

Faith Pulpit

Bonhoeffer and the Scriptures

Bible-believing evangelical Christians hold a high view of the Scriptures. Many evangelicals also see Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Bible-believing Christian. Bonhoeffer, however, accepted the prevailing historical-critical views of the Bible in his day. Therefore, we should be wary of calling Bonhoeffer a “Bible-believer.” The following three examples from his writings support this position.

Creation and Fall

In *Creation and Fall* (1932), an exegesis of Genesis 1–3, we find clear examples of Bonhoeffer espousing the historical-critical view of the Bible. In this work he referred to the Biblical author as the “Yahwist.”^{[1](#)} The “Yahwist” is a reference to the historical-critical reading of the text in Bonhoeffer’s day. John de Gruchy, who edited an edition of *Creation and Fall*, included an explanatory footnote at Genesis 2:4 to alert the reader that Bonhoeffer held Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis view.^{[2](#)} For Bonhoeffer, the Bible was subject to the prevailing views of historical criticism.

Commenting on Genesis 1:6–10, Bonhoeffer pointed out that the Scriptures contain errors in regard to the creation account.

Here we have before us the ancient world picture in all its scientific naïveté. While it would not be advisable to be too mocking and self-assured, in view of the rapid changes in our own knowledge of nature, undoubtedly in this passage the biblical author stands exposed with all the limitations caused by the age in which he lived. The heavens and the seas were not formed in the way he says: we would not escape a very bad conscience if we committed ourselves to any such statement.^{[3](#)}

Notice that Bonhoeffer defined “scientific naïveté” as believing that God spoke the heavens into existence as Genesis 1 describes. Bonhoeffer then asserted, “The idea of verbal inspiration will not do. The writer of the first chapter of Genesis is behaving in a very human way.”^{[4](#)}

In reference to the whole created order, Bonhoeffer said, “In accordance with eternal, unchangeable laws the days, years and seasons come into being in the firmament. Here number rules and its inflexible law. What does it have to do with our existence? Nothing—the stars go their way, whether man is suffering, guilty or happy.”⁵ When it comes to the Bible, Bonhoeffer saw existential value as more important than scientific accuracy.

By reading *Creation and Fall*, we learn that Bonhoeffer believed that the Bible was subject to historical criticism, contained errors in the creation account, and was not verbally inspired. These statements, however, presented no problems for Bonhoeffer, as the value of Scripture lies in human existence, not scientific data. This position raises a question: Did Bonhoeffer think the portions of Scripture that do not deal with science are accurate? Did Bonhoeffer believe the Bible was inerrant in nonscientific matters?

Christ The Center

In the summer of 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer conducted a series of lectures on Christology. Later, Bonhoeffer’s closest friend, Eberhard Bethge, reconstructed a set of these notes,⁶ which he subsequently published under the title *Christ the Center*.⁷

In that writing Bonhoeffer agreed with the scholarship of his day that classified some portions of the Bible attributed to Jesus as legendary accretions, i.e., statements not really spoken by Jesus.

We are first concerned with a book which we find in the secular sphere. It must be read and interpreted. It will be read with all the help possible from historical and philosophical criticism. Even the believer has to do this with care and scholarship. Occasionally we have to deal with a problematic situation; perhaps we have to preach about a text, which we know from scholarly criticism was never spoken by Jesus. In the exegesis of Scripture we find ourselves on thin ice. One can never stand firm at one point, but must move about over the whole of the Bible. As we move from one place to another we are like a man crossing a river covered in ice floes, who does not remain standing on one particular piece of ice, but jumps from one to another

There may be some difficulties about preaching from a text whose authenticity has been destroyed by historical research. Verbal inspiration is a poor substitute for the resurrection! It amounts to a denial of the unique presence of the risen one. It gives history an eternal value instead of seeing history and knowing it from the point of view of God’s eternity. It is wrecked in its attempt to level the rough ground. The Bible remains a book like other books. One must be ready to accept the concealment within history and therefore let historical criticism run its course. But it is through the Bible, with all its flaws, that the risen one encounters us. We must get into the troubled waters of historical criticism.⁸

First, observe once again that Bonhoeffer denied verbal inspiration. This time he equated verbal inspiration with a denial of the unique presence of Jesus Christ. Second, notice that Bonhoeffer saw the words attributed to Christ in the Bible as containing errors. He believed that if historical criticism showed the text to be untrue, the answer was simply to “jump” to another section of Scripture in the same manner one might jump from one floating piece of ice to another to cross a river. Finally, Bonhoeffer also called the Bible a book like any other book in the “secular sphere.”

On the matter of historical criticism and the inerrancy of the Bible, Bonhoeffer clearly saw the Bible as a human book fraught with errors, and the historical and philosophical research of the day was true and reliable. When a person encountered these errors, Bonhoeffer’s position was simply to move on in the text, ignoring the errors as though they did not really exist.

The Cost of Discipleship

The Cost of Discipleship is perhaps Bonhoeffer’s most widely known work and is popular with evangelical Christians today. What will surprise many readers is that in this book Bonhoeffer denied the resurrection as a historical event.

In The Cost of Discipleship Bonhoeffer defended the unity of the person of Christ. To Bonhoeffer and others of his time, the picture of Christ in the synoptic Gospels was at odds with the picture of Christ in the Pauline epistles. Though the texts paint completely different pictures, Bonhoeffer assured the readers that they could trust the pictures of Christ in all these texts. In a footnote Bonhoeffer got to the heart of why he could reconcile these passages though they appeared inconsistent with each other.

The direct testimony of the Scriptures is frequently confounded with ontological propositions. . . . For example, if we take the statement that Christ is risen and present as an ontological proposition, it inevitably dissolves the unity of the scriptures, for it leads us to speak of a mode of Christ’s presence which is different e.g. from that of the synoptic Jesus. The truth that Jesus Christ is risen and present to us is then taken as an independent statement with an ontological significance which can be applied critically to other ontological statements, and it is thus exalted into a theological principle. . . . The proclamation of the scriptural testimony is of quite a different character. The assertion that Christ is risen and present, is, when taken strictly as a testimony given in the scriptures, true only as a word of the scriptures. This word is the object of our faith. There is no other conceivable way to approach this truth except through this word. But this word testifies to the presence of both the Synoptic and the Pauline Christ.⁹ (italics mine)

Bonhoeffer appeared to say that whether Jesus really arose from the dead was not the point. The resurrection was not an empirical fact of history.¹⁰ I would suggest that Bonhoeffer spoke in the veiled language of a philosopher and believed the resurrection and other truths in the Scriptures were only existentially true. Richard Weikart’s comment is most helpful:

Couched in philosophical language, and, while comprehensible to those having studied theology or philosophy, it is probably unintelligible to the average non-philosophically inclined evangelical reader. The footnote is enlightening, because it occurs in a passage in which Bonhoeffer affirmed the truth, reliability and unity of the scriptures in the strongest possible way. To avoid misunderstanding he added a clarifying note denying the literal resurrection of Jesus in the past. . . . According to Bonhoeffer, the resurrection and other events in the Bible are thus not true as empirical facts of history.
[11](#)

Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* after many years of church ministry. In it he wrote about following Christ and about suffering as He did. And yet he still sides with historical criticism and denies the resurrection as a historical fact. To Bonhoeffer the resurrection was a myth.[12](#)

When we understand Bonhoeffer's view of scripture, we understand who he really was—a theologian who denied verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and the resurrection. Evangelical Christians who want to call Dietrich Bonhoeffer an evangelical or Bible-believing Christian must question in what sense Bonhoeffer can even be considered a “Bible-believer” since he held such a low view of the Scriptures.

Works Cited

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Temptation* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 65. This work was printed under multiple titles in various editions including, *Creation and Fall*, as well as being bound with a study produced by Bonhoeffer on temptation titled, *Temptation: Creation and Fall*.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 71.
3. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Temptation*, 27–28.
4. *Ibid.*, 28.
5. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 118.
7. *Ibid.*, 22.
8. *Ibid.*, 73–74.
9. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 255–56.
10. “It is neither possible nor right for us to try to get behind the Word of the Scriptures to the events as they actually occurred.” *Ibid.*, 93.
11. Richard Weikart, “Scripture and Myth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Fides et Historia*, 25, 1 (1993), 20, <http://www.csustan.edu/history/faculty/weikart/Scripture-and-Myth-in-Dietrich-Bonhoeffer.pdf> (accessed January 8, 2013).
12. Note Bonhoeffer's statement, “My view is that the full content, including the ‘mythological’ concepts, must be kept—the New Testament is not a mythological clothing of a universal truth; this mythology (resurrection etc.) is the thing itself.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged Edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 329.

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