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## Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Endurance

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## Summary

### *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Endurance: An Examination of One Christian's Persistence in the Face of Evil and Injustice*

The central question of this study is: *How did Dietrich Bonhoeffer endure in his faith when he saw so much evil, even in his own faith community?*

The object of this dissertation is to consider how Dietrich Bonhoeffer endured in his faith during times of disappointment and disillusionment with his own faith community and his experiences with the totalitarian state during the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer was chosen due to the extremity of his situation. If in such an extreme and demanding context he was able to endure as a Christian, then there must be a mindset within him that interprets situations and experiences into his practice of faith. Therefore, Bonhoeffer was reviewed with two questions in mind: what did he believe about evil, and what did he consider as justice.

In order to accomplish this, the dissertation is composed of six chapters. Chapter one explains the applied research method; namely, close reading of Bonhoeffer's texts and introduction of the problem and its origins. In this chapter the importance of love within Wesleyan theology—which is the background of the author—is explained and the problem with regard to endurance is outlined. For Methodists, absence of love is equivalent to the absence of sanctification. Since Bonhoeffer frequently saw the absence of love in his predominately Christian culture would this cause him to question the fact of sanctification and endurance?

In order to obtain a baseline evaluation of Bonhoeffer's character, family life, and impulses, an evaluation is initially performed in chapter two. Here Bonhoeffer's family and childhood experiences are chronologically considered. The primary purpose of this chapter is to consider those things that Bonhoeffer found important and to use them as the beginning of this study. In doing so, the importance of Bonhoeffer's decision to be a theologian is discovered, and his passion for the church is explained. In order to do this, his doctoral dissertation—*Sanctorum Communio*—is reviewed, and his theological arguments are uncovered. Important to the findings in chapter one is the argument that Bonhoeffer makes that the whole world is now unified with God through the act of Christ assuming the new, redeemed, collective person.

In chapter three, we begin the evaluation of what Bonhoeffer believed about evil. Three books are considered—*Creation and Fall*, *Discipleship*, and *Ethics*. We learn from examining these three books that, for the majority of his work, Bonhoeffer does not discuss the origins or state of evil. Instead, he turns the argument to the state of being unified with God. In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer exegetes the story of the fall in Genesis and concludes with the argument

that knowing good and evil causes humankind to become disunified with God. Therefore, the only remedy to a disunified state is to know only God and his will. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer stays with this argument for the few references he makes about evil with one exception. That exception is considered in chapter two as well. Finally, *Ethics* is evaluated and we see an even stronger emphasis on unity with God as the remedy to the knowledge of good and evil.

In chapter four this trend continues as we consider what justice meant for Bonhoeffer and how he believed justice should be performed. As with evil, we find that when Bonhoeffer discusses justice, he returns to the argument for unity with God. In introducing and arguing for his four mandates, Bonhoeffer also returns to unity with God. Even one of his most famous chapters, “Penultimate and Ultimate Things,” delivers the same message. And in the final analysis of justice in *Ethics*, we see again that, for Bonhoeffer, justice can only occur when humanity is in unity with God. Actually Bonhoeffer uses the reference to the unity with God to me and again as a heuristic principle to bring the discussion on justice and evil at a higher and more profound theological level.

In chapter five our conclusions from the research are introduced in the form of three main propositions. These propositions are the result of systematically evaluating Bonhoeffer’s argumentation and supported through our previous findings. Each proposition is then compared to Bonhoeffer’s final prison writings—compiled into the manuscript, *Letters and Papers from Prison*—to consider if Bonhoeffer maintained his theology before prison and whether his theology contributed to his endurance. They confirm that Bonhoeffer’s family support and childhood rearing provided an emotionally and psychologically stable base from which he gained strength during his resistance and imprisonment. In prison unity with God also provided the main basis for this theology and personal attitude. And finally, it confirmed the central place of the church in Bonhoeffer’s endurance.

Finally, in chapter six a general conclusion is offered highlighting various findings of interest from each chapter. Unity with God is the central motive in Bonhoeffer’s theology. It explains the centrality of the church—Christ existing as church community—and it provides the heuristic key to approach evil and justice.