Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Business Ethics
Walton Padelford
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Reviewed by: Mark DeVine

Dissatisfaction with his own lectures prompted economics professor Walton Padelford’s research, resulting in the book, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Business Ethics*. Though convinced that the content of a course on business ethics taught from a Christian perspective ought to differ in significant ways from one taught from alternative standpoints, Padelford doubted that his own course did so. The work of pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer emerged as a rich source of insight and guidance even though he had produced no comprehensive work on ethics and no direct statement on business ethics at all.

Yet, as Padelford shows, the promise of Bonhoeffer’s thinking for the world of business was impressive. No one doubts that the business world is thoroughly enmeshed in this fallen world. And though Bonhoeffer had much to say regarding the “be ye separate” mandate of Holy Scripture, few voices in the history of the church articulate a more serious affirmation of the “go ye” counterpart. To follow Jesus Christ who “tabernacled” among us, one must “plunge into the tempest of living” because, though this whole world is fallen, it still belongs to its creator, judge, and Lord.

Padelford seizes on the Christo-centrism that pervades Bonhoeffer’s thinking. Bonhoeffer’s convictions parallel those of the great theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper: “there is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, ‘This is mine! This belongs to me!’” Thus, in the business world, disciples find themselves on hostile, but not foreign soil—on terrain claimed by the same Lord who claims each of them. Precisely within this context the disciple is called to live unreservedly as witness to the hidden Lord who reigns there.

Ethical crossroads shaped by this reality provoke a unique question: not “How will this decision affect me” or even “What will
make me holy?” (as in a kind of consequentialist/Egoist ethics of Bentham) or “What universal, timeless principle applies?” (as in the non-consequentialist ethics of Kant), but rather, “What does Jesus Christ himself require of me here and now in this concrete situation?” The decision-maker’s eye is directed to Jesus Christ and those for whom he died and lives to redeem. No advanced knowledge of Jesus Christ’s concrete mandate, which will always demand a specific action, is available. Yet Bonhoeffer does not advance a Joseph Fletcher-style situation ethics in which there are no rules whatsoever and where the situation itself essentially determines necessary moral obligation. Rather, for Bonhoeffer, Jesus Christ, clothed with his gospel and bearing his word, speaks to the disciple within a particular situation, calling for specific, costly action here and now.

Through such command and obedience Jesus Christ spiritually forms the disciple into his own likeness and sanctifies the situation by exposing and exerting his lordship there. Padelford explores the fascinating ethical implications of Bonhoeffer’s insistence upon the ongoing presence, activity, and lordship of Jesus Christ in every sector of this world. Divine mandates are directed to four divinely-created and sustained spheres of human existence and relationship: government, marriage, labor, and the church. Jesus Christ is Lord of all four. But it is the church that recognizes this and finds itself, and each of its members, called to and liberated for obedience that bears witness to that hidden lordship.

Ethical behavior in such a context, shaped by such a distinct and thoroughgoing Christian reality, takes on a character at once personal, concrete, relational and other-directed. It is personal because every disciple finds himself confronted with the living word and command of the living Jesus Christ. It is concrete because Jesus Christ still issues commands as specific and unambiguous as he did when he walked on this earth: “take up your pallet and walk” or “sell everything and give to the poor.” It is relational because the whole ethical scene is characterized by actual interaction between actual people; Jesus Christ commands, disciples are commanded and act in relation to others. It is other-directed because, the disciple, himself
already taken care of through union with Jesus Christ, is free to concern himself completely with Christ and others. He is free for the happy duty of service and witness.

I commend Padelford’s fine work in this volume as a much-needed and indeed urgent use of Bonhoeffer in precisely the kind of application his theology best informs. Padelford advances an ethical vision that avoids the abstraction characteristic of so many philosophical and utilitarian approaches, precisely by taking Bonhoeffer’s utterly theological and Christ-centered convictions with full seriousness.

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