**Adventist Scholar Today and Bonhoeffer’s Relevant, Intellectually Responsible, Prophetically Vibrant and Ethically Transformative Gospel**

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Many consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (1906-1945) ministry and writings to be a modern-day embodiment of how the Gospel message should be made relevant, intellectually responsible, prophetically vibrant and ethically transformative for both the Church and society. Being a disciple of Christ in perilous times, Bonhoeffer was led to adopt certain seemingly unorthodox beliefs and practices that were grounded not only in objective and normative principles but also in the ethics of formation by the concrete and immediate will of God. Of course, relevancy and contextuality contributed largely to this attitude. I maintain that Bonhoeffer’s legacy can inspire and strengthen Adventist teachers, scholars, and activists in their renewed exploration of their prophetic role and search for social relevancy and contextuality of the Christian moral leadership in the 21st century.

This paper seeks to draw some useful guiding principles for Adventist scholars from Bonhoeffer’s: 1. powerfully relevant and contextual expression of the Gospel message; 2. intellectual and academic responsibility of the Christian scholar; 3. ethical concreteness and thickness based on the prophetic insight into the immediate will of God, yet without denial of the ethical, normative principles; and 4. transformative initiative (symbiosis of Divine will and active human agency) that brings about genuine spiritual revival and moral change.

The paper will be divided into four sections that will recognize each of these principles in its order. In the end, some important implications of the principles in today’s Adventist context will be presented and observed.

**Relevancy and Contextuality of the Bonhoeffer’s Proclamation of the Gospel**

Charles Marsh, a notable Bonhoeffer biographer, in his opus Magnus *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, observes:

So many horrors had transpired in the course of human history precisely because Christians had turned their eyes upward or, worse, abandoned the narrow path—the way of the cross—for some imagined ladder of ascent. Bonhoeffer determined now to teach how a Christian dissident should think about his sojourn *on earth*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

From *Life Together*, via *Cost of Discipleship* and *Ethics*, towards *Letters and Papers from Prison* Bonhoeffer constantly stressed the necessity of reinventing, rereading, reviving and reenergizing the Gospel story in the *relevant* immediate context of the *earthly* battle against evil in its particular and concrete form.

The undercurrents of this approach Bonhoeffer found in the reality of the *incarnation of Christ*. “Jesus Christ is not the transfiguration of sublime humanity. He is the “yes” which God addresses to the *real man*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) God was the first one who became relevant and contextual. The reality of *real* humanity was confirmed by His incarnation confirming that we should neither despise nor deify human beings.[[3]](#endnote-3) The incarnation of Christ and his involvement with *earthly realities* and *earthly concerns* of human beings is teaching us, the Church, therefore, that Christian faith is not only an upward look towards heaven but a downward look towards the context in which we live. “Let the Christian remain in the world, not because of the good gifts of creation, nor because of his responsibility for the course of the world, but for the sake of the Body of the *incarnated* Christ…”[[4]](#endnote-4)

In his battle against the Nazi regime and *Nationale Reichskirche* (pro-Nazi State Protestant Church), Bonhoeffer always maintained the principle of relevancy of Christ’s message and contextuality of the Gospel. In spite of the immediate danger and threat, he proclaimed the only true Gospel in the times when German *Volk* inspired by the apostate state Church claimed that Führer was the “bearer of a new Revelation… Germany’s Jesus Christ.”[[5]](#endnote-5) “Anyone who is called to a spiritual office is to affirm his loyal duty with the following oath: I swear that I will be faithful and obedient to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German Reich and people, that I will conscientiously observe the laws and carry out the duties of my office, so help me God.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

In these perilous times, Bonhoeffer made a conscious decision to stay faithful and obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ, his values and principles, and to side with publicly and lead the Confessing Church (the only community of faith that challenged the Nazi regime and interceded for the oppressed). Unfortunately, even this Church will have a large percentage of Christians who had taken the oath to Hitler.[[7]](#endnote-7) In these times full of risk, Bonhoeffer lived out the contextuality of the power of the Gospel by praying for the Jews when intercession was forbidden for the enemies of the State, and fighting against pro-Aryan paragraph in the State church policy. The Gospel he preached was transformed into a social relevant contextual Gospel meeting the immediate need of the world. “The secularity of the church follows from the incarnation of Christ. The Church, like Christ, has become the world.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Faithfulness to the Gospel implies *Nachfolge* (The Cost of Discipleship). *Nachdenken* (contemplation and reflection) without *nachvolgen*  (discipleship) is a beautiful castle built on sand.[[9]](#endnote-9) Discipleship, unlike only theological reflections, is always revealed in the reality of enduring the cross. “It is the suffering which is the fruit of an *exclusive allegiance* to Jesus Christ.”[[10]](#endnote-10) The proclamation of the contextual Gospel led Bonhoeffer to affirm the basic *Christ-suffering*, “every man must experience the call to abandon the attachments of this world.”[[11]](#endnote-11) “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Bonhoeffer, therefore, in his struggle against the Nazi ideology, prevalent worldly-religious? The culture of his age confirmed the principle of living out the Gospel in its immediate context and following Christ as a *real man*, *real Church, real Body of Christ*. Christ has reemerged in the conscience of the faithful as the true Führer and the Lord. The power of his conviction inspired many of his students to abandon the project of *Reichskirche* and suffer the consequences a long time before him. He was truly a relevant preacher of the Gospel.

**Intellectual and Academic Responsibility of Christian scholar and an activist**

Bonhoeffer had a very promising theological career. However, for the sake of leading out in spiritual contextual resistance to the prevailing Nazi culture, he was forced to leave the teaching post in Berlin, demonstrating exceptional intellectual and academic responsibility of the activist who did not just teach students some theological material or exegete ancient sacred writings but epitomized real and responsible change in the Church and society. The Christian scholar has gone to the desert of *Finkenwalde* (secluded seminary of the Confessing Church described as “a new monasticism”),[[13]](#endnote-13) because he believed that the responsibility of every scholar is to cry out in the wilderness against the social and spiritual abuses of the prevailing Nazi regime, as well as exemplify this responsibility by creating followers and the leaders of the future generation. Between the extremes of the secular-Protestant and monastic callings, Bonhoeffer reminds us that calling/vocation with *responsibility* says “yes” to worldly institutions and “no” of sharp protest against their abuses at the same time.[[14]](#endnote-14) This calling is determined exclusively by the calling of Jesus Christ to strictly apply the perennial principles of the Sermon on the Mount,[[15]](#endnote-15) and the immediate will of God.

**Ethical-Prophetic Insight into the Immediate Will of God**

Bonhoeffer always emphasized the *simplicity of obedience to the Will of God*. He wrote in his *Ethics*:

To be simple is to fix one’s eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside-down. It is to be single-hearted and not a man of two souls, an ανηρ διψυχος (Jas. 1.8). Because the simple man knows God, because God is his, he clings to the commandments, the judgements and the mercies which come from God’s mouth every day fresh. Not fettered by principles, but bound by love for God, he has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision. They no longer oppress him. He belongs simply and solely to God and to the will of God.[[16]](#endnote-16)

From the early recognition of the alien nature of the Nazi regime to the true Christian faith, and his own struggles whether to publicly proclaim his love for Jews or not; from the decision to resist *Reichskirche* and fight against his own official German Church on all grounds including searching for help in the international ecumenical community, and his decision to join German international intelligence organization *Abwehr* [[17]](#endnote-17)as a double spy; to the final decision that to serve the will of God one had to plot against Hitler, Bonhoeffer claimed that his conscience and faithfulness to the immediate Christ duty was driving him to believe “that only by believing in God could one be a total opponent to Nazi.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

The man who is not double-minded, who is simple, is the one who believes and thinks beyond the conflicting ethical principles. Bonhoeffer confirmed that the “ethics of the will of God” implies the immediate *prophetic* insight into God’s concrete will work in the concrete crisis. This simplicity of the obedience to the immediate will of God led him to experience the joy of God’s presence and approval at his last moments at the gallows even when he wept.[[19]](#endnote-19)

**Transformative Initiative Through Love – Symbiosis of Divine and Human**

In his sermon, “The Answer to Perplexing Question,” Martin Luther King Jr. asked the key question: how can evil be cast out? He recognized the inadequacy of both *optimistic* movements that praise the power and ingenuity of human being maximizing inventions and governance originating in Renaissance, and the *pessimistic* doctrine of human nature originated in Reformation which eliminates the ability of humans to do anything and put stress on divine redemption only.[[20]](#endnote-20) He concludes:

Neither God nor man will individually bring the world’s salvation. Rather, both man and God made one in the marvelous unity of purpose through and *overflowed love* as the gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Like MLK, Bonhoeffer completely understood this symbiosis principle. Being receptive to the divine mandate of love and sense of justice and righteousness, Bonhoeffer opened himself to the power of God’s love that shaped his life and led him towards radical change in his life and the lives he impacted. As a recipient of this divine gift of love, Bonhoeffer understood that the love necessary for this radical change did not originate in his faithfulness to his theological convictions, moral mandate, or emotional aspiration but from the glorious presence of God’s ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ.

*God* is love: that is to say not a human attitude, a conviction or a deed, but God Himself is love. Only he who knows God knows what love is; it is not the other way round; it is not that we first of all by nature know what love is and therefore know also what God is. No one knows God unless God reveals Himself to him. And so no one knows what love is except in the self-revelation of God. Love, then, is the revelation of God. And the revelation of God is Jesus Christ… (1 John 4:9).[[22]](#endnote-22)

God’s love as a powerful presence makes the human agent of love capable to love God and neighbor perfectly and fulfill the immediate will of God. This symbiosis of divine and human love is what helped Bonhoeffer to move forward in spite of the unbelievably strong opposition until his very death. Transformative Gospel he believed and defended at any cost was the Gospel of the ultimate sacrificial love in Christ Jesus.

**Bonhoeffer's Legacy and Adventist Scholar Today**

First, what we can learn from Bonhoeffer is that Adventist scholarship should be more relevant and contextual. By listening to the needs of the Church and the community around us we would be able to address the theological-ethical-anthropological issues that are pertinent and critical. Preaching and teaching in our schools should reflect the willingness to engage in contemporary theological and moral issues and problems of the Church and the society. Therefore, traditional Adventist purely theistic non-anthropological and otherworldly approach with alienated outdated language and theological constructs that do not match the immediate existential needs around us is not sufficient to contribute to new vision, renewed reflection and perpetual change. Adventist scholar is a “down-to-earth” “secular” seeker of the patterns and models of always expressing fresh and anew the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, every Adventist scholar should be a Christian activist in the Church and social setting. Crying out in the wilderness against any form of even nascent injustice and discrimination, whether by the Church structure or social institutions is not an optional agenda. It is imperative for the survival of the essence of Christian faith for the sake of all-inclusive love of God. Decentralization is not a new commodity of the innovative, progressive, open-minded and liberal elements of the Church; it is a spiritualized democratic new form of Christianization of the existing Adventist community of faith (revival and reformation?). The battle against the two-facedness of religious establishment of the Church and its constant stress on compliance is not a proud, presumptuous and arrogant way of dealing with the fragile(d) community of faith. Instead, it is the very mode of spiritual survival of all structures in the Church against the unfortunate lack of trust, cultural insensitivity, and ultimate likely corruption that might make the Church ineffective in the wider society and the ecumenical circles to unimaginable proportions.

Third, an Adventist scholar needs to learn to think and act not just regarding theological and spiritual or even ethical reflections/systems/opinions, but regarding prophetic insight into the immediate will of God. For instance, fatigued and burdened by the endless discussions, theological paradigms and bureaucratic policy-making over the ordination of women, the global Church is craving for the simplicity of the divine will based on the prophetic insight of Church’s activists (scholars, ministers, administrators) who should epitomize this struggle for simplicity in their lives. The simplicity of the will of God is always apparent to those who seek His Word and Spirit in justice and righteousness.

Finally, what is a better way to live simply than to love? Adventist scholars should not just talk about Christ’s love but the love for their spouses and children, colleagues, peers, supervisors, students, community, and even their enemies. The Divine love poured out abundantly on us in Christ is calling us to live a life of symbiosis of divine Spirit and our will-power. Human nature is neither totally corrupt nor fully capable. It is an instrument of the powerful Spirit of Christ who would like to see change and bring genuine love at every level of our scholarly-Church community. Transformation in love, as an ultimate goal, will not come spontaneously by using the same methods and believing the same principles that never gave the satisfactory result. God’s Word and Spirit in its anew and fresh, surprising demands and comforts of the Gospel in every new generation are the only powers that can bring about the permanent spiritual change and transform us, scholars, to love all human beings first, especially the Church we faithfully serve. This Bonhoefferian “polyphony of love,”[[23]](#endnote-23) divine love that does not harm but ennobles earthly loves is what Adventist scholars desperately need in their incarnational, responsible and ethical “secular,” spiritual vocation.

1. New York: Vintage Books, p. 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Touchstone, 1995, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Touchstone, 1995, p. 264. See the whole tract “The Visible Community,” in *Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 248-271. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Marsh, p. 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 268-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Year With Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Daily Meditations From His Letters, Writings and Sermons*, HarperOne, 2005, p. 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 445. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship,* p. 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Marsh, 228-262. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 251. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *From Devotional, October 1* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid.*,* p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Thomas Nelson, 2010, p. 369-371. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 393. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Martin Luther King, Jr. “ The Answer to Perplexing Question,” *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press, 2010, 134-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 53.

    23 Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, Touchstone, 1997, ed. E. Bethge, p. 303 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)