

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who Can Resist Temptation?” (December 1942)

Abstract

The traditional split within the Protestant Church deepened in 1932 with the founding of the German Christian movement [*Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen*], which was organized in accordance with the “Führer principle” and advocated the fusion of ecclesiastical and racial doctrines. After assuming power, Hitler promised to preserve the rights and integrity of the Christian churches in Germany. His real intention, however, was to ensure their National Socialist “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*] and eventual abolition. The first step in the direction of state control over the Protestant Church was the establishment of the new German Protestant Church [*Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK) or Reich Church] under the new Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller (1883–1945). German Christians formed the majority in this newly-formed church. But when the new church leadership called for the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph for church offices and the elimination of the Old Testament, opposing church representatives set up the so-called Confessing Church, which declared that Nazi racial ideology and Christianity were incompatible. The Confessing Church’s approximately 3,000 pastors were responsible for the most important institutional resistance by the Protestant Church against the Nazi dictatorship. One of the best-known representatives of the Confessing Church was Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), who ran the Church’s seminars for preachers in Zingst and Fürstenwalde after 1935. After losing his right to teach, being prohibited from writing and public speaking, and experiencing the weakening of the Confessing Church through mass arrests from 1936 onward, Bonhoeffer continued his resistance activity underground. In 1940, he joined the nucleus of resistance that had formed in the Wehrmacht around Admiral Wilhelm Canaris (1887–1945), Chief of Military Intelligence [*Amt Ausland/Abwehr*]. From there, he tried to establish contacts between western governments and the German military resistance and to bring about possible peace negotiations. On April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo on charges of undermining military strength. But it was only in connection with the investigation into the attempt on Hitler’s life on July 20, 1944, that the government was able to prove his resistance activities. Together with Admiral Canaris and his chief of staff, General Major Hans Oster, Bonhoeffer was taken to the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 8, 1945, and hanged the next day. In this memorandum of December 1942, Bonhoeffer calls upon the German people to show courage in taking responsibility before themselves and God.

Source

Who Can Resist Temptation?

The great masquerade of evil has confused all ethical concepts. The fact that evil can take on the appearance of light, benevolence, historical necessity and social justice is simply bewildering to someone who comes from our traditional ethical world; for the Christian, whose life is guided by the Bible, it is very much a confirmation of the profound evilness of evil.

The failure of those who claim to be “followers of reason,” the people who, with the best of intentions, and in their naive blindness to reality, think they can put the collapsing edifice together again with a bit of reason is patently obvious. Their dim vision leads them to want to be fair to all sides and, as a result, they are ripped apart by the contradictions between the opposing forces without having achieved anything. Disappointed by the irrational nature of the world, they see themselves condemned to sterility, step resignedly aside or yield themselves up completely to the stronger party.

The failure of all ethical *fanaticism* is even more shocking. The fanatic thinks that he can oppose the power of evil with the purity of principle. But like a bull he charges at the red rag instead of at the person holding it, tires and then succumbs. He gets tied up in insignificant details and falls into the trap set by his cleverer opponent.

The man of *conscience* fights a lonely struggle against the overwhelming pressure of dilemmas requiring a decision. But the extent of the conflicts within which he has to choose—with no one to advise and support him but conscience—tears him apart. The countless honorable and seductive disguises in which evil approaches him make his conscience anxious and uncertain until he finally contents himself with salving his conscience rather than keeping it clear, until, in order not to despair, he lies to his own conscience; for the man for whom his conscience is his only support cannot understand that a bad conscience can be healthier and stronger than a deceived conscience.

Duty seems to point the certain way out of the confusing mass of all the possible decisions that are available. In this case what has been ordered is taken as the most reliable thing to do, for the person who gives the order takes the responsibility and not the person carrying it out. But by restricting oneself to doing one's duty, one can never dare to act on one's own responsibility, yet only that kind of action can strike at the heart of evil and so overcome it. In the end, the man of duty will have to do his duty even towards the devil.

But anyone who tries to hold his own in the world by exercising his personal *freedom*, anyone who values the necessary deed higher than the purity of his own conscience and reputation, anyone who is prepared to sacrifice a sterile principle to a fruitful compromise or even a sterile notion of the happy medium to a fruitful radicalism should watch out that his freedom does not bring him down. He will accept the bad in order to avoid something worse and in the process he will no longer be able to recognize that it is precisely that something worse, which he is trying to avoid, that may prove preferable. This is the very stuff of tragedies.

In their flight from public conflict this or that person may find sanctuary in a private *virtuousness*. But he must close his eyes and shut his mouth in the face of the injustice around him. It is only at the cost of self-deception that he can avoid dirtying his hands with responsible action. In everything he does he will be continually haunted by what he has left undone. He will either die destroyed by this disquiet or become the most hypocritical of Pharisees.

Who can resist temptation? Only he for whom neither reason nor his principles, nor his conscience, nor his freedom, nor his virtue is the final measure of all things, but who is prepared to sacrifice all these when, in faith and bound solely to God, he is called to responsible action, and who in his life seeks nothing more than to respond to God's question and his call. Where are these responsible people?

Civil Courage

What really lies behind the complaint about the lack of civil courage? During these years we have come across much courage and self-sacrifice but very little civil courage even in ourselves. It would be psychologically too naive to explain this lack in terms of personal cowardice. What lies behind it is very different. In our long history we Germans have had to learn the need for and acquire the strength of obedience. We saw the meaning and greatness of our lives in the subordination of all our personal wishes and thoughts to the task assigned to us. Our eyes were directed upwards not in slavish fear but in voluntary trust which regarded an assigned task as a profession and a profession as a calling. The readiness to follow an order from "above" rather than act at one's own discretion represents a legitimate mistrust of one's own heart. Who would dispute the fact that, as far as obedience and fulfilling tasks are concerned, in their professional lives Germans have repeatedly demonstrated the utmost courage and commitment. However, the Germans preserved their freedom—and where in the world has there been

more passionate talk about freedom than in Germany from Luther to the idealist philosophers—by trying to liberate themselves from self-will in service to all. Their profession and their freedom seemed to them to be two sides of the same coin. But in thinking this they misunderstood the world; they did not reckon with the fact that their readiness to subordinate themselves, to commit themselves fully to their assigned tasks could be misused for evil. When this happened the practice of their professions itself became dubious, and then the whole basis of German moral concepts was inevitably shaken. It could not but become apparent that the Germans lacked a crucial fundamental insight, namely the need voluntarily to take responsibility for an action which runs counter to one's professional code or to the task which one has been assigned. In its place came, on the one hand, an irresponsible lack of scruple and, on the other, a self-tormenting scrupulousness which never led to action. However, civil courage can only grow from free men taking responsibility for their own actions. The Germans are only now beginning to discover what individual responsibility means. It depends on a God who demands the free leap of faith involved in responsible action and who promises forgiveness and consolation to those who become sinners as a result of making that leap of faith.

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