conscience responsible to God alone, the only one who can save humanity from sin.*³

- This in no way provides the individual with a license to forsake paying attention to the conscience.
 - Oppositely, the one who properly bears the weight of being willing to damage one’s conscience must act from **the foundation of love and responsibility – love of God** above all and responsibility first and foremost to the **kingdom of God**.⁴

Only when hidden in Christ can one responsibly stand in the emotionally crushing landscape of ethical decision-making in this darkened and bent landscape of the fall. Abraham must be willing to bear the guilt of killing his son that would have resulted from the responsible conduct of obeying his Creator.



³ Bonhoeffer, “Natural Life” in *Ethics*, 137.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, “History and Good [1]” in *Ethics*, 158.

Vicarious representative action bears witness by suffering for the life of the world.

- The one who acts responsibly must also bear witness to God through a life laid down in surrender. Just as “Jesus Christ is... the Yes of God to real human beings... [the] merciful Yes of a compassionate sufferer” so too must the one who acts responsibly walk as a compassionate sufferer.⁵
- For Bonhoeffer, this is the primary way in which the watching world will come to see the Father’s offer of reconciliation, by the ones who are bearing witness through suffering compassionately for “the life of the world,” to use the phrase of Christ Himself.⁶
- The believer must move forward by “seeking the welfare of the city” through a posture that models itself from the Savior who **suffered compassionately** for the sake of the world.⁷
 - This is Bonhoeffer’s clearest articulation of the incorporation of **virtue theory** that pays such close attention to *disposition*.

*Vicarious representative action risks itself in faith.*⁸

- Any ethical solution implemented in **a world darkened by the complexity of sin** will by necessity have an element of risk embedded within its response.
- The believer must **bear the weight of risking in faith** in order to act against “this present darkness” that is darkened by “the spiritual forces of evil” so prevalent under the curse of the fall.⁹
 - A large result of living in a darkened landscape is that good and evil are not as clearly recognizable as they ought to be.
- than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.”¹⁰

⁵ Bonhoeffer, “Ethics as Formation” in *Ethics*, 32.

⁶ John 6:51.

⁷ Jeremiah 29:7.

⁸ Consider too: Abraham, at God’s demand for his son to be a sacrifice, as a perfect example of “risking in faith.”

⁹ Ephesians 6:10-20.

¹⁰ Ephesians 3:20.

Vicarious representative action replaces traditional ethical theories.

- Bonhoeffer argues that the believer ought to jettison unchecked allegiance to any ethical theory that does not allow for vicarious representative action.
 - **Ethical theories are *necessary*** in the sense that as rational creatures we must create categories if we are to derive understanding, **but ethical theories are not *sufficient*** because the darkened landscape in which the believer finds himself has become *too complex with sin to be containable by any one classical ethical theory*.
- Bonhoeffer believes that “Those who are committed to an ethical agenda are compelled to a senseless waste of their energies.”¹¹
 - Ill: the ethical agenda of duty prevents the free action required of responsibility.
 - On virtue theory Bonhoeffer concludes, “Only at the cost of self-deception can they keep their private blamelessness clean from *the stains of responsible action* in the world.”¹² Responsible action cannot exist in the isolation of ethical virtue theory or any other classical theory that is not permitted breathing room to act responsibly with the complexity of this sin-fill world.¹³
- Bonhoeffer creates the category of “vicarious representative action” in order to account for what he believes to be a unified, full measure of responsibility that unites the traditional Christian theories of virtue, duty, and consequence.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, “Ethics as Formation” in *Ethics*, 26.

¹² Ibid., 27-28, emphasis added.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, “History and Good [1]” in *Ethics*, 146.

Conclusion

Acting out of proper identity, freedom, and responsibility while living in relationship with Christ before the Father provides the structure of the responsible life.

- This structure is the only proper response to the identity of being a child of God living in a sin-saturated world.
- Bonhoeffer concludes that from this reality one must seek to live out the ethical response of vicarious representative action where the believer has died with Christ, which allows Christ to live in and through the believer (doctrine of union with Christ).
- The believer can now act responsibly as Jesus vicariously demonstrates a responsible ethical response in His mission to reconcile all creation to the Father.
- To live out Bonhoeffer's conclusion of vicarious representative action **one must continuously abide in Christ by keeping in step with the Spirit.**¹⁴
 - Only by daily accepting this responsibility will a person be truly free; only by daily accepting this responsibility will a person arrive at an ethical solution that is strong enough to bear the weight of living in this present darkness.

In closing, Bonhoeffer presents an ethic that is built around a) a living relationship with Jesus Christ, b) focused primarily on the reconciliation of God with his people, and that is c) empowered by the Holy Spirit, which alone produces *true responsible action*.

¹⁴ c.f. John 15:4 and Galatians 5:16-25.

Reflection & Growth (Small Group Prompts)

- How can you better cultivate your “living relationship with Jesus Christ”?
- Where might God be calling you to “risk in faith” to see the gospel advance in your context?
 - (Remember that for the Christian, responsible conduct always has God’s inbreaking reconciliation as the lens through which decisions are made, never strictly personal desires, such as those for ease, safety, and rest.)
- Do you agree with Bonhoeffer’s dismissal of being able to live purely through a classical ethical theory and maintain one’s kingdom responsibility?
 - Why or why not?
- What section of Bonhoeffer’s ethics has been most helpful for you and why?

End your time in prayer, praying that the Spirit of God would lead each of us in our walk, making us clear light and useful salt to everyone we meet.

Final Reminders

After this call: Do you have a small group video call to join?

- Thank you for participating in this class!
- Will you fill out the survey included in today’s email?