

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Business Ethics**

Walton Padelford. 2011. Mountain Home, AR: BorderStone Press. ISBN 978-1-936670-14-7, \$24.95.

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Walton Padelford, a professor of economics at Union University, is to be applauded for undertaking this worthy but difficult project on the intersection of business ethics and the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The connection between the two is not obvious or simple. In the first chapter, Padelford provides a helpful and brief overview of the life, work, and ongoing significance of the German pastor, theologian, and conspirator against the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was ultimately executed by the Nazis for his participation in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. But since the early 1930s Bonhoeffer had been deeply involved in opposition to the Nazification of Germany, particularly the German church, as his participation in the German church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) occupied a great deal of his efforts before the outbreak of World War II.

There are some significant challenges facing a project like this, which seeks to bring Bonhoeffer's expansive (and rather scattered) writings to bear on a topic like business ethics. One of the challenges is that Bonhoeffer's reputation in America, at least to the extent that he is known popularly, is primarily pastoral and inspirational. (The foreword by New York City pastor Tim Keller to Eric Metaxas' recent bestselling popular biography, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, is an excellent example of this.) There is little about Bonhoeffer's life and work that is easy to come to terms with, but the depth of his theological and spiritual acumen are often underappreciated. Another challenge is that Bonhoeffer never treated economics or business in a systematic fashion. We have no complete treatise on economic life or business ethics from Bonhoeffer. What we do have is Bonhoeffer's treatment of "work" or "culture" as a realm of social life (along with marriage/family, church, and government) in the context of his teachings about "orders of preservation" or "divine mandates."

Padelford meets these twin challenges ably in this book. His interaction with and integration of Bonhoeffer's work from throughout the large literary corpus (sixteen volumes in the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition*) is remarkable. Padelford's efforts to weave together source material from all over Bonhoeffer's work is in some ways necessary, given the fragmentary and occasional nature of Bonhoeffer's comments directly on business and economic life. But even so, Padelford shows an excellent

command of the breadth of Bonhoeffer's work. And Padelford's interaction and employment of Bonhoeffer's work shows the depth and seriousness of Bonhoeffer's thought. Sometimes the original placement of Bonhoeffer's statements are somewhat removed from explicitly economic contexts, but Padelford usually frames Bonhoeffer's broader articulations of Christian discipleship in such a way that quite smoothly makes the connection to business ethics.

Following the biographical introduction, the early chapters of Padelford's book set the ethical context for Bonhoeffer's thoughts related to business. The most substantial material relevant to business ethics comes in sections from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* related to the mandate of "work," or "labor," or even broadly "culture" [*Bildung*]. This sphere of life should be broadly understood to refer not only to the world of commercial transaction but also to the cultivation of the created order, a consequence of the so-called "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1:28. One of the best sections of the book is chapter three, "Discourse on Business Ethics," which is deeply informed by Bonhoeffer's views on ethics as personal conformation to the image of Christ. The social nature of the human being is essential for Bonhoeffer, and this point is likewise critical for Padelford's case that Bonhoeffer has something important to contribute to contemporary discussions about business.

The ordinary Christian lives life in the midst of the structures and challenges of the world, and this reality is the primary means by which Christ becomes present to the world. As Padelford writes, "The member of the church-community lives in this world. However, Christ being formed in me and displayed in me, as my vocation leads me through the business world, allows the Church's prophetic voice to be heard precisely in the middle of the world" (p. 77). The prophetic nature of this presence "in the middle of the world" comes to expression in the ethical challenges faced by the Christian businessperson: "Our membership in the church-community also places a limit on us. A clash may occur when the claims of business and the church-community conflict" (p. 81). One of the essential points to learn from Bonhoeffer, Padelford argues, is that business life is not to be understood as distinct from or separate from the claims of Christ on obedient Christians. It is not some autonomous area of life in which the Christian sets aside the call to follow Christ and works simply according to the accepted rules and norms of the business world.

Padelford proceeds to helpfully delineate Bonhoeffer's unique perspective in contrast to that of the dominant philosophical approaches indebted to Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham. The dynamic "this-worldliness" of Bonhoeffer's ethical perspective challenges Christians to avoid the errors of idolatry (giving undue honor and value to worldly things) and other-worldliness (improperly devaluing or dishonoring the

good gifts of this life). Business is in this sense a “penultimate pursuit,” an area of human life that has its own dignity and purpose, subservient to and oriented to the “ultimate,” or as Padelford puts it, “The ultimate word of God is the word of the last things—an eschatological word. It is also the word of justification, of grace and faith alone” (p. 146). Padelford also helpfully explicates Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of vocation, which in some ways unites all of the previous insights about business and human life before God. The primary sense of calling in the Christian life is to follow God, and only in a secondary sense is this calling related to the various spheres of human existence. In this way, we really have one vocation, to follow Christ, which takes various forms or has various aspects as we work, play, love, and live.

Padelford’s study concludes with an emphasis on example, both in the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s faithfulness to his Christian calling throughout his participation in the conspiracy, as well as in the more mundane tasks of the professor, student, and businessperson. The book makes a strong case for the relevance of Bonhoeffer’s ethical insights to the Christian pursuit of faithful business.

In many ways Padelford’s book serves as an introduction into a much broader and far-ranging discussion about the Christian life and its economic expressions that can be informed by critical engagement with the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of the paradoxes of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought, which Padelford struggles with throughout the book, is that Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the “concreteness” of the ethical situation, on the real moment of struggle and decision, often ends up with remarkable abstraction and vagueness. There is little in the way of ethical principles that can be communicated, since Bonhoeffer’s ethic was not primarily an ethic of abstract principles. But in the attempt to describe an ethic of concreteness, we are too often left with even less than recourse to abstract principles. One of the options in such a case is to use examples, realizing that what faithfulness looks like for one person may not be what faithfulness looks like for all persons. Padelford does an admirable job describing what faithfulness looked like in the life of Bonhoeffer, but it would have been very helpful to hear examples of how Bonhoeffer’s insights have made a difference in how Padelford teaches economics and business to his students. Here and there Padelford provides some hints at this, but a more sustained set of examples (even framed by the limits of the “case study” approach) would have helped alleviate the paradox of the dynamic between the abstract and the concrete.

Padelford does attempt to address this paradox, and does so with some effectiveness, by emphasizing the “sapiential” or wisdom-informed character of business ethics. Padelford’s integration of scriptural insights, particularly from wisdom literature like Ecclesiastes, is especially

noteworthy at this point.

There are a few points that Padelford touches on that warrant deeper reflection. For example, in a section that properly and clearly distinguishes Bonhoeffer's ethics from the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher and John A. T. Robinson, Padelford mentions the so-called Freiburg "Bonhoeffer circle" of thinkers who were charting a course for post-war Germany. Although Bonhoeffer's direct contact with the group was somewhat limited, it would be worth exploring in more detail the connections between Bonhoeffer's social thought and the ordoliberal school of economics associated with Walter Eucken (who participated in the composition of the Freiburg memorandum), Wilhelm Röpke, and others.

Although theological ideas like vocation and discipleship receive significant treatment in Padelford's work, some others with intriguing implications for business life are left relatively unexplored. Bonhoeffer's idea of "vicarious representative action" (*Stellvertretung*) is quite important to his ethical thought. This idea is a development and deepening of the traditional Lutheran idea that in their callings Christians represent the masks or faces of God (*larvae Dei*) to others. For Bonhoeffer, our callings also involve engaging in responsible actions in the stead of others. Fathers and mothers have a representative role in this way with respect to their families, and politicians likewise with respect to their citizenry. Given the realities of a globalized world, with supply chains reaching across continents and involving innumerable human actors, what might we make of the ethical implications of viewing businesspersons as vicarious representatives?

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Business Ethics* is a worthwhile starting point for deeper discussions about the role of business in social life and the relationship of Christian faith to discipleship in the business realm. This book makes it clear that Bonhoeffer has much to teach us about what "the call to follow Jesus" might "mean today for the worker, the businessman, the farmer, or the soldier" (*Discipleship*, p. 39).

## **References**

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