

## LENT SERMON 2: OBEDIENT FOLLOWING

*And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphæus sitting at the receipt of custom, and said unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him. (Mark 2.14)*



In chapter 2 Bonhoeffer is commenting on Mark 2.14, *the call of Levi*, and his chapter goes on to describe what it means to have a “leader”, a *Fuhrer*:

“This encounter is a testimony to the absolute, direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus. There is no need of any preliminaries....”

Bonhoeffer is contrasting *a real leader* with a fake *Fuhrer*! This is the most direct assault on Hitler one can imagine in German print in 1937!

But Bonhoeffer also has another target in mind, too. *Liberal Christians* — so he asks this question, raises this problem:

*People wonder what caused Levi to obey?*

Who are the people to whom Bonhoeffer is referring?

I’d like us to think about that but let’s see what answer he gives to his question:

*...what caused Levi to obey?*

“Unfortunately our text is ruthlessly silent on this point, and in fact it regards the immediate sequence of call and response as a matter of crucial importance. It displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reasons for a man's religious decisions. And why? For the simple reason that the cause behind the immediate following of call by response is Jesus Christ himself. It

is Jesus who calls, and because it is Jesus, Levi follows at once" (THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP)

I want to suggest to you some reasons why Bonhoeffer wrote this particular paragraph the way he does and also why this paragraph matters for us this Lent.

Bonhoeffer is trying to teach us something important, something deep about human relationships; and about the simple commitment to others. He is trying to show us how reason (thought) gets in the way of faith, how faith is a habit. Habits work without thinking.

And the basis of the Christian life is a kind of following where, without thought, without letting reason get in the way, **we obey Jesus spontaneously**.

Now, that in itself would not be too surprising: but what is new in Bonhoeffer is the importance he places in the role of other people in our lives: how the voice of Jesus comes to us is most often through others in need around us! Christ comes to us in the form of the neighbour, the stranger, the victim.

Let me illustrate. Kim and jobs. 1000 jobs in the garden!

Simple obedience, not reflection!!

To unpack all this and to share a little more biographical data from his life let's examine five Karl's to whom he is connected:

Here's the first KARL:

#### I. KARL AUGUST VON HASE (GREAT GRANDFATHER)



Professor of Church History in the famous University at Jenna, theologian himself, court preacher to the Hohernzollern German emperor Wilhelm II, Dietrich's great grandfather (KARL AUGUST VON HASE), who died in 1890, once had a gut reaction and he rebuked the emperor for his attitudes towards the poor – and he was

fired by that same emperor. The family must have remembered this event as how they were to deal with power run amok: *the spoke in the wheel!*

*"We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."*

His grandfather spoke out of habit! It didn't matter that this was the emperor; he didn't think about the decision, but obeyed.

--

But a young scholar like Bonhoeffer is still figuring things out, is just developing his habits:



From 1930 to 1931 the young scholar spent a study year at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.



He was chilled by the bourgeois white churchliness of conservative America. However, in the base communities of the "other America" he found evidence of the church he was searching for.



In the United States it became clear to Bonhoeffer that the gospel surpassed the social and national bounds in which the church in his own country was held. The storefront churches and self-help centers of Harlem and the ecumenical and cosmopolitan atmosphere of the seminary impressed Bonhoeffer deeply. In the black churches of Harlem and the settlement movement of the base communities he found the gospel as “good news for the poor” hand in hand with concrete social commitment.

He was impacted by the antecedents of the American civil rights movement and the encounter with the representatives of the Social Gospel who sought to think and practice the commands of Christ in social and political categories.

Conversation partners and friends like Frank Fisher from Harlem, Paul and Marion Lehmann from the base communities, and Reinhold Niebuhr, professor for social ethics at the Union, gave a new direction to Bonhoeffer’s search for a concrete expression of “communion of saints” as

“Christ existing as Church community”

The friendship with Jean Lasserre, a French scholar at the Union Seminary, who confronted Bonhoeffer with the commands of the “Sermon on the Mount”, decisively changed his life; Bonhoeffer was to say:

“I believe I know that inwardly I shall be clear and honest with myself only if I truly begin to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount ... There just happen to be things that are worth an uncompromising stand. And it seems to me that peace and social justice, or Christ himself, are such things.”

From then on Dietrich Bonhoeffer was constantly to stress that in the Christian communion national, racial and social boundaries are abolished.

He himself would step across these barriers time and again.

He transcended the conservative Lutheran ethics which was still following Luther’s doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, which assigns to the church the proclamation of the

“pure gospel” of grace and leaves the world its “autonomy” to do as it will about justice.

Now, Bonhoeffer was to insist that faith in Christ and discipleship have a political and a social dimension.

In Bonhoeffer’s subsequent *praxis*, inspired by the ideas of the Social Gospel, what he later called “the church for others” became concretely visible. In the summer of 1932, being engaged in political and social movements in Berlin, he said:

“Consider what is on earth. By that much will be decided today, whether we Christians have enough strength to bear witness to the world that we are no dreamers with our head in the clouds, that we do not let things come and go as they are, that our faith is not the opium which leaves us content in the middle of an unjust world. But that precisely because we look to what is above we protest all the more stubbornly and deliberately on this earth.”

I believe it was from his family (people like his great grandfather Von Hase) that Bonhoeffer already carried a deep sense of responsibility for society. It was this that kept him in Germany right till his martyrdom.

Let’s look at the second Karl with whom he was in relationship.

## II. KARL BONHOEFFER (FATHER)

From his father Bonhoeffer drew much. Let me pick on two things that are relevant to the Bonhoeffer paragraph we are analysing.

### A. MISTRUST OF REFLECTION/EMOTION

### B. CAREFUL WITH WORDS – GRACE

Bonhoeffer’s father was the most famous psychiatrist in Germany teaching at its greatest university in Berlin where they had moved from Breslau, which is now in Poland.

The State even called on Karl Bonhoeffer to analyse the mental condition of the Dutchman accused of setting the Reichstag fire which led to so many changes of the Weimar Constitution by the Nazis and the rolling back of Civil Rights in Germany.

Bonhoeffer learned to use few words and to make them count (think of grace and how he deals with it in chapter 1!), and because his father preferred behaviourism to the emotional psychological theories of Freud and Jung, the young Bonhoeffer learns to forever doubt human abilities to explore their own inner world and analyse themselves fairly and honestly. He doubts *reflection*. Instead he thinks of the self relationally and as embedded into community –

## Christ existing as Church community

Let's look at a third Karl:

### III. KARL FRIEDRICH BONHOEFFER (BROTHER)

Of Bonhoeffer's brother I think we get a picture of the man who thinks too much, the man who reflects, the man who, unlike Levi in Mark 2.14, has no habit of faith.

But this is a signal of how Bonhoeffer grew up and shows us what a miracle of God's grace he was.

Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, Dietrich's older brother, rose to prominence as a brilliant physical chemist, even as several of his relatives – Dietrich among them – became involved in the resistance to Hitler, leading to their executions in 1945.

His life bears witness to the entanglement of science, religion, and politics in the Third Reich; and in the lives of Karl-Friedrich, his family and his colleagues, including Fritz Haber and the renowned Werner Heisenberg.

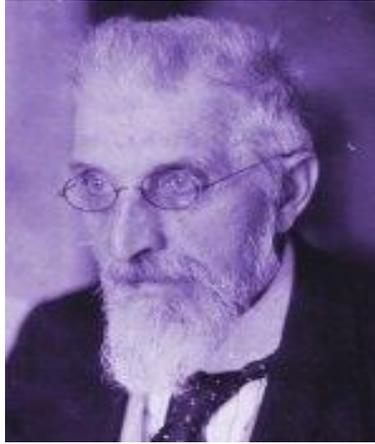
Nominated for the Nobel Prize, Karl-Friedrich was an expert on heavy water, a component of the atomic bomb. During the war, he was caught in the middle between his relatives who were trying to kill Hitler and his friends who were helping Hitler build a nuclear weapon.

Karl-Friedrich emerges from history as a complex figure – an agnostic whose brother was a renowned theologian, and a chemist who both reluctantly advised German nuclear scientists and collaborated with Paul Rosbaud, a spy for the British.

Illuminating the uneasy position of science in twentieth-century Germany, Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer was a man in love with chemistry, his family, and his nation, trying to do right by all of them in the midst of national chaos.

Instead of just obeying Jesus Dietrich's brother shows us some of the reasons the paragraph we are analysing exists. If you think about what is right to do too much, you get trapped.

Let's quickly turn to a fourth Karl and here is what I really want us to focus on.



#### IV. KARL HOLL – LUTHER & LIBERALISM (TEACHER)

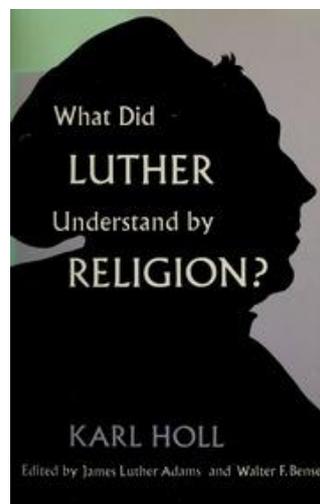
Karl Holl died in 1926 but Bonhoeffer sat in his seminar in Berlin and could not have been untouched by Holl's Luther Renaissance. Holl was not his most important teacher; that honour fell to the Liberals Adolph von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg.

##### A. HOLL'S LUTHER PROJECT

"The leading historian after von Ranke, i.e., von Treitschke, at the end of the nineteenth century, produced a very naturalistic and nationalistic picture of Luther. For von Treitschke, Luther is the German Luther who embodied and 'unleashed the native power of German defiance.' This is the Luther of German nationalism." ("Development of the Young Luther," p.475)

We know that

"... by the beginning of World War I the Luther image of the nineteenth century had been destroyed. Interest in Luther had waned and judgment of him was generally negative. Luther was dead." (p.476)



But by 1917 when Holl writes his famous book on Luther's account of conscience and as the first Modern Man:

"Karl Holl was the single most important impetus to the rise of the Luther renaissance. His fresh analysis of Luther in 1921 became the focus of modern Luther research." (p.477)

Bonhoeffer was a student in Holl's seminar at the University of Berlin from 1924 on; and the Luther renaissance was in full swing in Germany especially Berlin because of Holl.

I think Holl's *liberal theology* accounts to some extent for what Bonhoeffer says in our paragraph; here it is again:

"Unfortunately our text is ruthlessly silent on this point, and in fact it regards the immediate sequence of call and response as a matter of crucial importance. It displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reasons for a man's religious decisions."

Holl's book was all about Luther's psychological reasons for the Reformation stand he took.

*But exactly why does Bonhoeffer care about all this?*

## B. LIBERALISM

Bonhoeffer, I think, is squaring accounts with the Liberal theology of his teachers in Berlin and he is rejecting much they had to teach. And doing so - in print! Why?

Bonhoeffer knows very well from his training in Berlin the kind of questions Liberalism asks and the kinds of problems it is trying to solve - not least making Protestant theology intellectually respectable in a modern research University like Berlin.

Because liberal theology believes in and teaches the inherent goodness of human beings, unaided by grace, it does not need Jesus, revelation, miracles, or indeed grace!

God is working things out through an evolutionary history where everything is getting better and human effort is winning a better world day by day. After all, humans are not the problem but the solution to the problem.

But why is Bonhoeffer squaring these accounts in just this way, right at this time?

*Here's my suggestion to you:*

Liberalism has no defense against Nazism!

*And we should be aware of this in the age in which we live too; the great age of Liberal tolerance.*

If God works through human beings *just as they are*, then the Church is irrelevant, the Gospel is unnecessary, and Jesus Christ does not matter at all.

If you believe this, you don't need the Upper Room at all.

If God always already works through some "natural" good in human beings to save, then

...why couldn't the Kingdom of God come about through the Aryan people as the vehicle of the divine in time, as Hitler preached?

And I want you to think about this; and I want you to pause and take a breath next time you sing – *God defend New Zealand!*

Against this Nazi natural theology, Bonhoeffer sets the call of God in Jesus Christ:

"How could the call immediately evoke obedience? The story [of Levi] is a stumbling-block for the natural reason [of people like my teachers in Berlin], and it is no wonder that frantic attempts have been made to separate the two events. By hook or by crook a bridge must be found [some event or faculty in human beings] between them. Something must have happened in between, some psychological or historical event."

But remember what else Bonhoeffer will have discovered in Holl's Luther seminar: Luther's remarks dating to 1519 from Heidelberg at the Augustinian Consistory:

"The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it."  
(Martin Luther, 1519: Thesis 28, "Heidelberg Disputation")

Luther goes on in this 28, and he finishes that thesis with this thought:

"The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."

Bad theology starts with humans beings and it never becomes more than a glorified anthropology; that is what makes it bad theology.

Bonhoeffer therefore says in our paragraph:

"It displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reasons for a man's religious decisions."

Do you understand why it “displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reasons for a man’s religious decisions?”

Because Bonhoeffer by at least 1933 or 1934 had realised that unless we shut this unholy door for good – *we will always sell out to Nazis!* They will always corrupt us by convincing us that God is working some other way

than in the grace that comes in Jesus Christ.

To get this, we must turn to the fifth Karl, Bonhoeffer’s real master.

## V. KARL BARTH (MASTER)



‘You cannot speak about God by speaking about man in a loud voice.’ (Karl Barth)

Barth also had been impressed by the Luther Renaissance; he too had studied with the Liberals in Berlin and then at Marburg University. Barth himself had been a Liberal at one with his teachers.

But by the time of WWI he does not draw Holl’s liberal conclusions from the Luther Renaissance. *Luther is not the best evidence that the modern world is justified in its own court,* and that modern human beings are good just as they are.

Barth is devastated by the WWI, and especially by the Liberalism of his theological teachers in Germany (people like von Harnack). His nineteenth-century sunny optimism is all but destroyed by the War of 1914-18.

In 1919, he writes a commentary on Romans; here he preaches something radical and new that sets the true God quite apart from humans:

The infinite-qualitative difference.

This is not a problem Barth discovered. The problem of how we think and speak about God runs right through Christian theology.

“For between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them.” (1215: Counc. Lateran IV, art. 2)

Barth returns to Luther and so stops looking to find a faculty or a moral or religious possibility in human beings that God can work with, and returns to Luther’s 1519 idea:

“The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.”

By these lights Nazism can be identified and catalogued for what it is: Nazism is a kind of pagan-Christian heresy:

“Heresy is thus a name for theological projects that miss the mark of *analogy*, typically by falling into what [Eric] Przywara calls ‘the pure similarity of identity.’” (Re Przywara, FIRST THINGS)

Hitler and the Nazis fell into this heretical trap by calling the purification of the Aryan people and the race war that followed – *the work of God* in history. The Aryan people were God’s hand deal death and judgement and bringing in the Kingdom [*Reich*] of God – a 1000-year kingdom!

The Heresy they were following was the one the Lateran Council had precisely condemned in 1215:

“Joachim [of Fiore] was too intent on giving the Holy Spirit a particular form that would identify it too closely with historical processes.”

Karl Barth was concerned to show that a

“proper theological anthropology, in this sense, understands there to be a non interchangeability” of God and creature.

So, Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) rocked the world of theology when he published his commentary on Romans in 1919.

His focus on God *as truly God* and his return to Scripture

“destroyed the older liberalism,”

in one scholar’s words.

Later, Barth helped draft *the Barmen Declaration* (1934) that declared the true German church could never give ultimate allegiance to the Nazi state.

Unless you understand the issue in Nazi Germany you won't understand Barmen's declaration of faith, its confession which in part says:

"We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation." (Barmen Declaration, Art 1)

But *Barmen's Second Article* is important too; so important, I'm going to quote it to you in full because it is the article on sanctification of the human being in the face of Nazism's claim upon the church community:

2. "Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (1 Corinthians 1.30)

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords - areas in which we would not need **justification** and sanctification through him.

But if you understand why the Church had to take *this particular stand* against Hitler and the Nazi ideology and natural theology - against "other lords" - then you must equally know why Bonhoeffer writes - against Karl Holl and his Liberal teachers in Berlin:

"This encounter is a testimony to the absolute, direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus. There is no need of any preliminaries...."

Like Barth, Bonhoeffer rejected the nineteenth century's liberal theology, with its focus on human religion.

He embraced Barth's theology of grace revealed in Jesus Christ as the ONE Word of God, attested by Scripture and proclaimed by the church, whom we have to obey.

Barth's battle cry, "Revelation, not religion!" would remain a fundament of Bonhoeffer's theology to the end. (But, like Luther, Bonhoeffer would stress that God's revelation is deeply hidden "in the likeness of sinful flesh.")

Though he had read him Bonhoeffer finally met Barth in the summer of 1931.

“I was even more impressed by his discussion than by his writings and lectures,”

Bonhoeffer said. The two remained friends, and they became allies, especially in the struggle against the “German Christian” theology.

Barth’s understanding of religion is that it is “unbelief”.

In this he is following pure Luther:

*“Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.” (Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans)*

Now I want to leave you with this thought of Bonhoeffer’s. The implications of the world-denying beliefs that Bonhoeffer spoke out – he knew they could cost him his life, and they did. The world will never love us for telling it, it is not God! So let me end with Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge who writes and account of the SS doctor at Flossenburg.

“On the morning of that day between five and six o’clock the prisoners, among them Admiral Canaris and General Oster were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them.

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his 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 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.” (Bethge, p.830-1)

AMEN