

God is Weak: A Relation Between Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Reflections in Prison and Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross

Martin Lind

“God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 16 July 1944, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge.

The 38-year-old theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was isolated in the military section of Tegel Prison in Berlin, for the first 18 months of his confinement, from 5 April 1943 until 8 October 1944. He made many good friends with the warders and prison hospital orderlies, such that he was allowed to enter into extensive uncensored correspondence, partly by letter, partly by scraps of paper, with those on the outside. This correspondence was mainly addressed to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, whom he had first met as his student at the pastoral seminar in Finkenwalde in 1935.

Bonhoeffer and Bethge developed a deep friendship. There has been speculation of the nature of their relationship. They went on several journeys together, often sharing a bedroom, in Berlin and elsewhere. They had both failed to find a woman in their lives. This might have been one of the reasons for their burgeoning friendship, the joint disappointment of having not succeeded in finding a woman to share their lives.

Bonhoeffer bequeathed more or less all his belongings to Bethge in spite of being engaged to the young woman Maria von Wedemeyer. Were they a homosexual couple? Many years later when questioned, Bethge answered that they both were pretty straight, though, with the language used nowadays, he said, one might call their friendship homoerotic.

Returning to the letters; there were rules to be observed in prison correspondence. Details regarding certain persons, who were in position of danger had to be hidden, the progress of the resistance movement and investigations into his own case had to be made in code.

The correspondence went on even after 20 July 1944, the date of the attempt on Hitler's life, although following this Bonhoeffer was transferred to the headquarters



of Gestapo at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in October 1944. Thereafter the correspondence almost ceased, with a few exceptions.

Bonhoeffer's letter of 16 July 1944 was written only a few days before the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life. We know that this attempt deeply influenced Bonhoeffer. Before 20 July 1944 his hope for freedom was very much alive. After the attempt though he was clearly aware of the possibility of a death sentence.

Only four days before the attempt Bonhoeffer began a struggle with himself. He started to develop "a non-religious interpretation of biblical terminology". He writes, in the beginning of his letter, that "it's a far bigger job than I can manage at the moment". Still he continues.

One might think that in such a struggle it would be tempting to search for a God with power, a God who could once and for all defeat the humiliating National Socialism, the politics of Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer does the opposite. For him God is weak and powerless in the world. He searches in the Bible for images of the powerless God. For him it is religiosity that may lead to a God of power in the world. That is a God similar to the Antique concept of "the God from the machine", *deus ex machina*.

The expression "the God from the machine" has its background in the Antique dramas. After complicated love adventures in these dramas the final situation was often immense and incalculable. At the end of the drama they often showed a picture of a God, which slowly came down into the scene from a machine. When this picture of God arrived, all problems were solved. The God from the machine solved everything and the public could happily return home.

In our Christian tradition we have no God who solves all our problems. The Bible has no room for such a God.

We could say in an almost brutal way that human beings, according to the biblical texts, are obliged to find solutions themselves. There is no assurance of a final way out. Christian faith is about something else. According to St Matthews the last words Jesus said were the following: "I am with you always, to the end of time" (Matthew 28,20). This is a *promise of divine presence, not of divine solutions*.

Bonhoeffer writes in his letter of 16 July 1944: "The Bible however directs him [sc. man] to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help". It may be said that Bonhoeffer here maintains that in the powerlessness of God there is in reality the help which women and men need. In the end there is no help to be gained from positions of power. Only weakness can open the deepest room for human beings. Only in the fragility of human beings may they find their deepest identity.



This also means that God forces human beings to live in the world as if there was no God, “*etsi deus non daretur*”.

But what does Bonhoeffer mean by this? It has to be said, that we do not know exactly what he meant. Many of the statements in his letters from prison are never explained in detail. We have to uncover their meaning ourselves.

I would say that human beings cannot blame God for their own deeds. They have to take responsibility for their own lives. The followers of Jesus Christ pray, and Bonhoeffer is a friend of prayers. But the prayers can never be looked upon as an excuse for or in defence of human decisions.

In pious traditions there has been a language of “spiritual guidance”. It may be used in many different ways, and can be used in dangerous ways, making decisions seem divinely authorised through many prayers. History reveals cruel examples of this tradition.

Now the coming of age may imply that women and men can get along very well without God. The God, who at all times is with human beings, is the God who forsakes. This is a difficult fact. No human being can ever live without God. Still it is a fact that human beings experience the abandonment, the situation when God forsakes.

Bonhoeffer writes in his letter from 16 July 1944: “Before God and with God we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross.”

Human beings will always live before God and with God, regardless of faith and belief. It is simply impossible for any human being to choose a position outside God. But in this world where God is present everywhere God wants women and men to live responsibly and honestly, as if God did not exist.

On the cross God is weak. Christ suffers and dies. It is a real fragility and brokenness. Spiritual power is hidden in the powerlessness in the world. This does not mean that the suffering or weakness is less. It is a brutal weakness, which breaks down the body of Christ.

But here on the cross human beings see our God as God is.

Now I assert that a similar pattern can be found in the lives of every woman and man.

In human weakness human beings come closer to themselves, to their real life. In such weakness, in fragility, it becomes more and more clear that Life is greater. No woman and no man can control her or his life. No woman and no man owns her or his life. Life belongs to God. Life is always greater than the individual.



It is often more clear in the fragility that life is a gift. When all the possibilities to control one's own life are gone nakedness remains. There, in the very weakest moments of human existence, it is easier to accept the thought that life is greater than any separate person. The Christian tradition says that life is a gift from God.

In weakness the insight grows that the greatest in life is the most fragile, that which is most easily broken. And that is in reality the real strength.

I mean that this pattern is obvious for everyone. We may think of love between human beings; so easily damaged and still of decisive importance for life. We may think of friendship, confidence, care, relations; all that may easily be turned to their opposites.

Close to life, human beings' fragility is uncovered, but that fragility is the real strength. Close to life, human beings come close to God, the God who reveals himself in weakness and suffering.

I now turn to the theology of the cross in Martin Luther's thinking.

In the Heidelberg disputation of April 1518, Martin Luther offered some theses. One of them being, "A theologian of glory call evil good, and good evil".

This statement may not really look trustworthy. Whoever may say such things as an honest theologian?

For Luther this is a description of a conviction where God has won the battle over all the evil powers, his might therefore being obvious for each one who wants to see.

This means that all the followers of Jesus Christ already live in the glory of God. The Christian woman and man lives in a spiritual world, untainted by this sinful world. They live in the glory of God. The suffering of this world may occur, the evil events may come, but the follower of Jesus Christ lives in another world and is therefore fundamentally liberated from the evils of this world.

In this way Luther will call those theologians of the glory liars. They speak of this world without honesty, without taking the problems of this world seriously. For them the inner world is unbroken and glorious. They accept two perspectives on their existence. In the outer world evil things may occur. In the inner world God has already won the struggle and all his followers have achieved glory. For Martin Luther this is a false story, a dishonest way of telling the history of human beings.

"A theologian of the cross", continues Martin Luther, "calls the thing what it actually is". For Luther the main difference between the theology of the glory and the theology of the cross is a question of the *understanding of power*. The theologians of the glory understand the divine power in the Scriptures as the political power of contemporary society. They may presume that divine power is a



multiplying and exaggerating version of human power. This is inadequate and simply not true.

Only the theology of the cross will bring the human being to reality, forced to face facts and what really happens, and give an understanding of what happens. The theology of the cross underlines the fragility in suffering and means that real life is uncovered in this way. So it was in the suffering and death of Christ. So it is with all the followers of Christ.

For Martin Luther the theology of the cross does not imply a denial of the vocation. In some Lutheran reflection the theology of the cross has been interpreted as a Christo-monistic view of human existence, almost in the spirit of Karl Barth, the reformed theologian of the Twentieth Century. But for Martin Luther the belief in God's Creation as the first word of God is essential.

In a rather different way of thinking from Barth, Martin Luther developed his theology of vocation in the everyday life, a theology where the cross or the crosses have an important role to play.

In everyday life, where every human being regardless of faith and belonging lives as a co-worker of God, *cooperatores dei*, every human being is called by God to give his or her life for their neighbour, to live in love.

Some will take this to mean that Luther assumed that all were Christians in his time. That is simply not true. Luther was writing about the Turks, the yellow danger, the Muslims of his time. He explained that every woman and man is called by God to live in love. And if the human being does not want to do the deeds of love, God will force them to do it. Therefore everybody does accomplish good deeds, even sinless deeds. The people who do not want to do so are forced by God to do so.

Luther gives examples from the Turkish world. They are of course examples from the medieval perspective. He says that a Turkish woman would never refuse her infant baby food. She will breast-feed her baby. This act of breast-feeding is an act of pure love. It is sinless. The healthy woman has no calculating, egoistic thoughts in this act. The fact that even Turkish women breast-feed is a clear example of the sinless acts that all human beings do.

This view of human beings may even today liberate people into a respect for all peoples.

The deeds of the human beings are better than themselves, according to Luther.

In this world of vocations God sends the crosses. In front of the crosses every woman and man meet fragility and weakness, the real life.



There is according to my conviction a similarity between the thoughts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his letters from prison in the 1940s, and the theology of the cross, as developed by Martin Luther in his writings. This connection may be explained by the fact that Bonhoeffer was an eager reader of Luther's texts. Whether Bonhoeffer is to be called a Lutheran theologian or not is separate question. My opinion is clear. Bonhoeffer is more influenced by Luther than by any other theologian.

Bonhoeffer never criticised Martin Luther in the same way he criticised other theologians, for instance Karl Barth. For every Lutheran theologian it is, however, necessary to criticise Luther, not least for his anti-Semitism, but also for his feudal view of the Princes' commissions to brutally kill the peasants in the uprising of 1524-25.

For me Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a theologian who struggles with the conditions of real life, the conditions decisive for every man, the conditions which with necessity will involve weakness, fragility and suffering.

