

In other words, the will of God is, at the same time, both absolute *and* relative, in the person of Jesus Christ.

So. Given that the will of God changes—and yet, *doesn't* change—given that the will of God is contextual, through Jesus Christ ... how do we know—for sure—what the will of God is in any given situation? How do we *know* what the will of God is?

And the answer is this—the will of God is found in the intersection of reaching up to God and reaching out to others. It's found, in other words, in the cross—that place where the divine world intersects with the human world, where selfish becomes selfless, and where losing yourself means finding yourself. It's that place where, as our reading from Revelation reveals, Christ becomes the alpha, and the omega, and everything in between.

The place at which Bonhoeffer found himself of course, was Nazi Germany, in the year 1939—a place where Adolph Hitler had just invaded Poland, where Jews were persecuted, and the “official” German church, established by Hitler, was turning a blind eye to all that was happening. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who renounced violence of every kind ... and yet, he found it impossible to sit by and watch violence be done to others.

And so he turned to God and he prayed. He prayed to discover God's will—he prayed for discernment to know how, *exactly*, God was calling him to follow Christ in selfless devotion to both God and neighbor to reduce the suffering that was all around him.

And what he heard was God urging him to put an end to it. He heard God telling him that the *most* selfless course of action, in *this* particular instance, would be to stop Hitler by whatever means were necessary—even if that meant killing Hitler; even if *that* meant Bonhoeffer would lose his own life in the process. God's will was that innocent people should not die, and so Bonhoeffer had a

responsibility to them—using whatever means were necessary—to do whatever he could to keep this from happening.

And so Bonhoeffer joined the resistance, and he helped plan what turned out to be a failed assassination attempt on Adolph Hitler's life.

Bonhoeffer realized, of course, that his decision was inconsistent with God's law as set forth in the Ten Commandments; he understood that what he was doing went against his own moral principles of non-violence; he knew what he was doing might cost him his life—which, as it happens, it *did*.

But for Bonhoeffer, who truly wanted to live his life in obedience to Christ, there was no other option. He would do the will of God as he understood it—he would follow Jesus wherever Jesus led him, even if it cost him his life—because for Bonhoeffer, that was what it meant to follow Christ. For Bonhoeffer, that was the cost of discipleship—his life.

What would *you* have done? Would you have joined the resistance? Could you have planned to kill another human being if it meant that you could save the lives of millions?

What would you have done?

Your answer may not be the same as Bonhoeffer's ... and that's okay. Bonhoeffer wouldn't expect you to do the same thing he did, because you're not him, so your context is automatically different than his right at the start, which means, of course, that your understanding of the will of God could very well be different than Bonhoeffer's in this particular situation—in fact, it probably *would* be different.

But that's okay, because it's still the will of God—as long as your *intent* would be to do the will of God. As long as you consciously and intentionally tried to remove “self” from your decision in the name of Jesus Christ—as long as you sincerely modeled yourself after the person of Jesus Christ—as long as

you prayerfully discerned God's will for you—as long as you did all these things, according to Bonhoeffer, then God's will would be done. God would work in and through you, just as God works in and through *all* of us who faithfully try to enact God's will through Jesus Christ.

What are you called to do, *today*, to selflessly reach out to others in need?

How is Christ calling *you* to follow him, through selfless service to others?

What will *you* do?

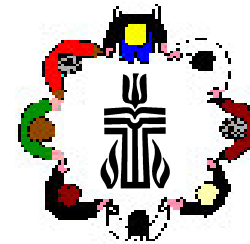
Amen.

### References

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1937. The Cost of Discipleship. New York: A Touchstone Book Published by Simon & Schuster.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1990. A Testament to Freedom, Geoffrey B Kelly and E. Burton Nelson, eds. HarperSanFrancisco: A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers.

Huff, Douglas. “Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” 2006. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/bonhoeff.htm>. Retrieved 2/23/2008.



Trinity Presbyterian Church  
Reverend Nancy Lynch, Pastor  
6081 Ross Road  
Fairfield, Ohio 45014

513-860-4114  
[www.trinity-fairfield.com](http://www.trinity-fairfield.com)  
[office@trinity-fairfield.com](mailto:office@trinity-fairfield.com)

“What Would You Do?”

Sermon by  
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Third Sunday in Lent  
February 24, 2008



Revelation 1:8, 21:6-8,  
22:13-16

“Reaching Up to God ...  
Reaching Out to Others.”

## Revelation 1:8, 21:6-8, 22:13-16

The year is 1939. The place is Germany. The situation is such that Adolph Hitler has just invaded Poland, thus launching, in earnest, World War II.

The Nazi government, as official policy, has declared the persecution of Jews to be not only acceptable, but *expected*. Thousands of Jews throughout Europe are systematically rounded up, stripped of their personal possessions and rights, and sent to concentration camps where, depending upon their usefulness in terms of labor, they are condemned to either live in unbelievable squalor or die in shower-like gas chambers.

Moreover, you're a pastor—a leader of the Christian church in Germany—so you're worried not only about basic human rights violations (which is bad enough), but you're *also* worried about the establishment of this new “German Nationalist” church Hitler has created, the purpose of which is to justify not only *politically*, but also *theologically*, the human rights violations you *know* are wrong. You've been asked to sign a loyalty oath to this new church—an oath that asks you to define what's going on, in essence, as the “will of God.”

What do you do?

This is the situation in which German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself some seventy years ago or so. Life as he knew it—life as *everyone* knew it—was imploding around him. He saw what was happening—how could he *not*?—and yet, he was uncertain as to what he should do.

There were, as he saw it, a couple of different options. He could, for example, sign the loyalty oath ... but to do so would compromise his faith, because it would require

him to pledge allegiance not to *Christ*, but to *Hitler*.

He could do what he could to alleviate the suffering of those whom he encountered; for example, he could shop at Jewish stores the Nazi government had declared as *verboten* ... but that didn't help those suffering in concentration camps.

He could actively and openly oppose the German government ... but to do so might mean his *own* imprisonment (not to mention that of his family).

Or, he could simply do what *many* people in Germany back then chose to do—namely, *nothing*—which would have been totally understandable, given that Bonhoeffer was a pacifist ... but to do “nothing” was, in Bonhoeffer's eyes, unconscionable.

What would *you* have done?

If you were Dietrich Bonhoeffer, what you would do is what he actually *did* do, which is seriously and prayerfully consider what the Christian response should be.

To do that, though—to figure out exactly what was called for in a situation for which he was unprepared, for which *no one* was prepared—to do that would require him to discern what the will of God was for *him*, in *this* particular situation, at *this* particular time.

It's always a complicated matter for us to figure out what it is that God wants us to do because, just as a juggler has to keep track of many balls in the air as he juggles, so, too, do *we* need to keep track of *our* many balls in the air as we juggle the many factors we need to consider in making a decision.

Factors, for example, like *reason*—what makes the most sense logically; or *morality*—what leads to the greater good; or *law*—what we're legally required to do; or *conscience*—what we feel compelled to do.

All of these factors come into play any time we make an ethical decision, whether we realize it or not. As, according to Bonhoeffer, they *should*. Because, according to Bonhoeffer, balancing all these factors is *exactly* what we need to do to determine the will of God.

Bonhoeffer argues that focusing exclusively on one factor or another is dangerous, because this can lead us into a decision based not on *God's* will, but on *our* will.

Focusing strictly on reason or intellect, for example, can lead us to ignore emotions, which are also crucial factors to consider. Focusing exclusively on morality can lead us to a “one-size-fits-all” kind of approach which can cause us to miss important information we might need. Focusing only on conscience can lead to a sort of moral relativity in which anything goes, as long as it “feels” right to us.

But how do we do this? How can we, in any given situation, focus on *all* of the factors we need to examine?

In other words, how do we determine the will of God?

According to Bonhoeffer, the answer is simple. The will of God is found in the reality of Jesus Christ, in whom God's divine world and our human world have become one. It is in Jesus Christ, according to Bonhoeffer, that God's will can be found, because it's in Jesus Christ that God's will is revealed. It's in Jesus Christ that our juggled balls of human decision-making remain in balance, because it's Jesus Christ who juggles those balls in the manner prescribed by God.

Because it's in Jesus Christ that God has reconciled the world to God (2 Cor. 5:18-19)—so it is *only* in Christ that we can even begin to access what the will of God will be.

So, according to Bonhoeffer, to find the will of God, we have to find Christ—we have to

*follow* Christ. It's part of our call to discipleship—it's part of the *cost* of discipleship in terms of following Christ's example of selfless service to others. Because for Bonhoeffer, doing the will of God means following Christ.

Interestingly, however, the path we choose when we follow Christ is not some pre-determined path based on reason, or morality, or law, or conscience, or any other factor in the decision-making process. The path we choose, instead, *changes*, depending upon the situation, because what's selfless in one situation may not be what's selfless in another. What's selfless can—and does—vary, because each context is unique.

And so, by definition, you can never enact the same sort of selflessness in one situation as you might in another, because each and every situation is different. It changes according to the *context* of the factors within which the decision is being made. And so it follows that the will of God will be different in every situation.

This is *not* the same thing as relative morality, or what's sometimes called “situation ethics.” In moral relativism, anything goes—it's up to each individual to determine what he or she thinks is best in any given situation. The only accountability one has there is accountability to *self*.

This is *not* what Bonhoeffer's suggesting, though, because there *is* accountability in his ethical model—the accountability that's found in and through Jesus Christ—so there's always an absolute standard to which we're held accountable—the selfless example of Jesus Christ.

It's just that, for Bonhoeffer, how we *enact* this absolute standard is relative, because it depends on the situation—or maybe *context* is a better word here, as “context” doesn't seem to have the negative connotations that “situation” has.