



*The 2004 Aus Memorial Lectures:
Lecture Two*

**Bonhoeffer's Challenge
to Evangelism**

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

In this second Aus lecture I shall speak of the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, addressing themes that bear directly on evangelization.

AGAINST BEING LITTLE

Let me begin in an unlikely place—with a piece of juvenalia by the great American social reformer Jane Addams, who is the subject of an intellectual biography that I wrote entitled *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*. Reviewing the life and work of Addams I discovered a number of little-known pieces that jarred with the usual public perception of Addams as a saintly and self-abnegatory giver of succor to the immigrant poor. This is a skewed view. Addams was always clear that her creation of Hull-House and her lifelong devotion to the efforts centered in that remarkable institution were as much for her as for others. In fact, one of her most remarkable early essays is on “The Subjective Necessity for the Settlement.” Women like Addams—educated young women of the nineteenth century—needed a field for action, something often denied to women. The unique, public institution, the settlement house, afforded her and many others precisely that.

Reading Bonhoeffer challenges us to turn away from a false understanding of meekness that wallows in the weakness of self and others by “feeling their pain.” The Christian shares another’s distress by being strong for the other rather than by collapsing the other into the self. To serve, love, and evangelize authentically calls upon all our human strengths and capabilities.

Addams came to her views about the settlement as she struggled with what we would now call “identity” issues as a young woman. It was during this period that she wrote an essay, “Against Being Little.” In this essay, she scores the comfort of “little-ness.” Too often women embrace a diminished view of self—“little old me,” if you will. One lurks in the background, afraid to step forward publicly. There were, to be sure, many reasons for this reticence. But Addams, in this essay, isn’t so much interested in sociology as psychology. There is a comforting psychology in being “little,” in keeping the scale and scope of one’s activities small. One is always sheltering in the shade of the “big”—images of trees come into play at this juncture, the large trees that can stand up against the bracing breezes that blow.

Too many women settled for “little-ness.” It seems clear to me that Addams suspected that a certain interpretation of Christianity played a role in all this, as if Christianity sanctioned the meek taken far too literally. Does *askesis*, or emptying, make sense if one is already weak? Addams suggests that one can only lead from strength. That powerlessness corrupts and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely. Literalizing the Sermon on the Mount in order to turn powerlessness into a normative good is a distortion and helps us to understand, even though one cannot agree with, Nietzsche’s indictment of Christianity as a “slave morality.” (As usual with Nietzsche, the hyperbole and runaway rhetoric often conceals, or reveals, a moment of truth—enough, in this case, that it should make the believer squirm.) We—especially women in her day—too easily become enchanted with the undeniable benefits that flow from “little-ness”—“not me, I’m a little person; I can’t do it; I’m not responsible,” and so on. It is strength that Addams claims for women and it is strength that Bonhoeffer claims for Christians.

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A failure of nerve—or perhaps I should say *the* failure of nerve—that too often characterizes Christian intellectuals in the present flows, at least in part, from the mistaken view that “little-ness,” construed as an apologetic, abnegatory view of oneself and one’s tradition, is not only appropriate but a way to take the moral high ground. By contrast, those who would place before people the gospel of Jesus the Christ in both “pride and humility”—as did John Paul II in the homily in Kazakhstan I cited in the first lecture—make the mistake, from the “little” point of view, as they speak of their faith, its tradition, and its message, of linking anything associated with pride to a wounded world.

BONHOEFFER’S UNAFRAID CHRISTIANITY

Bonhoeffer seeks a largehearted, polyphonous Christianity, unafraid of the world—living, speaking, and dying within its very heart. For Christ exists at the center. It is the world that has shoved Christ to the periphery of human existence,

and all too many Christians have colluded in this marginalization in the conviction that that, somehow, is where we belong because of the sins, errors, and lapses of our forebears. Christianity gets indicted nowadays for nearly everything awful—from philosophical dualism to the third-world debt to radical Islamist ideology—and Christians nod their heads affirmatively.

When one points to the role of Christianity in halting exposure of infants in the antique world—and those most likely to be left to die were girl babies and children born with disabilities—one is countered with the fact that Christians didn't stop the practice of slavery immediately. When one points to Christianity's role in preserving ancient culture, one is countered with Christianity's role in somehow extirpating "local" cultures. On and on it goes. Even Martin Luther King's Christianity is somehow forgotten, as law professor Stephen Carter has pointed out in his recent work, *God's Name in Vain*. The official "secular" take on King, one Christians do not consistently challenge, is to see King as a great inspirational leader but to forget that he was a Baptist minister, a theological traditionalist, and that all his great public speeches were sermons. We celebrate King's birthday. We forget the organization that was the heart of his effort: the Southern *Christian* Leadership Conference.

This cultural negation of Christianity is a form of "little-ness" that goes something like this: Christianity colluded with oppressive institutions; it created more oppressive institutions; in the name of God it did horrible thing x, y, or z; therefore, Christians should keep quiet *unless* they ally themselves with what Bonhoeffer called "the view from below." But Bonhoeffer is both complex and absolutely clear in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* that "the view from below," if it becomes frozen into a permanent stance of disgruntlement and resentment, is a corrupt form of "little-ness"—or the conceit of little-ness. There is a rather bizarre form of self-pride associated with this little-ness—something along the lines of "Look at how abject and apologetic I am, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make up in a tiny way for the horrific sins of my forebears."

I am reminded here of Augustine's pointed cautions about the noisy divestment of oneself of personal wealth displayed by some of the prosperous who embraced vocations that stipulated a vow of poverty. Never was so much made of people stripping themselves of privilege, as we would nowadays describe it, and this calling of attention to oneself because of one's sacrificial nobility is a form of pride, all the more troubling because it does not recognize itself as such. This is precisely the sort of attitude—or one of them—that Bonhoeffer found troubling. Bonhoeffer was never one to deny who and what he was, where he came from, and the undeniable strengths and benefits he derived from a family tradition that included a good bit of privilege. It is from that stance of privilege and strength that he refuses special treatment in Tegel Prison, simply as a matter of fact, no "big deal" about it. He refuses from strength, not weakness.

My fear is that Christians have so thoroughly acknowledged the sins of power

that they have fallen face-first into the sins of powerlessness and the attitude that derives undoubted benefits—certainly of a psychological sort—from a literalization of “meekness.” (This is the attitude, remember, that Nietzsche calls resentment.) This stance traffics in bathos and swims in sentimentality. The God embraced is exclusively a God of mercy; the God of justice—if justice involves punishment—goes by the board. Repeatedly throughout his work, Bonhoeffer scores sentimentality, for sentimentality clouds the mind, confusing bathos for authentic compassion (*com-passio*, suffering *with*, not offering pity). Pity is a rather noisy stance—one makes rather a display of it. Authentic compassion demands reticence.

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In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer insists that “there must be reticence and secrecy”; that there is much in human life that should be covered and concealed; that what is secret should not be publicly paraded but “may be revealed only in confession, i.e., in the presence of God.” Those who demand incessant confession Bonhoeffer describes as belonging in “the gutter,” the purview of vulgar minds. He attacks what makes humans weak. Describing what he calls a “secular offshoot of Christian theology,” Bonhoeffer scores “existentialist philosophy” and those “psychotherapists” who

demonstrate to secure, contented, and happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate....Wherever there is health, strength, security, simplicity, they scent luscious fruit to gnaw at or to lay their pernicious eggs in. They set themselves to drive people to inward despair, and then the game is in their hands. That is secularized Methodism. And whom does it touch? A small number of intellectuals, of degenerates, of people who regard themselves as the most important thing in the world, and who therefore like to busy themselves with themselves....The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian. Pointless, because it seems to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e., to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent [like an excess of guilt, e.g.], and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit man's weakness for purposes that are alien to him and to which he has not freely assented. Unchristian, because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in man's religiousness.

Instead, Christ should be in the center of life, with human beings in all their worldliness. A religion that exploits human weakness belittles us because it will not permit the adulthood of humanity. This exploitation of weakness takes at least two forms. In the first, the message gets out that being “meek,” again misunderstood, is

infinitely preferable to being strong, and that the sins one must fear are the sins that flow from strength and power. In the second, those that are operating from a stance of relative strength are bidden to lament that fact and to be suspicious of the very things that have come together to make them strong. But authentic compassion speaks to the possibility of human strength: we lift people up. “I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man’s life and goodness.” To renounce a full life and real joys in the mistaken view that one cannot experience joy if someone somewhere is suffering is not Christian, insists Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer fights with all his being the tendency to identify strength with unacceptable power—power being defined as always requiring an object to repress or oppress—and to see in meekness or weakness the authentic Christian stance. A particular distortion of Christianity is implicated in the presence among us of a particular sort of self-absorbed self, one who has no room for another, either because he or she is caught up in an idealist miasma of what Bonhoeffer calls vitalism or because he or she views the other through the lens of mechanization and utility—or an even more deadly ideology of racial superiority. We are alert to these dangers. However, self-absorption takes other forms that we are less able to see, though they are manifest in our own time. The absorption of the other in and through categories of empathic sentimentalization—the “I feel your pain” phenomenon—eclipses utterly the distance between self and other, erasing thereby the concrete humanity of the other just as surely as do those activities we are more accustomed to denounce.

The Charge of Elitism

Bonhoeffer’s discussion of “the sense of quality” in *Letters and Papers from Prison* has provoked criticism of his alleged “elitism,” as if his arguments were little more than a reflection of his family background and status. This complaint arises because interpreters fail to distinguish between a nostalgic defense of class-indexed mannerisms and a moral exhortation to preserve and cultivate the self-reserve that is inseparable from genuine respect for the concrete presence of the truly other. Bonhoeffer called for the courage “to fight for a revival of wholesale reserve between man and man lest we...perish in an anarchy of human values.” Bonhoeffer’s hope lay in “the birth of a new sense of nobility” drawn from all “former social classes.” The qualities that were to characterize this new nobility were a sense of duty, due regard for self and others, and the recovery of “quality.” No doubt Bonhoeffer had in mind, as an example of what he found insufferable, the values of what Hannah Arendt referred to and condemned as the parvenu, the low-minded social climber whose entire way of being pivots around flattery, contempt, and low ambition. Given the prevalence of such values in the Nazi era, it was unsurprising that, if Christianity once championed equality, it must now “defend passionately human dignity and reserve.”

The erasure of distinction between selves—what Arendt called the “space in

between” people that protects human dignity and plurality—is presented to us nowadays as a public service, a way to get people to “confront” the truth of their lives. It is the eradication of this “space in between” that is constitutive of totalitarianism, Arendt argued, as people are stripped of their membership in solidaristic institutions and find themselves standing alone, not as strong moral agents but as weak reeds blowing in the gale-force winds of ideology.

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The phenomenon of demanding that people display their most intimate and private lives—including one’s guilt at being a member of a dominant race or gender or nation—is widespread in modern Western culture. Recall, if you will, the hysteria occasioned by the death of Princess Diana and the ire heaped upon Britain’s royal family because they did what dignified people do when tragedy strikes—they helped the young sons to deal with the death of a mother; they went to church; they sought to protect one another. This was considered cold and inconsiderate to the public, given its insatiable need for the erasure of distance and its clamor for more exposure. Bonhoeffer would have been as appalled by this voraciously self-righteous insistence that all boundaries be violated as by the shameless self-exposures that answer and feed it. He detested anything cloying, anything that cheapens and degrades. He rightly saw such sentimentality as the opposite of Christian *caritas*, for the expression or extension of authentic compassion always recognizes the independent existence of the other who has a claim on my attention. He admired writers who treated the “most delicate matters without sentimentality, the most serious without flippancy” and who were able to express their convictions without pathos. He was himself a master of understatement, describing one Allied bombing raid on Berlin that threatened those (like himself) who were imprisoned as “not exactly pleasant.”

The Charge of Insufficient Compassion

This reserve (of which he is both theorist and witness) makes Bonhoeffer vulnerable to a second criticism in our era of “secularized Methodism,” as Bonhoeffer put it. The reactions of my own students are instructive. Not a few have been troubled by Bonhoeffer’s apparent—and this is how they read him—lack of sympathy for his fellow prisoners, some of whom collapsed under the stress of the bombing and, as if that were not sufficiently bothersome, his articulated contempt for those who talked “quite openly about how frightened they were.” Bonhoeffer had little patience with or sympathy for those who moaned and carried on at night during the bombing but who, once they were in the daylight and out of immediate harm’s

way, were “very hard on others and talk big about a dangerous life.” Bonhoeffer told such persons that they were ridiculous and that there were “17 and 18 year olds here in much more dangerous places during the raids who behave splendidly.” Moreover, Bonhoeffer’s idea of giving comfort was to tell a shattered fellow prisoner that it would last only a few more minutes. From the point of view of a sizeable number of contemporary students, the case has been made for Bonhoeffer’s emotional deficiency. This is unsurprising for contemporary students who have come of age in a culture of exposure that celebrates subjectivism and sanctions Christianity only if it embraces weakness. So Bonhoeffer’s gestures of support seem paltry to a day and age characterized by overheated “support” that parades its empathy effusively in order to ensure that others applaud one’s own capacity to feel another’s “pain.”

Bonhoeffer did not defend himself directly against such charges, but I will. Bonhoeffer’s impatience with a certain sort of fearful display shows subtlety of insight. He had a hunch that one should not parade one’s fears, for doing so was one side of a coin whose other face was an excess of braggadocio. While it is true that Bonhoeffer himself said that he was “bad at comforting: I can listen all right, but I can hardly ever find anything to say,” the passage that follows is far more revealing: “But perhaps the way one asks about some things and not about others helps to suggest what really matters; and it seems to me more important actually to share someone’s distress than to use smooth words about it.” One does this by being strong *for the other*, rather than collapsing the other into oneself. Moreover, it strikes me that telling a terror-stricken sufferer “it will only be a few more minutes” —rather than something like “I know what you are feeling,” and growing fearful along with the sufferer as one clings, weeping, to the other—is a form of comfort that respects the distance between persons while holding out a powerful lifeline: this will not last much longer.

Perhaps childbirth is not a very good analogy, but I cannot help thinking of the women in labor for whom the most effective form of help and comfort is to time contractions, to say “only so many more seconds,” and to do something quite practical like breathing assistance—as birth coaches are trained to do. The more matter-of-fact this help is, the better. A person is not much help if he weakens, weeps, and falls apart in the delivery room. Bonhoeffer did write Eberhard Bethge that he had not joined “the ranks of the toughs”; that he meant simply to stand firm against “a kind of weakness that Christianity does not hold with but which people insist on claiming as Christian.” Reticence and reserve are ways of not so overflowing the boundaries of one’s self that one floods the other. In observing the boundaries of the self, one makes more room for others. The seeds of a powerful critique of the many ways in which self-absorption and the embrace of weakness masquerade as concern lie in these suggestive observations by Bonhoeffer.

In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer notes that it is the despiser of persons—more precisely the “tyrannical despiser” of persons—who exploits the “baseness of the hu-

man heart” and who plays on human weaknesses, legitimating and authenticating those weaknesses. “He thinks people stupid and they become stupid. He thinks them weak, and they become weak....Contempt for man and idolization of man are close neighbors.” There are among us those who are satisfied only if other human beings live up (or to put it more accurately, live down) to their ideas of human weakness, victimization, and helplessness. Rather than helping others to be strong, they mistakenly see strength as an insult to the weak. Such people claim to be compassionate, and because they appear to want everyone to “feel” better, it is very difficult to challenge them. Any criticism of their “caring” position seems to make one “hard-boiled” (as Bonhoeffer suspected others judged him to be.)

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But the victim of Nazism—any real victim in the world—requires bold assistance. Such victims require persons of rectitude, conviction, presence of mind—virtues that are part and parcel of authentic Christian compassion of the sort that eschews sentimentality in favor of something more tough-minded. Standing with and supporting one’s brother and sister in Christ differs greatly from the sentimentalized, and far easier, feeling of another’s “pain,” an identification that amounts to a vaguely parasitical joining that requires victims in order that it can, in our current parlance, “feel good about itself.” Genuine compassion seeks to help the other grow strong and rejoices when this happens. Compassion responds to cries for help but does not need victims the way an addict needs drugs. “There is,” writes Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*, “a ‘merely emotional’ love of neighbor. Such love is capable of making the most unheard-of-sacrifices.” But “self-centered love” is that which “loves the other for the sake of itself.” It loves other persons “not as free persons, but as those whom it binds to itself....Self-centered love does not think much of the truth....Emotional, self-centered love desires other persons....It wants them to return its love, but it does not serve them.” For we serve when we speak the truth boldly; when we celebrate what Bonhoeffer called “life’s polyphony”; when we embrace strength and fortitude; when we rejoice that the Savior came that we might have life and might have it more abundantly.

One never excludes the weak who are knocking on the door—the authentically weak, all those “seemingly useless persons.” At the same time, one does not need the weakness of others in order that one can be weak along with them and repudiate all of one’s strengths. It is from strength that one is called upon to make judgments in that world of twilight within which all human deed-doing and thought occurs. For along with weakness and meekness comes a tendency never to judge—although, of course, the determination to collapse important distinctions

is itself a form of judgment. There are habits of mind involved here, not just a psychological attitude.

Bonhoeffer's call to free responsibility requires presence of mind; requires making important distinctions; requires, in other words, judging. Thus, the Christian-as-citizen is obliged to make distinctions between and among governments and regimes. Distinction erosion that collapses totalitarian, tyrannical, and systematically cruel regimes into those that may, from time to time, infringe rights, succumb to folly, or err by taking too grandiose a direction in a "good cause" is outrageous. It is a cruel deception and falsehood that disables our capacity to think ethically in the concrete way that Bonhoeffer requires of us. At least part of what lies behind this distinction-erosion is the notion that power, by definition, is bound to be bad; that any bold exercise of power must never be sanctioned by the Christian.

EVANGELIZE BOLDLY!

Let's connect up what I have said to the theme of these lectures, namely, evangelization. Authentic evangelization involves the following: I proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and risen again. I acknowledge the extraordinary judgment by God of the world, a judgment that could only have been rendered by one who was all-powerful but who chose to empty himself, who experienced a moment of faltering ("Let this cup pass from me") but accepted the requirement of the Father. Much of what amazed observers of the early Christians in their life together was: "See how those Christians love one another." To serve authentically, to love authentically, to evangelize authentically calls upon all our human strengths and capacities. No society that educates people can expect them to do anything save to use those educated capacities to the fullest—tempered, hopefully, by a solidarity with others that sees in them not objects to pity or enemies to fear, but fellow laborers in the vineyard whom I am called upon to serve with the heart, soul, and mind God has given me. I am to rejoice in their moments of triumph rather than to descend into envy. I am to rejoice in my moments of triumph rather than to wallow in false humility. One does not evangelize people in their moments of collapse and despair. One helps them to regain their strength; one helps to see them through the night and then, from presence of mind and strength, one puts before them in all humility the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

To those of us in the academy and in the professions of thinking and writing, I am not here advocating turning classrooms into instruments for confession and conversion. I am also not endorsing the sort of Christian writing Flannery O'Connor scored as "pale, sicklied o'er piety of the faint-hearted sort." O'Connor's wickedly comedic stories featuring larger-than-life and frequently grotesque protagonists were a form of evangelization of a powerful sort. C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* books evangelize through witty, beautiful storytelling.

The Christian scholar evangelizes through the display of intricate, well-

crafted, clearly articulated arguments—all attesting to the “the tangle of our minds.” The composer evangelizes through stirring music. All gesture to a moment beyond. Reminding us of the world’s beauties and blessings is an evangel. How tedious it is to be around those for whom the only “good” news is bad news, including, as I have noted several times over now, the bad news of Christian misbehavior through the centuries. The person listening to all this does well to ask: “Well, why don’t you junk it then rather than belaboring its awfulness?” But such persons cannot abandon the stance of incessant lamentation. Their own identities are entangled with a guilt that is very different from authentic and candid recognition of shortcomings. The meaning and purpose of their lives is limned with stories of failure, very different from acknowledging limits. Their only evangel is one that, above all, denigrates the powerful and would tear them down, for we must all be weak together. As Bonhoeffer cautioned us repeatedly, this attitude is not authentically Christian but, instead, a strange distortion of Christianity in the service of an ideology of resentment.

*“if we are called not to be afraid, let us similarly insist
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“Sin boldly!” Luther shockingly proclaimed. My message, to conclude, is to evangelize boldly! If we are called not to be afraid, let us similarly insist that we should “be not ashamed.” Christians should be the grateful heirs of a great, complex tradition that, over the centuries, has offered so much that is beautiful and vital and good and decent, even great, that we should rejoice daily that we stand on the shoulders of giants, in the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Confess we should—as John Paul II did so powerfully in the year marking the thousand years of Catholic Christianity. But an excess of bathetic confession yields indecision, fear, and failure—for only these somehow attest to one’s authentic repudiation of privilege.

We must be strong for our neighbor’s sake; we must acknowledge the power that is ours in order to accept the responsibility tethered to that power; we must rejoice in the blessing that is life itself. All of this adds up to an attitude of evangelization. Christian intellectuals should attest to it in their lives and their work. As I insisted in my first lecture, a stance of authentic toleration and respect is made possible *only* if people articulate their faith in all its power and fullness.

At one point we all learned the song “Onward Christian Soldiers.” We don’t sing that song anymore—for good and bad reasons. The good reasons are that we are rightly wary of any notion of the church militant spreading the faith through force of arms—although that, surely, is a rather crude literalization of the hymn. Still, “marching as to war” tied to faith—well, we do well to be leery. The bad reason for eschewing this old hymn is a conviction that any robust notion of Christians striding into the world as good soldiers for their faith means, by definition,

that they will run roughshod over others and add to the deposit of sin that we tend to emphasize these days over the deposit of faith. Not necessarily so.

Several years ago now, I published a book called *Women and War* that concluded in a call for “chastened patriotism” as a civic attitude men and women alike might embrace. It is an appropriately chastened evangelism I call for here: one aware of excesses of the past and determined to avoid them, but, at the same time, bold in the affirmation of faith—in all humility *and* pride. ⊕

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN delivered this lecture at Luther Seminary on March 10, 2004. As with the first lecture, Word & World publishes here Elshtain’s oral presentation, including the occasional informal style and the lack of specific documentation.