After Ten Years

An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942–1943

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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- Introduction
- Ten Years
- Without Ground under One’s Feet
- Who Stands Firm?
- Civil Courage
- On Success
- On Stupidity
- Contempt for Humanity?
- Immanent Justice
- Some Statements of Faith on God’s Action in History
- Trust
- The Sense of Quality
- Sympathy
- On Suffering
- Present and Future
- Optimism
- Peril and Death
- Are We Still of Any Use?
- The View from Below

Introduction

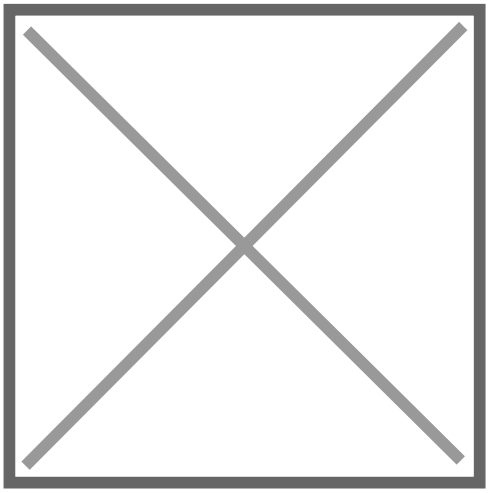
Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German: ['diːtʁɪç 'bɔnhøːfɐ] ⓘ; 4 February 1906 – 9 April 1945) was a German Lutheran pastor, neo-orthodox theologian and anti-Nazi dissident who was a key founding member of the Confessing Church. His writings on Christianity's role in the secular world have become widely influential; his 1937 book *The Cost of Discipleship* is described as a modern classic.[1] Apart from his theological writings, Bonhoeffer was known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to Nazi euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of Jews.[2] He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and imprisoned at Tegel Prison for a year and a half. Later, he was transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer was accused of being associated with the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler and was tried along with other accused plotters, including former members of the *Abwehr* (the German Military Intelligence Office). He was hanged on 9 April 1945 during the collapse of the Nazi regime.

Studies in America

In 1930, Bonhoeffer moved to America with the intent of attaining a Sloane Fellowship at New York City's Union Theological Seminary.[4]: 94 Bonhoeffer was greatly unimpressed with American theology. He described the students as lacking interest in theology and would "laugh out loud" when learning a passage from Martin Luther's *Sin and Forgiveness*.[5]: 16 During his time there, he met Frank Fisher, a black seminarian who introduced him to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where Bonhoeffer taught Sunday school and formed a lifelong love for the African-American church.[4]: 108 He heard Adam Clayton Powell Sr. preach the "Gospel of Social Justice" and became sensitive to the social injustices experienced by racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., as well as the ineptitude of churches when it came to bringing about integration.[8] He was captivated by the sermons he witnessed in Negro churches.[4]: 111 The originally nationalist Bonhoeffer[5]: 16 later changed his views after seeing *All Quiet on the Western Front*,[9] which shows the horrors of war.[4]: 112–113 Later in life he favored the views of pacifism, which promoted love for all people and placed a high value on each individual life. Bonhoeffer became involved with the ecumenical Christian movement, which eventually led him to resist Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.[4]: 113

Return to Germany

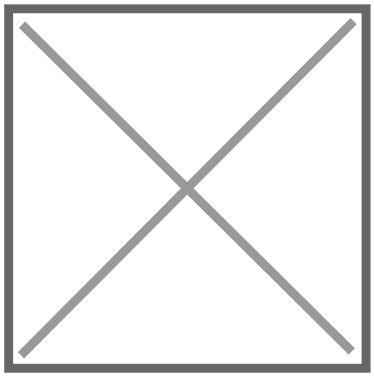


Bonhoeffer on a retreat weekend with confirmands of Zion's Church congregation (1932)[10]

After returning to Germany in 1931, Bonhoeffer became a lecturer in systematic theology at the University of Berlin. Deeply interested in ecumenism, he was appointed by the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches (a forerunner of the World Council of Churches) as one of its three European youth secretaries. At this time he seems to have undergone a personal conversion, as he changed from being a theologian primarily attracted to the intellectual side of Christianity, to being a dedicated man of personal faith, resolved to literally carry out the teachings of Christ, revealed in the Gospels.[11] On 15 November 1931, at age 25, he was ordained at Old-Prussian United St. Matthew [de] in Berlin-Tiergarten.

Underground seminaries

In 1935, Bonhoeffer was offered a coveted opportunity to study non-violent resistance under Mahatma Gandhi in his ashram. However, remembering Barth's rebuke, Bonhoeffer decided to return to Germany instead, where he was the head at an underground seminary in Finkenwalde for training Confessing Church pastors. As the Nazi suppression of the Confessing Church intensified, Barth was driven back to Switzerland in 1935; Niemöller was arrested in July 1937; and in August 1936, Bonhoeffer's authorization to teach at the University of Berlin was revoked after he was denounced as a "pacifist and enemy of the state" by Theodor Heckel.



Memorial of Bonhoeffer in front of St. Peter's Church, Hamburg

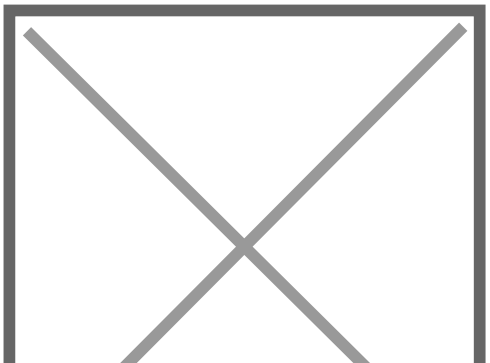
Bonhoeffer's efforts on behalf of the underground seminaries included securing necessary funds. He found a great benefactor in Ruth von Kleist-Retzow. In times of trouble, Bonhoeffer's former students and their wives would take refuge in von Kleist-Retzow's Pomeranian estate, and Bonhoeffer was a frequent guest. Later he fell in love with Kleist-Retzow's granddaughter, Maria von Wedemeyer,[25] to whom he became engaged three months before his arrest in 1943. By August 1937, SS leader Heinrich Himmler had decreed the education and examination of Confessing Church ministry candidates illegal. In September 1937, the Gestapo closed the seminary at Finkenwalde, and by November twenty-seven pastors and former students were arrested. It was around this time that Bonhoeffer published his best-known book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, a study on the Sermon on the Mount in which he attacked "cheap grace" as a cover for ethical laxity against the virtues of "costly grace".

Bonhoeffer spent the next two years secretly traveling from one eastern German village to another to conduct a "seminary on the run," supervising the continuing education and work of his students, most of whom were working illegally in small parishes within the old-Prussian Ecclesiastical Province of Pomerania. The von Blumenthal family hosted the underground seminary on its estate of Groß Schlönwitz. The pastors of Groß Schlönwitz and neighbouring villages supported the education of young men who voluntarily housed these seminarians (among whom was Eberhard Bethge, who later became his best friend and edited Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*) and employing them as vicars in their congregations.[26]

In 1938, the Gestapo banned Bonhoeffer from Berlin. In the summer of 1939, the seminary was able to move to Sigurdshof, an outlying estate (Vorwerk) of the von Kleist family in Wendisch Tychow. In March 1940, the Gestapo shut down the underground seminary there following the outbreak of World War II.[26] Bonhoeffer's semi-monastic communal life and teaching at the underground Finkenwalde seminary formed the basis of his books, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*.

Bonhoeffer's sister Sabine, along with her Jewish-classified husband Gerhard Leibholz [de] and their two daughters, escaped to England by way of Switzerland in 1938.[27]

Abwehr agent



Bonhoeffer's study

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was further harassed by the Nazi authorities, as he was forbidden to speak in public and was required regularly to report his activities to the police. In 1941, he was forbidden to print or to publish anything. In the meantime, Bonhoeffer had joined the Abwehr. Dohnányi, already part of the Abwehr, brought him into the organization on the claim that his wide ecumenical contacts would be of use to Germany, thus protecting him from conscription to active service.[30] Bonhoeffer presumably knew about various 1943 plots against Hitler through Dohnányi, who was actively involved in the planning.[30] In the face of Nazi atrocities against the Jews and other minorities, the full scale of which Bonhoeffer learned through the Abwehr, he concluded that "the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself from this whole affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to survive and live for Truth."[31] He did not justify his action but wrote, "When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it... Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace."[32] (In a 1932 sermon, Bonhoeffer said, "The blood of martyrs might once again be demanded, but this blood, if we really have the courage and loyalty to shed it, will not be innocent, shining like that of the first witnesses for the faith. On our blood lies heavy with guilt, the guilt of the unprofitable servant who is cast into outer darkness."[33])

Under cover of the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer served as a courier for the German resistance movement to reveal its existence and intentions to the Western Allies in hope of garnering their support. Through his ecumenical contacts abroad, he hoped to secure possible peace terms with the Allies for a post-Hitler government. In May 1942, he met Anglican Bishop George Bell of Chichester, a member of the House of Lords and an ally of the Confessing Church, contacted by Bonhoeffer's exiled brother-in-law Leibholz; through him feelers were sent to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. However, the British government ignored these, as it had all other approaches from the German resistance, considering all Germans to be the enemy.[34] In addition, British war policy was to conduct area bombing of civilian cities, which Bell opposed, a view that had become unpopular in Britain. Dohnányi and Bonhoeffer were also involved in Abwehr operations to help German Jews escape to Switzerland. During this time, Bonhoeffer worked on his book *Ethics* and wrote letters to keep up the spirits of his former students. He intended *Ethics* as his *magnum opus*, but it remained unfinished when he was arrested. On 5 April 1943 Bonhoeffer and Dohnányi were arrested and imprisoned.

Imprisonment

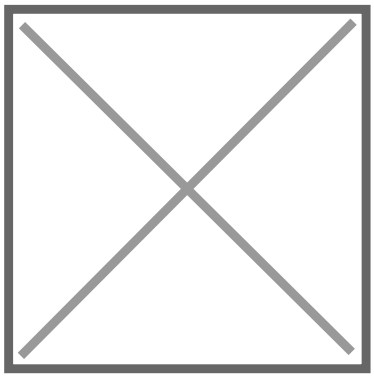
On 13 January 1943 Bonhoeffer had become engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, the granddaughter of his close friend and Finkenwalde seminary supporter, Ruth von Kleist Retzow. Ruth had campaigned for this marriage for several years, although up until late October 1942, Bonhoeffer remained a reluctant suitor despite Ruth being part of his innermost circle. He considered that his responsibilities during wartime made it the wrong time to marry.[35] A large age gap loomed

between Bonhoeffer and Maria: he was 36 to her 18. Bonhoeffer had first met her when she was his confirmation student at age 11.[36] As was considered proper at the time, the two had spent almost no time together alone prior to the engagement and did not see each other between becoming engaged and Bonhoeffer's 5 April arrest. Once he was in prison, however, Maria's status as his fiancée became invaluable, as it meant she could visit Bonhoeffer and correspond with him. While their relationship was troubled,[37] she was a source of food and smuggled messages.[38] Bonhoeffer made Eberhard Bethge his heir, but Maria, in allowing her correspondence with Bonhoeffer to be published after her death, provided an invaluable addition to this scholarship.

For a year and a half, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned at Tegel Prison awaiting trial. There he continued his work in religious outreach among his fellow prisoners and guards. Sympathetic guards helped smuggle his letters out of prison to Bethge and others, and these uncensored letters were posthumously published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One of those guards, a corporal named Knobloch, even offered to help him escape from the prison and "disappear" with him, and plans were made for that end; eventually Bonhoeffer declined it, fearing Nazi retribution against his family, especially his brother Klaus and brother-in-law Dohnányi, who was also imprisoned.[39]

On 4 April 1945, the bulk of the diaries of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the Abwehr, were discovered, and in a rage upon reading them, Hitler ordered that the other Abwehr members be executed.[40] Bonhoeffer was led away just as he concluded his final Sunday service and asked an English prisoner, Payne Best, to remember him to Bell if Best should ever reach his home: "This is the end—but for me it is the beginning of Life!"[41]

Execution



Flossenbürg concentration camp, Arrestblock-Hof: Memorial to members of German resistance executed on 9 April 1945

Bonhoeffer was sentenced to death on 8 April 1945 by SS judge Otto Thorbeck at a drumhead court-martial without witnesses, without any evidence against him, with no records of the proceedings or a defense.[42] He was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp by hanging at

dawn on 9 April 1945. Bonhoeffer was stripped of his clothing and led naked into the execution yard where he was hanged with five others: Canaris; General Hans Oster, Canaris's deputy; General Karl Sack, a military jurist; lawyer Theodor Strünck; and German resistance fighter Ludwig Gehre.

Eberhard Bethge, a student and close friend of Bonhoeffer, writes of a man who saw the execution:

> "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.[41]

This is the historical account of Bonhoeffer's death, which over the decades went unchallenged;[4] however, some recent biographers see problems with the story because Bethge's witness, Hermann Fischer-Hüllstrung, was a doctor at Flossenbürg concentration camp.[43] J.L.F. Mogensen, a former prisoner at Flossenbürg, cited the length of time it took for the execution to be completed (almost six hours), plus departures from camp procedure that may not have been allowed to prisoners so late in the war, as jarring inconsistencies. Considering that the sentences had been confirmed at the highest levels of Nazi government, by individuals with a pattern of torturing prisoners who dared to challenge the regime, Craig J. Slane posits that "the physical details of Bonhoeffer's death may have been much more difficult than we earlier had imagined."[44]

Other recent critics of the traditional account are more caustic. It also appears in some instances that "Fischer-Hüllstrung had been given the job of reviving political prisoners after they had been hanged until they were almost dead, in order to prolong the agony of their dying."[45] Another critic charges that Fischer-Hüllstrung's "subsequent statement about Bonhoeffer as kneeling in wordy prayer ... belongs to the realm of legend," although without evidence to the contrary.[46]

The disposition of Bonhoeffer's remains is not known.[47] His body may have been cremated outside the camp along with hundreds of other recently executed or dead prisoners,[48] or American troops may have placed his body in one of several mass graves in which they interred the unburied dead of the camp.[47]

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer

Ten Years

Ten years is a long time in the life of every human being. Because time is the most precious gift at our disposal, being of all gifts the most irretrievable, the thought of time possibly lost disturbs us whenever we look back. Time is lost when we have not lived, experienced things, learned, worked, enjoyed, and suffered as human beings. Lost time is unfulfilled, empty time. Certainly that is not what the past years have been. We have lost much, things far beyond measure, but time was not lost. Indeed, the insights and experiences we have gained and of which we have subsequently become aware are only abstractions from reality, from life itself. Yet just as the ability to forget is a gift of grace, so similarly is memory, the repetition of received teachings, part of responsible life. In the following pages I want to try to give an accounting of some of the shared experience and insight that have been forced upon us in these times, not personal experiences, nothing systematically organized, not arguments and theories, but conclusions about human experience—lined up side by side, connected only by concrete experience—that have been reached together in a circle of like-minded people. None of this is new; rather, it is something we have long been familiar with in times gone by, something given to us to experience and understand anew. One cannot write about these things without every word being accompanied by the feeling of gratitude for the community of spirit and of life that in all these years was preserved and shown to be worthwhile.

Without Ground under One’s Feet

Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alter-native open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, sense-less, and contrary to life? Have there been those who like us looked for the source of their strength beyond all those available alternatives? Were they looking entirely in what has passed away and in what is yet to come? And nevertheless, without being dreamers, did they await with calm and confidence the successful outcome of their endeavor? Or rather, facing a great historical turning point, did the responsible thinkers of another generation ever feel differently than we do today—precisely because something genuinely new was forming that was not yet apparent in the existing alternatives?

Who Stands Firm?

The huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into con-fusion. That evil should appear in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, social justice is absolutely bewildering for one coming from the world of ethical concepts that we have received. For the Christian who lives by the Bible, it is the very confirmation of the abysmal wickedness of evil.

The failure of “the reasonable ones”—those who think, with the best of intentions and in their naive misreading of reality, that with a bit of reason they can patch up a structure that has come out of joint—is apparent. With their ability to see impaired, they want to do justice to all sides, only to be crushed by the colliding forces without having accomplished anything at all. Disappointed that the world is so unreasonable, they see themselves condemned to un-productiveness; they withdraw in resignation or helplessly fall victim to the stronger.

More devastating is the failure of all ethical fanaticism. The fanatic believes that he can meet the power of evil with the purity of a principle. But like the bull in the arena, he attacks the red cape rather than the person carrying it, grows tired, and suffers defeat. He becomes entrapped in non-essentials and is caught in the trap of the cleverer one.

The man of conscience has no one but himself when resisting the superior might of predicaments that demand a decision. But the dimensions of the conflict wherein he must make his choices are such that, counseled and supported by nothing but his very own conscience, he is torn apart. The innumerable respectable and seductive disguises by which evil approaches him make his conscience fearful and unsure until he finally settles for a salved conscience instead of a good con-science, that is, until he deceives his own conscience in order not to despair. That a bad conscience may be stronger and more wholesome than a deceived one is something that the man whose sole support is his conscience can never comprehend.

The reliable path of duty seems to offer the escape from the bewildering plethora of possible decisions. Here, that which has been commanded is clutched as the most certain; the responsibility for what has been commanded lies with the one giving the command rather than the one who carries it out. However, duty is so circumscribed that there is never any room to venture that which rests wholly in one’s own responsibility, the action that alone strikes at the very core of evil and can overcome it. The man of duty will in the end have to do his duty also to the devil.

There is the one who determines to take a stand in the world by acting on his own freedom. He values the necessary action more highly than an untarnished conscience and reputation. He is prepared to sacrifice a barren principle to a fruitful compromise or a barren wisdom of mediocrity to fruitful radicalism. Such a one needs to take care that his freedom does not cause him to stumble. He will condone the bad in order to prevent the worse and in so doing no longer discern

that the very thing that he seeks to avoid as worse might well be better. This is where the basic material of tragedy is to be found.

In flight from public discussion and examination, this or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him. He can remain un-defiled by the consequences of responsible action only by deceiving him-self. In everything he does, that which he fails to do will leave him no peace. He will either perish from that restlessness or turn into the most hypocritical of all Pharisees.1

Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a per-son is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call. Where are these responsible ones?

Civil Courage

What really lies behind the lament about the lack of civil courage? In these years we have encountered much bravery and self-sacrifice but civil courage almost nowhere, even among ourselves. Only an altogether naive psychology would trace this deficiency back simply to personal cowardice. The reasons behind this are quite different. In the course of a long history, we Germans have had to learn the need for obedience and the power thereof. We saw the meaning and greatness of our life in the subordination of all personal wishes and ideas under the commission that came to be ours. Our gaze was directed upward, not in slavish fear but in the free trust that beheld a career in the com-mission and a vocation in the career. The readiness to follow an order from “above” rather than one’s own discretion arises from and is part of the justified suspicion about one’s own heart. Who would contest that, in obedience, commission, and career, the German has again and again accomplished the utmost in bravery and life commitment?

But he safeguarded his freedom—where in the world was freedom spoken of more passionately than in Germany, from Luther to the philosophy of idealism?—by seeking to free himself from self-will in order to serve the whole: career and freedom were to him two sides of the same thing. However, in doing so he misjudged the world; he did not reckon with the fact that the readiness to subordinate and commit his life to the commission could be misused in the service of evil. When such misuse occurred, the exercise of the career itself became questionable, and all the basic moral concepts of the Germans were shaken. It became apparent that Germans still lacked one decisive and fundamental idea: that of the need for the free, responsible act, even against career and commission. In its place came the irresponsible lack of scruples, on the one hand, and self-tormenting scruples that never led to action, on the other. But civil courage can grow only from the free responsibility of the free man. Only today are Germans beginning to discover what free responsibility means. It is founded in a God who calls for the free venture of faith to responsible action and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the one who on account of such action becomes a sinner.

On Success

While indeed it is not true that success justifies even the evil deed and the reprehensible means, it is similarly out of the question to regard success as something that is ethically wholly neutral. It so happens that historical success creates the ground on which alone life can go on. The question remains as to whether it is ethically more responsible to go to war like Don Quixote against a new age or, conceding one's defeat, to consent finally and freely to serving the new age. Success, after all, makes history, and the One who guides history always creates good from the bad over the heads of the men who make history. It is a short circuit when the stickler for principle, thinking a-historically and hence irresponsibly, simply ignores the ethical significance of success. It is good that for once we are forced to engage seriously the ethical problem of success. As long as the good is successful, we can afford the luxury of thinking of success as ethically irrelevant. But the problem arises when success is brought about through evil means. In the face of such a situation, we learn that neither the onlooker's theoretical critique and self-justification, that is, the refusal to enter into the arena of facts, nor opportunism, that is, disavowal and capitulation in the face of success, does justice to the task at hand. We may not and do not desire to act like offended critics or opportunists. Case by case and in each moment, as victors or vanquished, we desire to be those who are co-responsible for the shaping of history. The one who allows nothing that happens to deprive him of his co-responsibility for the course of history, knowing that it is God who placed it upon him, will find a fruitful relation to the events of history, beyond fruitless criticism and equally fruitless opportunism. Talk of going down heroically in the face of unavoidable defeat is basically quite non-heroic because it does not dare to face the future. The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living. Only from such a historically responsible question will fruitful solutions arise, however humiliating they may be for the moment. In short, it is much easier to see a situation through on the basis of principle than in concrete responsibility. The younger generation will always have the surest sense whether an action is done merely in terms of principle or from living responsibly, for it is their future that is at stake.

On Stupidity

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind at least a sense of unease in human beings. Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgment simply need not be believed—in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical—and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for when dealing with a stupid person than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.

If we want to know how to get the better of stupidity, we must seek to understand its nature. This much is certain, that it is in essence not an intellectual defect but a human one. There are human beings who are of remarkably agile intellect yet stupid, and others who are intellectually quite dull yet anything but stupid. We discover this to our surprise in particular situations. The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect but that, under certain circumstances, people are made stupid or that they allow this to happen to them. We note further that people who have isolated themselves from others or who live in solitude manifest this defect less frequently than individuals or groups of people inclined or condemned to sociability. And so it would seem that stupidity is perhaps less a psychological than a sociological problem. It is a particular form of the impact of historical circumstances on human beings, a psychological concomitant of certain external conditions. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. It would even seem that this is virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other. The process at work here is not that particular human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances. The fact that the stupid person is often stubborn must not blind us to the fact that he is not independent. In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. This is where the danger of diabolical misuse lurks, for it is this that can once and for all destroy human beings.

Yet at this very point it becomes quite clear that only an act of liberation, not instruction, can overcome stupidity. Here we must come to terms with the fact that in most cases a genuine

internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it. Until then we must abandon all attempts to convince the stupid person. This state of affairs explains why in such circumstances our attempts to know what “the people” really think are in vain and why, under these circumstances, this question is so irrelevant for the person who is thinking and acting responsibly. The word of the Bible that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom declares that the internal liberation of human beings to live the responsible life before God is the only genuine way to overcome stupidity.

But these thoughts about stupidity also offer consolation in that they utterly forbid us to consider the majority of people to be stupid in every circumstance. It really will depend on whether those in power expect more from peoples’ stupidity than from their inner independence and wisdom.

Contempt for Humanity?

The danger of allowing ourselves to be driven to contempt for humanity is very real. We know very well that we have no right to let this happen and that it would lead us into the most unfruitful relation to human beings. The following thoughts may protect us against this temptation: through contempt for humanity we fall victim precisely to our opponents' chief errors. Whoever despises another human being will never be able to make anything of him. Nothing of what we despise in another is itself foreign to us. How often do we expect more of the other than what we ourselves are willing to accomplish. Why is it that we have hitherto thought with so little sobriety about the tempt-ability and frailty of human beings? We must learn to regard human beings less in terms of what they do and neglect to do and more in terms of what they suffer. The only fruitful relation to human beings—particularly to the weak among them—is love, that is, the will to enter into and to keep community with them. God did not hold human beings in contempt but became human for their sake.

Immanent Justice

It is one of the most astonishing experiences and also one of the most incontrovertible that evil—often in a surprisingly short span of time—proves itself to be stupid and impractical. That does not mean that punishment follows hard on the heels of each individual evil deed; what it does mean is that the suspension of God's commandments on principle in the supposed interest of earthly self-preservation acts precisely against what this self-preservation seeks to accomplish. One can interpret in various ways this experience that has fallen to us. In any case, one thing has emerged that seems certain: in the common life of human beings, there are laws that are stronger than everything that believes it can supersede them, and that it is therefore not only wrong but unwise to disregard these laws. This helps us understand why Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics elevated wisdom to be one of the cardinal virtues. Wisdom and stupidity are not ethically indifferent, as the neo-Protestant ethics of conscience wanted us to believe. In the fullness of the concrete situation and in the possibilities it offers, the wise person discerns the impassable limits that are imposed on every action by the abiding laws of human communal life. In this discernment the wise person acts well and the good person acts wisely.

There is clearly no historically significant action that does not trespass ever again against the limits set by those laws. But it makes a decisive difference whether such trespasses against the established limit are viewed as their abolishment in principle and hence presented as a law of its own kind, or whether one is conscious that such trespassing is perhaps an unavoidable guilt that has its justification only in that law and limit being reinstated and honored as quickly as possible. It is not necessarily hypocrisy when the aim of political action is said to be the establishment of justice and not simply self-preservation. The world is, in fact, so ordered that the fundamental honoring of life's basic laws and rights at the same time best serves self-preservation, and that these laws tolerate a very brief, singular, and, in the individual case, necessary trespass against them. But those laws will sooner or later—and with irresistible force—strike dead those who turn necessity into a principle and as a consequence set up a law of their own alongside them. History's immanent justice rewards and punishes the deed only, but the eternal justice of God tries and judges the hearts.

Some Statements of Faith on God’s Action in History

I believe that God can and will let good come out of everything, even the greatest evil. For that to happen, God needs human beings who let everything work out for the best. I believe that in every moment of distress God will give us as much strength to resist as we need. But it is not given to us in advance, lest we rely on ourselves and not on God alone. In such faith all fear of the future should be overcome. I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are not in vain and that it is no more difficult for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds. I believe that God is no timeless fate but waits for and responds to sincere prayer and responsible actions.

Trust

Few have been spared the experience of being betrayed. The figure of Judas, once so incomprehensible, is hardly strange to us. The air in which we live is so poisoned with mistrust that we almost die from it.

But where we broke through the layer of mistrust, we were allowed to experience a trust hitherto utterly undreamed of. There, where we trust, we have learned to place our lives in the hands of others; contrary to all the ambiguities in which our acts and lives must exist, we have learned to trust without reserve. We now know that one can truly live and work only in such trust, which is always a venture but one gladly affirmed. We know that to sow and to nourish mistrust is one of the most reprehensible things and that, instead, trust is to be strengthened and advanced wherever possible. For us trust will be one of the greatest, rarest, and most cheering gifts bestowed by the life we humans live in common, and yet it always emerges only against the dark background of a necessary mistrust. We have learned to commit our lives on no account into the hands of the mean but without reserve into the hands of the trustworthy.

The Sense of Quality

When we lack the courage once again to establish a genuine sense of boundaries between human beings and personally to fight for them, we perish in an anarchy of human values. The impudence that has its being in the contempt for all such boundaries is just as much a mark of the rabble as the inward uncertainty, haggling, and courting the favor of the insolent; making common cause with rabble is the way toward rendering oneself rabble. When one no longer knows what one owes oneself and others, where the sense for human quality and the strength to respect boundaries cease to exist, chaos is at the door. When for the sake of material comfort one tolerates impudence, one has already surrendered, there the floods of chaos have been permitted to burst the dam at the place where it was to be defended, and one becomes guilty of all that follows. In other times it may have been the task of Christianity to testify to the equality of all human beings; today it is Christianity in particular that should passionately defend the respect for human boundaries and human qualities. The misinterpretation that it is a matter of self-interest, or the cheap allegation that it is an antisocial attitude, must be resolutely faced. They are the perennial reproaches of the rabble against order. Whoever becomes soft and unsure here does not understand what is at issue, and presumably those reproaches may well apply to him. We are in the midst of the process that levels every rank of society. But we are also at the hour of a new sense of nobility being born that binds together a circle of human beings drawn from all existing social classes. Nobility arises from and exists by sacrifice, courage, and a clear sense of what one owes oneself and others, by the self-evident expectation of the respect one is due, and by an equally self-evident observance of the same respect for those above and those below. At issue all along the line is the rediscovery of experiences of quality that have been buried under so much rubble, of an order based on quality. Quality is the strongest foe of any form of bringing everything to the level of the masses. Socially this means abandoning the pursuit of position, breaking with the star cult, an opening out upward and downward particularly in connection with the choice of one’s friends, delight in private life, and courage for public life. Culturally the experience of quality signals a return from the newspaper and radio to the book, from haste to leisure and stillness, from distraction to composure, from the sensational to reflection, from the idol of virtuosity to art, from snobbery to modesty, from extravagance to moderation. Quantities compete for space; qualities complement one another.

Sympathy

We have to consider that most people learn wisdom only through personal experiences. This explains, first, the astonishing inability of most people to take any kind of preventive action—one always believes that he can evade the danger, until it is too late. Second, it explains people's dull sensitivity toward the suffering of others; sympathy grows in proportion to the increasing fear of the threatening proximity of disaster. There is some justification in ethics for such an attitude: one does not want to interfere with fate; inner calling and the power to act are given only when things have become serious. No one is responsible for all of the world's injustice and suffering, nor does one want to establish oneself as the judge of the world. And there is some justification also in psychology: the lack of imagination, sensitivity, and inner alertness is balanced by strong composure, unperturbed energy for work, and great capacity for suffering. From a Christian perspective, none of these justifications can blind us to the fact that what is decisively lacking here is a greatness of heart. Christ withdrew from suffering until his hour had come; then he walked toward it in freedom, took hold, and overcame it. Christ, so the Scripture tells us, experienced in his own body the whole suffering of all humanity as his own—an incomprehensibly lofty thought!—taking it upon himself in freedom. Certainly, we are not Christ, nor are we called to redeem the world through our own deed and our own suffering; we are not to burden ourselves with impossible things and torture ourselves with not being able to bear them. We are not lords but instruments in the hands of the Lord of history; we can truly share only in a limited measure in the suffering of others. We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ's greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer. Inactive waiting and dully looking on are not Christian responses. Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered.

On Suffering

It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than in the freedom of one’s very own responsible action. It is infinitely easier to suffer in community with others than in solitude. It is infinitely easier to suffer publicly and with honor than in the shadow and in dishonor. It is infinitely easier to suffer through putting one’s bodily life at stake than to suffer through the spirit. Christ suffered in freedom, in solitude, in the shadow, and in dishonor, in body and in spirit. Since then, many Christians have suffered with him.

Present and Future

To this day, it seemed to us that developing a plan for our professional and personal life was one of the inalienable rights belonging to human life. That has come to an end. Through the weight of circumstances, we have been put into the situation where we must forgo “worrying about tomorrow.” But there is a crucial difference as to whether this results from the free response of faith, as the Sermon on the Mount states, or is coerced subservience to the demands of the present moment. For most people the enforced renunciation of planning for the future means that they have succumbed to living only for the moment at hand, irresponsibly, frivolously, or resignedly; some still dream longingly of a more beautiful future and try thereby to forget the present. For us both of these courses are equally impossible. What remains for us is only the very narrow path, sometimes barely discernible, of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” Jeremiah is told to proclaim—in paradoxical contradiction to his prophecies of woe—just before the destruction of the holy city; in light of the utter deprivation of any future, those words were a divine sign and a pledge of a great, new future. To think and to act with an eye on the coming generation and to be ready to move on without fear and worry—that is the course that has, in practice, been forced upon us. To hold it courageously is not easy but necessary.

Optimism

It is more sensible to be pessimistic; disappointments are left behind, and one can face people unembarrassed. Hence, the clever frown upon optimism. In its essence optimism is not a way of looking at the present situation but a power of life, a power of hope when others resign, a power to hold our heads high when all seems to have come to naught, a power to tolerate setbacks, a power that never abandons the future to the opponent but lays claim to it. Certainly, there is a stupid, cowardly optimism that must be frowned upon. But no one ought to despise optimism as the will for the future, however many times it is mistaken. It is the health of life that the ill dare not infect. There are people who think it frivolous and Christians who think it impious to hope for a better future on earth and to prepare for it. They believe in chaos, disorder, and catastrophe, perceiving it in what is happening now. They withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world, from the responsibility for ongoing life, for building anew, for the coming generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future.

Peril and Death

In recent years we have become increasingly familiar with the thought of death. We ourselves are surprised by the composure with which we accept the news of the death of our contemporaries. We can no longer hate Death so much; we have discovered something of kindness in his features and are almost reconciled to him. Deep down we seem to feel that we are his already and that each new day is a miracle. It would not be correct to say that we die gladly—even though no one is unacquainted with that weariness, which ought not to be allowed to arise under any circumstances. We are too inquisitive for that, or, to put it more seriously, we would like to see something more of our scattered life's meaning. But we do not make of Death a hero either; life is too great and too dear for us to do so. Still more do we refuse to look for the meaning of life in danger; we are not desperate enough to do so and know too much of the treasures of life. We also know too well the fear for life and all the other destructive effects of unrelenting imperilment of life. We still love life, but I believe that Death can no longer surprise us. After what we have experienced in the war, we hardly dare acknowledge our wish that Death will find us completely engaged in the fullness of life, rather than by accident, suddenly, away from what really matters. It is not external circumstances but we ourselves who shall make of our death what it can be, a death consented to freely and voluntarily.

Are We Still of Any Use?

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds. We have become cunning and learned the arts of obfuscation and equivocal speech. Experience has rendered us suspicious of human beings, and often we have failed to speak to them a true and open word. Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? We will not need geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, but simple, uncomplicated, and honest human beings. Will our inner strength to resist what has been forced on us have remained strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves blunt enough, to find our way back to simplicity and honesty?

The View from Below

It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering. If only during this time bitterness and envy have not corroded the heart; that we come to see matters great and small, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness with new eyes; that our sense for greatness, humanness, justice, and mercy has grown clearer, freer, more incorruptible; that we learn, indeed, that personal suffering is a more useful key, a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action. But this perspective from below must not lead us to become advocates for those who are perpetually dissatisfied. Rather, out of a higher satisfaction, which in its essence is grounded beyond what is below and above, we do justice to life in all its dimensions and in this way affirm it.