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Introduction

What does it mean for a Christian to discern God's will? Such a question implies that one does not simply know God's will, but must come to know it through a mental process of discriminating one option from another and determining the correct path amidst false alternatives and temptations. This practice of perception and discrimination describes what we mean when we speak of "discernment" in its most general sense. And taken in this most general sense, we can say that the question of discernment occupied the mind of Dietrich Bonhoeffer throughout a large portion of his adult life. He pursued it from the time of his first lecture on Christian ethics in 1929 until his death in 1945, often framing it in terms of how to hear God's commandment, how to perceive the form of Christ in the world, or how to recognize what Jesus wants to say to us today.[1] In *Ethics*, the collection of manuscripts offering the best window into his mature ethical thinking, he focuses this general line of inquiry on the simple question: what is the will of God?[2] For him, answering this question was central to the Christian life and required a process of moral discernment. It was not enough to rely on a depository of moral knowledge gained through universal ethical principles or static orders of creation; instead, one had to carefully discern God's will afresh on every new occasion in order to act faithfully. Thus, discernment was both spiritual and theological for Bonhoeffer, but also intensely practi-

1. For examples of Bonhoeffer's statements about hearing God's commandment, perceiving the form of Christ in the world, and considering what Jesus wants to say to us today, see DBWE 11:362–65; DBWE 6:99; DBWE 4:37.

2. DBWE 6:47, 75, 320–26.

cal, for it helped to facilitate everyday decisions and actions. In fact, as I will demonstrate in what follows, discernment lies at the heart of his vision of Christian ethics and illustrates its hidden unity.

The *concept* of discernment, however, is not present throughout his corpus, but emerges only at a late stage in his writing. He offers no systematic engagement with the concept, and his aversion to anything resembling "method" in Christian ethics makes him hesitant to speak in detail about the precise process of discernment. Moreover, running throughout his corpus is a strong emphasis on simple, unreflective obedience to Christ, which seems to pose challenges for any sort of mental process of discrimination whereby one comes to determine God's will. Perhaps the question "what is the will of God?" does *not* suggest any kind of rational deliberation after all. Could it be that the only answer to the question of discernment is simple faith in the immediate lucidity of God's direction, which demands either obedience or disobedience with no room for reflection in between? A closer reading of Bonhoeffer, however, suggests more complexity. There is a contrasting emphasis in his work on the importance of reason, wisdom, experience, and an accurate perception of reality. Thus, while he advocates a simple, unreflective approach to God's will, he also indicates the need for a rational, reflective moral deliberation that makes use of the best of human ability and recognizes its embedded place within the reality of the world. I will investigate this tension in his account during the course of this book and argue that the two contrasting emphases are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I will contend that his theology contains the necessary resources to incorporate, on Christological grounds, both simplicity and reflective moral deliberation into his concept of moral discernment. Furthermore, I will argue that this conceptual unity, premised on the relationship between Christ's two natures, becomes efficacious in the lives of Christians through a process of conformation to the form of Christ, which includes as an essential element the disciplined practice of spiritual exercises. Finally, I will demonstrate how simple obedience, while precluding self-centered moral reflection, nevertheless creates space for meditative reflection that understands reality through a Christological lens. In so doing, this meditative reflection finds its orientation in the natural, penultimate world, which serves as a crucial context and guide for those who want to discern God's will.

Bonhoeffer as a Practitioner of Discernment

Throughout his life Bonhoeffer had many occasions, both common and extraordinary, to practice discernment. Early in his life he had to determine which career path he would pursue; later he had to decide whether a potential visit to Gandhi's ashram in India or a return to Germany to take charge of the Confessing Church seminary was more important; as war loomed over Europe in 1939, he had to make up his mind whether to remain in relative safety in the United States or to return to his homeland to be with his fellow Germans. As Lisa Dahill puts it:

> Bonhoeffer models a Christian life centered in ongoing, clear-sighted discernment in the midst of complex and ambiguous historical circumstances. His witness therefore demonstrates the tremendous power for good which can flow through a life well skilled in Christian discernment—as well as the risky courage in faithfulness into which its sustained practice draws a person.[3]

Discernment was far more than a theological concept for Bonhoeffer; it was a concrete practice central to his life as a Christian. It follows that his reflections on moral discernment throughout his writings, but particularly in *Ethics*, are not merely a product of theological curiosity, but a result of a deep conviction about the practical necessity of discernment within the Christian experience.

But here one must exercise caution because determining the precise relationship between Bonhoeffer's life and thought is one of the primary interpretive challenges for studies dealing with his theology. There are some scholars who believe a "biographical or narrative approach" to Bonhoeffer is indispensible.[4] If one does not understand Bonhoeffer's life experience or recognize the "autobiographical dimension" in his writing, a full understanding of his theology is impossible and one falls prey to what Thomas Day describes as the "common mistake of theologians . . . to suppose that the biographer has shown the contexts so that we [the theologians] may now zero in on texts."[5] Other scholars, however, advise caution when employing Bonhoeffer's life story too heavily as an interpretive aid, lest his

3. Dahill, "Probing the Will of God," 43.

4. De Gruchy, "Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 97; Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 3.

5. Day, *Christian Community*, 109; cf. Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 3.

"enduring significance" be reduced to his "remarkable biography alone."[6] Worse, there exists the danger of committing a causal fallacy by interpreting Bonhoeffer's theological formulations as the direct result of specific life experiences or historical events.[7]

While in the present book I am careful to avoid an overreliance on Bonhoeffer's life story as an interpretive key to his theology, I also recognize the utility of drawing upon his biography in a limited and responsible manner to illustrate and explain some of his thoughts about moral discernment. Thus, it is fitting to offer a brief biographical sketch at the outset, with special emphasis on two important transitions in his life that have a direct bearing on the topic of discernment and to which I refer back at various points in the following chapters.[8] The first transition point occurs in late 1931 or early 1932, and changes the trajectory of his theological thinking regarding Christian discipleship, spiritual exercise, and obedience to God's commandment, and by extension, his thinking on discernment. The second transition takes place in 1939 and radically influences the course of his life from that point forward: it is particularly relevant because it offers special insight into his own process of discernment.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 and grew up in an upper middle class family, mostly in Berlin. He attended university first at Tübingen and then at Berlin where teachers such as Adolf von Harnack, Karl Holl, and Reinhold Seeberg stimulated his thinking.[9] This education did not, however, keep him from reading Karl Barth's theology, which had a greater influence

6. Floyd, "Bonhoeffer's Literary Legacy," 71.

7. Friesen makes such an error in his early study of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* when he details how the events of 1940 provide direct insight into Bonhoeffer's manuscript "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World" (hereafter referred to as "God's Love"). Later research demonstrates that Bonhoeffer wrote "God's Love" in 1942 rather than 1940, suggesting that Friesen was too quick to interpret Bonhoeffer's theology through a biographical lens. See Friesen, "Comparative Analysis," 48ff. For evidence of the dating of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* manuscripts, including "God's Love," see Tödt et al., "Editors' Afterword," 440–49; Tödt, "Appendix 2," 467–76.

8. For the best full-length account of Bonhoeffer's life, see Bethge's magisterial biography, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. For other insightful accounts of Bonhoeffer's life that serve as important supplements to Bethge's work, see Kelly and Nelson, *Moral Leadership*, 1–35; Marsh, *Strange Glory*; Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Each of these works has informed the brief biographical sketch that follows.

9. For a good overview of the influence of Bonhoeffer's Berlin teachers, see Rumscheidt, "Significance," 201–24; Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 67–71.

on his thought than that of his Berlin instructors.[10] During his time at university he established himself as a gifted academic as well as an independent and creative thinker, evidence of which one can see in his two doctoral dissertations, *Sanctorum Communio*, completed in 1927, and *Act and Being*, finished in 1930. In addition to his academic work, he also had his first taste of parish life in 1928-29 when he spent a year in Barcelona as an assistant pastor to a German-speaking congregation. This ministry experience confirmed his desire to pursue church work later on, although his academic ambitions nevertheless remained. After returning to Berlin for about a year and working as an academic assistant at the university, he left for a year of postdoctoral studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930-31, a move that would alter the course of his life.

While at Union, Bonhoeffer enjoyed many influential relationships, including friendships with the French pacifist Jean Lasserre and with fellow student Frank Fisher. Lasserre taught him a new way to think about Christ's commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. One could not be content merely to hear these commandments in faith; on the contrary, one needed to act upon them in obedience. Thus, the Sermon on the Mount was a call to a particular way of Christian life, which included as a central component the prohibition of violence. As Eberhard Bethge comments in regard to Lasserre's influence on Bonhoeffer: "after meeting Lasserre the question of the concrete reply to the biblical injunction of peace and of the concrete steps to be taken against warlike impulses never left him again."[11] Through his friendship with Frank Fisher, Bonhoeffer began attending Abyssinian Baptist Church, an African-American congregation in Harlem. Here he experienced authentic and lively Christian worship, rooted in the gospel. He also gained intimate knowledge of the racial struggle in the United States, an issue of immense practical importance that would take on a different form in his own country. These, and other experiences, eventually led to a decisive movement from being "not yet a Christian" to embracing the fullness of "the life of a servant of Jesus Christ."[12] Bethge referred to it as Bonhoeffer's transition from theologian to Christian, suggesting a shift

10. Pangritz's work provides a good starting point for exploring Barth's influence on Bonhoeffer; see, Pangritz, "'Within, not Outside,'" 245–82; Pangritz, *Karl Barth*.

11. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 153; cf. DBWE 8:485–86.

12. DBWE 14:134.

from his largely academic interests in theology to a deep concern for and engagement with the life of the church.[13]

Bonhoeffer rarely spoke of this turning point and never gave it a precise date, although Bethge's observations regarding Bonhoeffer's increased church attendance and new attitude toward Scripture suggest a transformation having occurred by 1932.[14] What insight we do get from Bonhoeffer himself about the transformation comes from a letter he wrote years later. He recounts the following:

> But then something different came, something that has changed and transformed my life to this very day. For the first time, I came to the Bible. That, too, is an awful thing to say. I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it—and yet I was not yet a Christian but rather in an utterly wild and uncontrolled fashion my own master. I do know that at the time I turned the cause of Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, for my crazy vanity. I pray to God that will never happen again. Nor had I ever prayed, or had done so only very rarely. Despite this isolation, I was quite happy with myself. The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly and so have other people around me. That was a great liberation. It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church, and step-by-step it became clearer to me how far it must go.[15]

The end of this passage makes clear that this transformation had the character of a gradual process, rather than a dramatic, revelatory moment that happened all at once. Moreover, Bonhoeffer's words throughout the passage reveal not just a change in theological attitude or a new conviction about a particular moral issue. On the contrary, he hints at a deep spiritual transformation, with both inward and outward manifestations.

13. One can find a slightly different interpretation of this event as a personal liberation from the problem of a powerful ego in Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 105–84 (esp. 105–7, 140–43).

14. For Bethge's comments on Bonhoeffer's transformation, including his attempt to date the experience, see Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 181–82, 203–4, 206. For Bethge's comparison between Bonhoeffer's transformation and Luther's "evangelical experience," the detail and dating of which is also difficult to determine, see ibid., 203.

15. DBWE 14:134. Bonhoeffer also notes in this letter that Christian pacifism, which he had previously questioned, "suddenly came into focus as something utterly self-evident."

In particular, it is a transformation involving a new appreciation for the Bible and the Sermon on the Mount and a new sense of belonging to the church. He reflects on this new appreciation a few years later in a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich. He writes that while theology had formerly been "more academic" for him, it now centered on his willingness "to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously."[16] Bethge elaborates on this in his own summary of the changes Bonhoeffer exhibited:

> Bonhoeffer now regularly attended church . . . He also practiced a meditative approach to the Bible that was obviously very different from the exegetical or homiletical use of it . . . He no longer spoke of oral confession merely theologically, but as an act to be practiced. This was unheard of in the church and academic circles in which he moved. He alluded increasingly to a communal life of obedience and prayer, which could perhaps renew the credibility of the individually isolated and privileged ministry . . . More and more frequently he quoted the Sermon on the Mount as a statement to be acted upon, not merely used as a mirror. He began taking a stand for Christian pacifism among his students and fellow clergy, although hardly anyone noticed at the time.[17]

Here, Bethge mentions Bonhoeffer's increased interest in the life of the church, his attention to spiritual exercises such as Bible meditation, oral confession, and prayer, and his new understanding of the Sermon on the Mount as an authoritative word demanding obedience. Bonhoeffer now had a sense that God could speak personally and directly to the individual. As one of his students remarked, commenting on a 1932 prayer meeting: "'[H]e [Bonhoeffer] said to us . . . that we should not forget that every word of Holy Scripture was a love letter from God directed very personally to us.'"[18] He also had a sense that one might best walk the way of discipleship, which centered on discerning God's voice and acting upon God's commandments, within the context of a disciplined, communal life. Some of these thoughts on discipleship and obedience begin to emerge in his writings as early as 1932.[19] In short, such emphases on the immediacy of God's word, the importance of community, and the practical nature of discipleship mark a significant change in Bonhoeffer, and remain part of his

16. DBWE 13:284–85; cf. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 205.

17. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 204.

18. Ibid. Bethge attributes this quotation to J. Kanitz via private communication in 1955; see ibid., 963n90.

19. See especially his lecture "Christ and Peace," DBWE 12:258–62.

thinking for the rest of his life.[20] Moreover, these changes contribute to the development of his thinking about discernment, as will become clear in the following chapters.

The second point of transition for Bonhoeffer comes much later in 1939 and once again corresponds to time spent in the United States. Of course, much had transpired between his return to Germany from Union Theological Seminary in 1931 and his second trip to the United States in 1939. During the early 1930s he was involved in several interrelated activities: teaching theology at the University of Berlin (out of which came his well known book *Creation and Fall*); advocating for peace through his association with the ecumenical movement; and ministering as a student chaplain, a preacher, and a confirmation class and youth club leader. In addition, he was deeply involved in the Confessing Church movement in Germany, which sought to oppose the German Christians who had acquiesced to the Nazi government. At stake were issues of authority (i.e., did the church owe her obedience to Christ alone or to other governing bodies as well?) and solidarity with the Jewish people (i.e., to what extent should the church oppose the unjust and inhumane policies of the Nazi government?). Bonhoeffer's deep convictions regarding the church situation and the treatment of the Jews in German society sometimes caused him to criticize even the Confessing Church for its failure to act boldly and decisively, and would eventually lead to the revocation of both his right to teach and to publish in Germany.

In late 1933, still near the beginning of the church struggle, he decided to leave Berlin and become a full-time parish minister for two German-speaking congregations in London. During this time he maintained his involvement in the German church struggle, and eventually returned to Germany in 1935 to take over as the director of the Confessing Church seminary, located first at Zingst and later at Finkenwalde. Living a disciplined, communal life with the seminarians and facilitating their training as ministers was one of the most significant experiences of his life; he reflects on these experiences in his book *Life Together*. Also notable during this time was his teaching on the Christian moral life, captured most fully in his book *Discipleship*. The Gestapo finally closed the seminary in 1937, which forced Bonhoeffer to find other means of working with the seminarians over the next few years. Meanwhile, his situation in Germany soon

20. For a persuasive account of how Bonhoeffer's year at Union influenced his thinking, see Pfeifer, "Learning Faith," 251–79; see also Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 101–35.

became more precarious. As war approached, the threat of his summons for military duty became imminent. He knew that if he were called up, he would have to refuse military service because of his theological conviction that Christ forbade war and called Christians to an ethic of peace. This would mean jail and probable execution, but more seriously in his mind, it would put his friends in the Confessing Church in jeopardy. The Nazi government would consider his personal refusal to serve as indicative of the Confessing Church's hostility toward the government and the nation and use it as an excuse for action. To avoid all of this, he eventually accepted an invitation to the United States to give a series of lectures and to do some teaching at Union. He left for New York in June 1939.

It is here that he experienced another decisive turning point in his life. While he had planned to stay in the United States for at least a year, he found himself returning to Germany just over a month later. Why the sudden reversal? From the diary he kept during his trip, we gain excellent insight into the inner struggle he experienced upon arriving in the United States.[21] Already on June 13, the morning after he arrived, he wrote about returning to Germany "after one year at the latest," noting that it was "entirely clear" to him that such a return trip was necessary.[22] Later that night, longing for the fellowship he enjoyed with his seminarians in Germany, he wrote: "I don't comprehend why I am here, whether it was sensible, whether the outcome will be worth it."[23] A few days later on June 15 he despairs again of having made a wrong decision. He writes: "The full force of self-reproaches about a wrong decision comes back up and is almost suffocating. I was filled with despair."[24] On June 16 he pens the following: "Disturbing political news from Japan. If turmoil now breaks out, I will definitely travel to Germany. I cannot be alone abroad. That is utterly clear to me. I do live over there, after all."[25]

At one point, Bonhoeffer even wonders if the intense homesickness he feels is a "sign from above" intended to guide him to a decision to return soon to Germany.[26] Indeed, prior to a decisive meeting on June 20, where he eventually turned down an offer to remain in the United States

21. DBWE 15:217–38.
22. Ibid., 220.
23. Ibid., 221–22.
24. Ibid., 222.
25. Ibid., 223.
26. Ibid., 228.

for at least three years as a pastor to German refugees, he longed for a sign indicating what he should do. In his own words, written on June 19: "I want to know how the work over there is going, whether all is going well or whether they need me. I want to have a hint from over there for tomorrow's decisive consultation."[27] Even after sharing his decision to return to Germany at the meeting on June 20, his mind remained unsettled and he wrote about feeling uncertainty about his resolution. His entry from June 20 reads: "It is strange that in all my decisions I am never completely clear about my motives. Is that a sign of lack of clarity, inner dishonesty, or is it a sign that we are *led* beyond that which we can discern, or is it both?"[28] He then writes out the daily texts from Isaiah 45:19 and 1 Peter 1:17, and continues with the following:

> The Daily Text today speaks with terrible severity of God's incorruptible judgment. God certainly sees how much personal concern, how much fear is contained in today's decision, as courageous as it may appear. The reasons that one puts forward to others and oneself for an action are certainly not sufficient. One can simply give reasons for anything. In the end one acts out of a level that remains hidden from us. Because of that one can only pray that God will wish to judge us and forgive us.[29]

While he had made the decision to return, the precise timing was still uncertain. But then, in a diary entry dated June 26, 1939, he mentions that he "happened to read" 2 Timothy 4:21, in which Paul closes the letter by writing to Timothy: "'come before the winter.'"[30] Bonhoeffer immediately applied this verse to his own situation and believed that it might be telling him something about the timing of his return to Germany. In the final lines of his diary entry he writes: "'Come before the winter'—it is not a misuse of the Scripture if I allow this to be said *to me*. If God gives me the grace for that."[31] On June 28, two days after this experience reading the 2 Timothy text, he appears more certain about his course of action: "I cannot think that it is God's will that if war comes I should remain here without a particular assignment. I must leave at the first possible date."[32] And once again,

27. Ibid., 226.
28. Ibid., 227; Bonhoeffer's italics.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Ibid.; Bonhoeffer's italics.
32. Ibid., 233.

when he is on the ship back home, he reflects that since the return journey began, "the internal tension about the future has stopped. I can think about the abbreviated time in America without reproach."[33]

Bonhoeffer would attempt to explain his decision in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr:

> I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. My brothers in the Confessional Synod wanted me to go. They may have been right in urging me to do so; but I was wrong in going. Such a decision each man must make for himself. Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.[34]

These words give some credence to Bethge's comment that Bonhoeffer "struggled with his conscience" over the decision to return to Germany.[35] Andreas Pangritz, however, questions whether a struggle of conscience is an accurate description. He argues that it was not so much the internal voice of the conscience, but the external voices of friends, colleagues, and fellow Christians back in Germany that influenced his decision.[36] Or perhaps it was a sense of vocation that guided him home, as Robert Merrihew Adams suggests. He contends that Bonhoeffer's deliberation "was rooted in a sense of *belonging* in Germany, in his *caring* about certain people and projects and wanting to *participate* in a certain social process."[37] While it is difficult to evaluate these different characterizations, especially given the lack of detail Bonhoeffer provides, one can clearly see that at the very least, he was engaged in some manner of moral discernment, which included both rational reflection and an act of simple obedience to the perceived meaning of a biblical text.

33. Ibid., 238.
34. Ibid., 210.
35. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 652.
36. Pangritz, "Theological Motives," 34.
37. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 293.

Bonhoeffer wrote on his last day in New York before leaving for Germany that "[p]robably this journey will have a great effect upon me."[38] The next several years would show this to be true. Upon his return he averted the immediate crisis of military service by gaining an exemption from active duty with the help of his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, who worked for the *Abwehr*, the German military intelligence agency. In 1940 Bonhoeffer became a civilian member of the *Abwehr* and from 1940 to 1943 he lived a double life. Purportedly, he travelled abroad to meet his ecumenical contacts and gain intelligence for the German war effort; in reality, he met his ecumenical contacts in order to pass along information about the resistance movement in Germany. While doing this, he also helped smuggle Jews out of Germany as part of the clandestine "Operation 7." In addition, he found time to write his *Ethics* manuscripts and to develop a relationship with Maria von Wedemeyer, who would become his fiancé in 1943. Through it all, he was aware of the various assassination attempts on Hitler, and supported them not because he had abandoned his commitment to peace, but because he thought that the extraordinary time called for decisive and responsible action from Christians willing to commit sin and take on guilt for the greater good.[39] This period of his life lasted until 1943 when he was finally arrested, initially on suspicion of his involvement with "Operation 7." His famous prison writings, published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*, offer a unique glimpse into this final phase of his life from 1943 until his death on April 9, 1945 at the Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Previous Scholarship on Bonhoeffer and Discernment

Despite over 60 years of scholarly engagement with Bonhoeffer's work, surprisingly little exists on the theme of moral discernment.[40] However, this is not to say there are no precursors to the present study. While few scholars discuss discernment in any depth, and none take it up in a full-

38. DBWE 15:237.

39. Here I agree with Green's claim that Bonhoeffer exhibited a consistent peace ethic throughout his life, despite his involvement in conspiratorial activities against Hitler; see, DBWE 6, 14–16. For a different interpretation of the relationship between Bonhoeffer, pacifism, and the conspiracy against Hitler, see Nation et al., *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*

40. For a solid overview of Bonhoeffer scholarship, see de Gruchy, "Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology"; and Haynes, *Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*.

length manuscript, there are a handful of texts that point toward the significance of moral discernment and offer brief interpretive comments. For instance, Heinrich Ott indicates the potential importance of discernment for Bonhoeffer's theology in his book *Reality and Faith*, one of the earliest studies of Bonhoeffer's thinking.[41] Ott argues that Bonhoeffer's discussion of discernment (*Prüfung*) in *Ethics* is "decisive . . . both for Bonhoeffer's ethical and his ontological conception."[42] Nevertheless, he does not pursue this theme, content merely to lament the fact that Bonhoeffer did not say more about simple discernment or describe some "teaching on methods" for "ethical proving."[43]

Larry Rasmussen, in another early study of Bonhoeffer's ethics, also singles out the topic of discernment by questioning the adequacy of Bonhoeffer's account of "proving what is the will of God" in a short section critiquing Bonhoeffer's methodological approach to ethics.[44] Additionally, in his later article, "A Question of Method," Rasmussen suggests that Bonhoeffer's thoughts on "proving the will of God" are one of four "methodological entry points" used to formulate his conception of ethics.[45] However, while he acknowledges that any of the four would be "worthy of study," he chooses to focus on "conformation" and "the command of God," leaving aside the theme of discernment. One can observe this pattern of identifying the theme of discernment, but not investigating it in any depth, in many other scholarly works on Bonhoeffer's theology. For instance, Marvin Bergman's 1974 work on Bonhoeffer and moral decision-making dances around the issue of discernment at several points, but surprisingly, never fully explores it.[46] Thomas Day, in his book *Bonhoeffer on Christian Community*, recognizes the tension in Bonhoeffer's theology between simple obedience and moral reflection, but falls short of a satisfying, theological explanation for the existence of such a tension.[47] In his 1985 book *Shaping the Future*, James

41. Ott, *Reality and Faith*. Ott's German text was originally published in 1966.

42. Ibid., 285.

43. Ibid.

44. Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 152–61 (first published in 1972). I will discuss Rasmussen's critique in chapter 6.

45. Rasmussen, "A Question of Method," 103.

46. Bergman, "Moral Decision Making," 227–43; Bergman, "Teaching Ethics," 367–80.

47. Day argues that, while Bonhoeffer believed in the necessity of moral reflection, he needed to encourage fellow conspirators to quick action without getting caught up in too much deliberation; thus, the apparent tension in his theology between moral reflection

Burtness hints at the importance of discernment when he contends that "a fascinating and potentially fruitful avenue of investigation" would be a study of Bonhoeffer's "ethical decision making."[48] Such a study, however, does not appear within the pages of Burtness' text.[49] Likewise, Ernst Feil goes so far as to argue in 1986 that a *Leitmotiv* for Bonhoeffer was the continual task of discerning what to do in the face of uncertainty and trusting in God alone for the outcome.[50] Despite this assertion, however, Feil does not delve further into Bonhoeffer's thoughts on discernment.

More recently, several scholars have engaged in more sustained explorations of Bonhoeffer and discernment. Rachel Muers, in her book *Keeping God's Silence*, speaks of Bonhoeffer and discernment on several occasions in the context of her larger attempt to develop a theological ethics of communication.[51] Though Bonhoeffer's view of discernment is not the focus of her study, she offers several insightful comments regarding the link between discernment and formation and the role of love as a guide for discernment.[52] Two other scholars, Michelle Bartel and Lisa Dahill, have explored Bonhoeffer's notion of discernment in even more depth. Bartel deals with the concept in her 1998 Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary entitled "The Rationality of Discernment in Christian Ethics."[53] In seeking to demonstrate that discernment is both rational and teachable within the Christian community, she devotes a substantial chapter to Bonhoeffer. She argues that Bonhoeffer's view of discernment unites six key characteristics of discernment in Christian ethics: creativity, apperception, testing the spirits, intelligibility, shared loyalty to Christ, and objective verification in action.[54] Unfortunately, her methodology, evaluated strictly in terms of its impact on her treatment of Bonhoeffer, is questionable. By first articulating six characteristics of Christian discernment (drawn from her engagement with several theologians) and then arguing that Bonhoeffer's account of

and simple obedience is merely a byproduct of a particular historical situation. See Day, *Christian Community*, 142.

48. Burtness, *Shaping the Future*, 6.

49. Ibid.

50. Feil, "Gewissen und Entscheidung," 220.

51. Muers, *Keeping God's Silence.*

52. Ibid., 170–72.

53. Bartel, "Rationality of Discernment."

54. For a summary of these six characteristics, see ibid., 77–82. For Bartel's application of these characteristics to Bonhoeffer, see ibid., 122–28.

discernment offers the prime example of how all six characteristics can exist together, she risks reading her own understanding of discernment into Bonhoeffer rather than letting Bonhoeffer speak for himself.

Dahill, who has easily written the most on Bonhoeffer and discernment, makes several important observations in her work.[55] For example, she emphasizes the significance of reading Bonhoeffer's views on discernment in light of his own biographical and historical context, as we already noted above. In addition, she recognizes the interconnectedness of discernment with many of Bonhoeffer's other ethical themes: reality, conformation, and discipleship, to name a few. She also understands discernment through Bonhoeffer's image of Christian life as a polyphony, in which Christ acts as the "cantus firmus."[56] As Dahill puts it: "To listen for the *cantus firmus* among all the other complementary or distracting melodies of our experience in this complex world—this is discernment."[57] Finally, she places great importance on the place of spiritual exercises in Bonhoeffer's account and their relation to the task of discernment.[58] More than any other scholar, Dahill's perceptive reading of Bonhoeffer and her insights into his understanding of moral discernment provide the impetus for further investigation, which this current book aims to provide.

Methodology and Argument

This study is an interpretative piece of research that pays close attention to Bonhoeffer's primary texts and relevant secondary sources in order to explicate and articulate what *he himself* thinks about the activity of discerning God's will.[59] Thus, it is not a comparative study of Bonhoeffer and

55. See Dahill, "Probing the Will of God," 42–47; Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*; Dahill, "Particularity," 68–76.

56. Dahill, "Probing the Will of God," 47.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., 45.

59. For the sake of simplicity and accessibility for the English language reader, I have chosen to make textual references to the English edition of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (DBWE) whenever possible. Occasionally I reference the German edition, the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (DBW), in order to emphasize a particular feature of the German text. Those wishing to consult Bonhoeffer's original German more frequently will benefit from the careful cross-referencing in the DBWE volumes, which allows one reading through the English translation to immediately locate the exact page number of the corresponding passage in the German edition.

other theologians, but rather examines other theological contributions only to illuminate aspects of Bonhoeffer's thinking.[60] This study also does not explore or evaluate other biblical or theological views of moral discernment or propose a new theory of moral discernment; again, the focus is strictly on Bonhoeffer's thought in the belief that he has something important to contribute to the larger discussion of discernment and Christian ethics.[61]

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* manuscripts written from 1940–43 receive special attention throughout the book. Such a focus is justified because the collection of texts represents his mature ethical thinking, both incorporating themes from his earlier theology and developing new trajectories that carry into his writings from prison. Clifford Green remarks that even though the *Ethics* is incomplete and was only published posthumously, it is nevertheless "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's magnum opus."[62] Bonhoeffer himself indicated the prominent place of his *Ethics* in his own mind when he wrote to Bethge from prison: "Personally I reproach myself for not having finished the *Ethics* (at the moment it is presumably confiscated), and it comforts me somewhat that I told you the most important things."[63] He later writes: "I have the feeling that I am becoming significantly older here and sometimes think my life is more or less behind me and all I have left to do is to complete my *Ethics*."[64]

Of all his *Ethics* manuscripts, one holds particular importance and serves as the starting point for this study: Bonhoeffer's 1942 manuscript "God's Love."[65] This manuscript is an obvious starting point for our investigation for several reasons. In particular, the manuscript contains his most focused reflections on the dual activities that comprise Christian discernment: discerning or examining God's will (*prüfen den Willen Gottes*) and self-examination (*Selbstprüfung*). It therefore offers a fixed point from which

60. For a good introduction to comparative studies of Bonhoeffer and others, see Frick, *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*. This collection includes chapters on Bonhoeffer's relation to obvious figures such as Luther, Barth, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kant, and Hegel, and less obvious individuals such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Thomas à Kempis, to name just a few.

61. For an introduction to the topic of discernment, particularly from the Protestant perspective, see Gustafson, "Moral Discernment," 17–36; Bartel, "Rationality of Discernment"; Wannenwetsch, "Fourfold Pattern," 177–90.

62. Green, "Editor's Introduction," 1.

63. DBWE 8:181.

64. Ibid., 222.

65. DBWE 6:299–338.

to determine where discussions of discernment appear elsewhere in his writings, whether through the same or different terminology. This approach guards against the danger of importing a presupposed definition of discernment into the text prior to understanding what Bonhoeffer himself argues.

In addition to this, "God's Love" is a natural beginning point for the study because of the textual clues that suggest its prominence in Bonhoeffer's mind. The editors of the critical edition of *Ethics* point out that the manuscript, written approximately two years after he began work on his *Ethics*, is the only *Ethics* manuscript with Roman numeral pagination.[66] This feature indicates his possible intention to place it first as a preface to his completed work.[67] Both the form and content of the manuscript further strengthen this conclusion. For instance, the manuscript opens with a programmatic claim, setting the stage for the rest of the work, that one should approach Christian ethics as that which supersedes and critiques all other forms of ethics.[68] In addition, as we will see in chapter 2, the manuscript contains exegetical material from both Genesis 3 and Matthew 5-7, forming a natural bridge with Bonhoeffer's earlier works from the 1930s, *Creation and Fall* and *Discipleship*. As the editors assert, this evidence validates Bethge's decision to place "God's Love" first when he reordered Bonhoeffer's manuscripts for the sixth edition of *Ethics* and supports the decision to begin this study with an extended consideration of the manuscript.[69]

Despite the focus on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, however, it is certainly not the only one of Bonhoeffer's writings to deal with the issues surrounding moral discernment. Thus, while the current study deals substantially with *Ethics* and returns to it again and again at key junctures, it also draws from beyond this period when doing so will illuminate the issues under discussion. For example, while the theme of Christian formation is prominent in *Ethics*, one can hardly do it justice without some mention of its place in

66. Tödt et al., "Editors' Afterword," 445.

67. During Bonhoeffer's time, as today, Roman numerals commonly indicated prefatory material; see DBWE 6:299n1.

68. Ibid., 299–300. The fact that a similar methodological statement is found in Bonhoeffer's earliest *Ethics* manuscript, "Christ, Reality, and Good," is unsurprising and does nothing to undermine the argument concerning the prominence of "God's Love." Cf. ibid., 47.

69. Tödt et al., "Editors' Afterword," 446. The DBW and DBWE editions of *Ethics* present Bonhoeffer's manuscripts in strict chronological order (making "Christ, Reality, and Good" first, and "God's Love" ninth). For a reconstruction of Bonhoeffer's possible intended ordering, in which "God's Love" appears first, see ibid., 447–48.

Bonhoeffer's earlier book *Discipleship*. Moreover, the motif of God's commandment, while occupying a prominent place in *Ethics*, is also strongly present in his work in the early 1930s. Because part of the fascination with his theology is the way that it develops in some ways and remains constant in other ways throughout the years, one would be remiss even in a focused study not to offer some account of the historical development of his thinking.

Finally, a word concerning terminology will prove helpful. Throughout the book I employ the term "tension" to speak of the apparent incongruity in Bonhoeffer's theology arising from two different emphases: an emphasis on a simple, unreflective approach to discerning God's will and an emphasis on a rational, reflective, and deliberative approach to discerning God's will. These two emphases often seem to act in opposition to each other, resulting in a strained condition (e.g., how can a Christian disciple, in his or her approach to God's will, be simultaneously "unreflective" and "reflective"?). However, the very term "tension" not only indicates a strained condition arising from two opposing forces or themes, but also points to the possibility that someone or something might alleviate or finally overcome that strained condition; that is to say, a "tension" need not be a permanent state. Therefore, as already mentioned, a primary purpose of this book is to investigate the tension in Bonhoeffer's theology and to explore how the opposing themes that create the tension might find reconciliation.

With these methodological issues in mind, we turn now to a brief account of the argument ahead. Chapter 2 begins with a close analysis of Bonhoeffer's understudied 1942 *Ethics* manuscript "God's Love." Here, through an investigation of his theological anthropology and his concomitant understanding of two different approaches to the moral life and to moral discernment, I highlight a tension between a simple, unreflective obedience to God's will and a rational, reflective approach to God's will. I continue in chapter 3 by arguing that Bonhoeffer's Christology relieves the tension between simplicity and moral reflection and allows both to be combined into a coherent account of moral discernment. Here, the focus is on his understanding of the relationship between the two natures of Christ, which he expresses through his notion of Christ-reality and his conceptual innovation of the ultimate and penultimate. In chapter 4 I contend that this conceptual unity between simplicity and moral reflection becomes efficacious in the lives of Christians through the process of conformation to the form of Christ. In such a process one does not actively form oneself, but places

oneself in a position, in part through spiritual exercises, where Christ's form can do its work. I explore the simplicity of discernment more fully in chapter 5 using as a guide the motif of God's commandment. I demonstrate the importance of simplicity and simple obedience for Bonhoeffer's conception of the Christian moral life and also argue that his understanding of simple obedience does not reject all manner of moral reflection, but merely redefines its purpose and purview. Finally, in chapter 6, I use the theme of natural life to address the place of discernment within the natural, penultimate world. I assert that Bonhoeffer's theology of the natural allows him to speak of the structure of the natural order as a relative guide to moral discernment. Moreover, human attributes such as reason and conscience, despite receiving some negative appraisals, also play a role in the process of discernment. I conclude the book in chapter 7 by reaffirming the centrality of moral discernment for Bonhoeffer's vision of Christian ethics and by considering what new picture emerges of Bonhoeffer given the contents of this study.