

IN DEFENSE OF HAVING STUFF: BONHOEFFER, ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE GOODNESS OF HUMAN MATERIALITY

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE RADICAL MOMENT IN AMERICA

Christian bookstores today are filled with the call to be “radical.” Books like *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne and *Radical* by David Platt have challenged a comfortable and affluent American evangelicalism to take seriously Jesus’ demanding call to follow him.¹ These books have raised questions concerning the relationship between the church in America and the material goods of our world, and have laid down a challenge for American Christians to take seriously the call of Jesus to sell our possessions and to give to the poor in order to follow Him. They have called into question the readiness of American evangelicals who claim to be followers of Jesus to *really* follow Jesus, to *really* take seriously His call to a costly discipleship.² These books have been read by millions, and have had significant impact on the way many in the American evangelical church are evaluating not only our personal relationship to possessions, but also our approaches to church structure and staffing, multi-million dollar church buildings, expensive technologies for running our church services, and the way in which the American church conceives of her relationship to the poor.

I wish to begin this essay by affirming that the New Radicals³ have raised very important questions regarding the wealth of American Christianity and how that has impacted our vision of what it means to follow Jesus. I believe that this is an important conversation, and one that must be entered into with seriousness. The object of their assault, the wealth and consumerism of America and its impact on the American

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¹ David Platt, *Radical* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Multnomah Books, 2010); Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Press, 2006).

² In his article entitled “Here Come the Radicals!” in *Christianity Today*, Matthew Lee Anderson points out the ubiquity of the word “really” in the writers he dubs “The New Radicals.” Anderson states that the emphasis on what it “really” means to follow Jesus is the way by which these authors are attempting to call American evangelicals to fully embrace the demanding call of following Christ, but more than anything he believes that “the reliance on intensifiers demonstrates the emptiness of American Christianity’s language...The inflated rhetoric is a sign of how divorced our churches’ vocabulary is from the simple language of Scripture.” See Anderson, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (March 2013): 23.

³ In his article, Anderson cites the following as the leaders of “The New Radicals”: David Platt, Shane Claiborne, Francis Chan, Kyle Idleman and Steven Furtick.

Church, is one that must be challenged. As such, I affirm the impulse behind the conversations and believe that this is an important moment for American evangelicalism.

However, it is my contention that, while the New Radicals have challenged the American church to think about our relationship to money and possessions, they have not based this call on a proper theological foundation. What is missing is a thoroughgoing theological anthropology that stresses and celebrates the essentially *material* nature of humanity. In light of the absence of a developed theological anthropology, the works that speak into the Radical Moment all too often reflect a subtle Docetism that runs the risk of demeaning the goodness of God's material world and the goodness of the relationship between humans and the goods of the material world. The lack of such a theological anthropology tends to a vision of the human being that, to borrow a line from Wendell Berry, "is...drastically reductive; it does not permit us to live and work as human beings, as the best of our inheritance defines us."⁴

In this essay, I wish to counter this trend by inserting into the Radical Moment a theological anthropology that joyfully and unapologetically affirms materiality and possessions. I believe that this time in American evangelical life provides us with an opportunity to reflect more deeply on our essential being as humans created out of the dust of the earth, and so to reflect more deeply on our relationship to the things of the earth. It is my conviction that the evangelical church is in great need of a theological anthropology that can become the foundation for our conversations about the relationship between humanity and the stuff of the earth. Absent such a foundation, our theology will continue to run the danger of the reductionism and Docetism that is too often found in the works that mark the Radical Moment in America.

To build this anthropological foundation, I will engage the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In many of the works of the New Radicals, the reader will come across at least one reference to or quotation by Bonhoeffer, usually to Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*. For instance, in *Radical*, Platt cites this work and its call to "abandon the attachments of this world." He goes on to say, "The theme of the book is summarized in one potent sentence: 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.' Bonhoeffer aptly entitled his book *The Cost of Discipleship*."⁵ However, this emphasis on Bonhoeffer's vision of discipleship is lacking due to

⁴ Wendell Berry, "Economics and Pleasure," in *What Are Humans For?* (New York: North Star Press, 1990): 135. In his context, Berry is talking about the reduction of the human to an economic unit of competition. While his view of reductionism of the human in his essay isn't the exact same as the one I am proposing here, this quote connects with my basic assumption that the vision of humanity in the works of the radical movement is inadequate.

⁵ It must be pointed out, *contra* Platt's assertion here, that Bonhoeffer did not entitle his work *The Cost of Discipleship*. It is simply entitled *Nachfolge*, which is most literally to be translated "to follow after." While, of course, the cost of discipleship is a key theme in this text, the title of this work, which has been amended in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works edition and is simply called *Discipleship*, is a gloss by the first English publishers of the book, and not Bonhoeffer's title. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Vol. 4, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

the failure to contextualize Bonhoeffer's teaching on discipleship in a theological anthropology that he developed from the beginning of his theological career and carried through to the end. As I will demonstrate in the pages that follow, there is much more going on in Bonhoeffer's theology than a call to abandon our attachments to the world. In fact, Bonhoeffer has a strong emphasis on the goodness of our attachments to the things of this world that arise from the fact that God created us as earthly, material beings, who cannot properly be human without the things of the world; this is what is missed when one doesn't grasp the anthropological content of Bonhoeffer's theology. Adopting Bonhoeffer's teaching on 'costly discipleship' without engaging his teaching on what it means to be human leaves one with a false vision of Bonhoeffer's call to follow Jesus, as well as a reduced anthropology.

In what follows, then, I offer "a defense of having stuff." This defense must not be heard as a call for conspicuous consumption or an endorsement of the continued impoverishment of the majority of humanity; this essay is not an apology for owning 5,000 square foot mansions while being unconcerned about the poor among us. Clearly, to follow Jesus is to be engaged with and concerned for the poor. Rampant consumerism is having devastating effects on our society and in our churches; the gap between rich and poor is growing at alarming rates; humans are being locked into prisons of poverty. We must not duck the effects of these forces in our world. But I propose that what evangelicalism most needs in this moment is not simply a call to *dispossess*, but a clear vision of what it means to *possess* in a way that honors God and our constitution as created beings, and to see the very act of possessing as a protest against the consumerism of our age. In what follows, I will suggest that a theological anthropology of materiality provides us resources to see possessing as an essential part of our rejection of the demeaning of the material in American society. By possessing in a way that depicts a right relationship to the stuff of the earth, the Church can provide a vision of humanity that demonstrates a relationship to the material world that rejects the demeaning of materiality inherent in our consumerist passions, and instead presents a vision of a joyful engagement with the stuff of the earth that is consistent with our material being and that offers God praise for the beauty and goodness of His creation. What I offer here, following Bonhoeffer, is an unapologetic affirmation of the material world and the goods of that world that can provide us with a firm foundation for the conversations about wealth and possessions.

2. BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

One of the most critical themes in Bonhoeffer's *corpus* is his stress on *being human* as a theological theme and as central to the call to follow Christ. From his earliest works, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, in which he reflects on the nature of humanity in our created, fallen, and redeemed condition, to the prison correspondence, in which we find his earthy and gritty reflections on humanity "come of age" and on the "this-worldly" nature of discipleship, Bonhoeffer never shies away from the

material constitution of humanity. Bonhoeffer's theological vision of "the human being of heaven and earth" is steadfast in its attention to the fact that humans are created out of the dust of the earth. Bonhoeffer's insistence on and attention to the earthly, material createdness of humanity is often lost on his casual commentators, who fail to grasp how important theological anthropology is to Bonhoeffer's vision of what it means to follow Jesus. As I have suggested above, the adoption of Bonhoeffer in this Radical Moment is incomplete if we don't have a thorough knowledge of his anthropological vision. I suggest that Bonhoeffer's vision of the human, which we will now turn to explore through analyzing three of his key theological writings, is an important dialogue partner for the evangelical church as we approach the question of the relationship of humanity to the material world in which we have been placed by God. We begin our exploration of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology with his lesser-known but critically important book, *Creation and Fall*.

A. *Creation and Fall*

In the winter semester of 1932-33, Bonhoeffer gave a series of lectures on Genesis 1-3 at the University of Berlin, that was later published as *Creation and Fall*.⁶ In this work, Bonhoeffer is writing in the tradition of Barth's *Römerbrief*, doing "theological exegesis", a method that set itself apart from the traditional German historical-critical exegetical approach common at the time. In this book, Bonhoeffer is reading the text of Genesis 1-3 under the influence of Barth's Christological emphasis as the method for all proper Christian exegesis. As such, *Creation and Fall* is an attempt to read the foundational chapters of Scripture through the cross and to understand the foundations of the Scripture narrative from the perspective of the completion of the story, rather than reading it as if the reader was unaware of the unfolding story to be told.

In approaching Genesis 1-3 in this way, Bonhoeffer focuses, not primarily on historical-critical issues (which are present, though minimally), but on theological issues. One of the most significant theological movements in this text is his treatment of the creation of humanity. For Bonhoeffer, the human cannot be understood apart from an affirmation of the essentially *earthiness* of humanity. Following from Bonhoeffer's description of the human taken from the earth is the need to unapologetically affirm the relation of the human to the things of the earth: to food, to possessions, to homes, to the "stuff" of the earth.

In the chapter entitled "The Human Being of Heaven and Earth," Bonhoeffer turns his attention to the creation of the human as described in Genesis 2:7: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." For Bonhoeffer, this is a pivotal text for understanding the

⁶ Bonhoeffer changed the title of the book from "Creation and Sin," which was the title of the lecture series, because of the fate that all too often afflicts academic writers: someone else published a work using his original title before he could. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (Vol. 3, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, trans. Stephen Bax; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

nature of humanity and the essential earthiness of the life that we were created to live. Bonhoeffer states that in this verse “we are directed to the earth in a distinct and exclusive way that is quite different from before,”⁷ i.e., quite different from the creation account recorded in Genesis 1. Here, the attention of the reader is directed to the fact that humanity is created out of the earth, with a very real and essential connection to the earth. He continues: “The human being whom God has created in God’s image... is the human being who is taken from earth. Even Darwin and Feuerbach could not use stronger language than is used here. Humankind is derived from a piece of earth. Its bond with the earth belongs to its essential being.”⁸ To emphasize this point, Bonhoeffer writes, “The ‘earth is its mother’; it comes out of her womb.”⁹ This statement is striking: while God is our Father, the earth is our mother; humanity arises out of the union of the Father and mother, and so, if you will, we look like *both*. Yes, we are created in the image of God, and so look like Him, but we also look like our mother: earthy and material, created to live among and in relationship to the stuff of the earth.

For Bonhoeffer, the human being who is created in God’s image has an essential bond to the earth in our embodied life, which means that this embodied status must in no way be despised. To do so is to despise our very nature. As Bonhoeffer writes, “The body belongs to the person’s essence. The body is not the prison, the shell, the exterior, of a human being; instead a human being is a human body. A human being does not ‘have’ a body—or ‘have’ a soul; instead a human being ‘is’ body and soul.”¹⁰ To despise the fact that we are products of the union of the breath of God *and* the dust of the earth is to be fallen, and so separated from God and self. “People who reject their bodies reject their existence before God the Creator. What is to be taken seriously about human existence is its bond with mother earth, its being as body. Human beings have their existence as existence on earth....Flight from the body is as much flight from being human as is flight from the spirit.”¹¹ In these words, we see the thorough rejection by Bonhoeffer of any reductionism or Docetism. The human cannot be reduced to a “spiritual being.” Our earthly life is not an accident, nor is it a cause for repentance or remorse. To be human is to be earthbound, to be a piece of clay merged with the breath of God, created to live in God’s presence as a material human being. We read, “(Humans) have not by some cruel fate been driven into the earthly world and enslaved in it. Instead, the word of God the almighty one summoned humankind out of the earth in which it was sleeping, in which it was dead and indeed a mere piece of earth, but a piece of earth called by God to have human existence.”¹²

Bonhoeffer illustrates this point through Michelangelo’s depiction of the creation of Adam from the Sistine Chapel. In this image, Bonhoeffer

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 74.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 76.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 76.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 76–77.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 77, 78.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 77.

points to a prime example of a theological anthropology that takes seriously the earthiness of humanity created in God's image. He writes, "The Adam who rests on the newly created earth is so closely and intimately bound up with the ground on which Adam lies that Adam is, even in this still-dreaming state, a most singular and wonderful piece of earth—but even so still a piece of earth."¹³ And it is this piece of earth whom God inspires with his life-giving breath, whom God places in the earthly garden, whom God commands to eat and to drink, to enjoy all that God has created, to enjoy the pleasures of the body in sexual union with the other, to live freely in the beauty of God's created world, to till the soil and so receive sustenance from the earth, his mother.

And it is this piece of earth whom God redeems, when narcissism has misdirected the passions of the body to consume rather than enjoy, to hold possessions as idols rather than as gifts. In order to redeem, God Himself becomes a piece of earth: "[W]here the original body in its created being has been destroyed, God enters it anew in Jesus Christ, and then, where that Body too is broken, enters the forms of the sacrament of the body and blood."¹⁴ For Bonhoeffer, the Lord's Supper follows from our being earthbound human beings. "Because Adam is created as body, Adam is also redeemed as body in Jesus Christ and in the sacrament."¹⁵ The physical partaking of bread and wine are signs, not merely by which we remember Christ, but by which we signify our life as embodied beings, who are being redeemed in our bodies through the broken Body of Jesus and who are sustained as a united body and soul through the Lord's Supper.

In *Creation and Fall*, we see Bonhoeffer's clear emphasis on the essential materiality of humanity. This stress opens us up to the theological need for a joyful affirmation of creation and the goodness of the things of the earth in our life as human beings. Bonhoeffer insists that we not shy away from the fact that we express our God-ordained life on earth *in relation to the things of the earth*. While there are dangers in this emphasis, the dangers must not distract us from the full expression of our earthiness and so the full expression of the goodness of our relationship to "stuff," to food, goods, homes, and possessions. To fail in this emphasis is to fail to glorify God, who created us, not as disembodied beings who would not need food, goods, homes, or possessions, but as embodied beings who thrive through the sustenance of our mother. Bonhoeffer here provides us with the foundation for "a defense of having stuff." But we must now move forward to Bonhoeffer's later work, to *Ethics* and to the prison correspondence, to see how he himself works out his theological anthropology of materiality and its expression of the goodness of our earthly life.

B. *Ethics and the Stuff of Life*

Bonhoeffer never completed *Ethics*. His writing of this book was interrupted by his arrest, but the essays that were written and collected

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 78.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 79.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 79.

to make up the published book *Ethics* reveal Bonhoeffer's continuing exploration of the goodness of human materiality and earthly living.

We begin our reflection on *Ethics* with some general observations of Bonhoeffer's ethical commitments. It is important to grasp that, for Bonhoeffer, ethics is not rooted in vague and aloof ethical theories, which are then applied by professional ethicists; Bonhoeffer has no need for casuistry. Rather, the very purpose of ethics is to free human beings to live genuinely human lives. One of Bonhoeffer's abiding concerns is that ethics all too often operate as a threat to living out of the vocation of being God's creatures in the full embrace of our earthiness. Ethical abstractions become the enemy of earthly living, removing us from our daily life by placing that life in the constant gaze of ethical theories and so producing in us an ethical inertia of self-reflection rather than the freedom "to live and work as human beings." Bonhoeffer insists that the Gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free from abstract principles, and calls us rather to the concrete realities of life in this world.

This theme of the concrete earthly life as the purpose of ethics runs throughout both *Ethics* and the prison letters. Bonhoeffer is calling for a discipleship that is deeply engaged with the world, a Christianity that resists the escapism of "spirituality" and that encourages Jesus' followers to be engaged in the here and now of earthly living. There has been a great deal of reflection on Bonhoeffer's call to an engaged life of discipleship in much of the "activist" adoption of Bonhoeffer. However, what we find in Bonhoeffer is broader than his call to activism, to fighting for peace and justice. Alongside this we also find a call to simply live material lives in the joy and goodness of God's blessing. This call, which has not received the attention that the call to activism has received, is critically important for our understanding of Bonhoeffer's vision of following Jesus in our daily, earthly, material life.

In order to expound on Bonhoeffer's call to earthly living in his later theology, I will focus my thoughts on an extended quote from the essay in *Ethics* entitled "Natural Life":

A human dwelling is not intended merely to be a protection against bad weather and the night, as well as a place to raise offspring. It is the space in which human beings may enjoy the pleasures of personal life in the security of their loved ones and their possessions. Eating and drinking serve not only the purpose of keeping the body healthy, but also the natural joy of bodily life. Clothing is not merely a necessary covering for the body, but is at the same time an adornment of the body.¹⁶

In this quote, we see Bonhoeffer building on the anthropological foundation that he established in *Creation and Fall*. We recall that in *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer describes the human being as one who is essentially earthbound. This relationship to the earth is not a fault, something that must be overcome, but is essential to our being human.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 187).

As such, we concluded that Bonhoeffer's anthropological teaching in *Creation and Fall* drives us to recognize the goodness, not just of our material nature, but also of our relation to the things of the earth. Had God created us to be disembodied beings, we would not need food, homes, clothing, or possessions; however, in creating us as clumps of earth, we have been created to need the stuff of earth in order to sustain our life as God's creatures.

But in the quote above, Bonhoeffer moves us beyond the issue of what we "need." Quite intentionally, he is rejecting a theological anthropology in which we think of our relationship to stuff as merely a necessity, as a Maslowian hierarchy of needs in which our relation to the stuff of the earth belongs to the category of mere sustenance. In speaking about a home, Bonhoeffer makes the point that the home should not be seen as "merely" a structure that keeps out the bad weather (i.e., a need). Rather, the home is the place where the life that God created us to live, the life of intimacy in relationship to those we love, is to thrive in relation to those loved ones as well as to the possessions that we have in our home. In speaking about food, he similarly resists the notion that food is merely a way to keep the body alive, but rather serves to enhance the joy of bodily life that we have been given by God. And, in speaking of clothing, Bonhoeffer states that clothes should be used, not merely to cover our bodies, but to adorn ourselves as God's created ones.

Bonhoeffer's thinking contained in this paragraph is very "un-radical." Rather than a call to dispossess, Bonhoeffer here offers a call to possess, and to enjoy those possessions as gifts from God intended for our good as a blessing to the earthy nature of being human. Rather than seeing the things of the material world around us as mere necessities, Bonhoeffer here paints a picture of a home, of food and drink, and of clothes as the appropriate expression of our being human. It is one thing to say that we are material beings and therefore we *need* protection against bad weather; it is quite another to celebrate the home as a place where we can enjoy personal life and the security of our loved ones and our possessions. This, rather than being a statement of need, is a statement of celebration, a robust affirmation of the goodness of human life in our relationship to goods and possessions. And in this, Bonhoeffer places firmly before us the anthropological category of joy.

Joy is a central tenet of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology. His teaching on the embodied existence given by God leads him to express throughout his theology that we are called in Scripture to the joy of the Lord, the enjoyment of God. For Bonhoeffer, the enjoyment of God and the enjoyment of stuff are not two diametrically opposed options. On the contrary, we are created to have joy in being the "piece of earth" created by God for material existence and the goods that accompany and are intrinsic to the blessing of our material existence. And this joy means that our relationship to the stuff of earth is a relationship, not merely of physical sustenance, but of delight, appreciation, celebration and thanksgiving for the blessings of the earth that God has given to his earthly image. Bonhoeffer here demonstrates that a theological anthropology of materiality must also be an anthropology of joy. When we enjoy goods

and possessions, houses and food, and the celebrations we share with our loved ones, we live in thanks to the Creator who has given us material life, who has given us food to enjoy, homes to enjoy, possessions to enjoy, under His Fatherly care and for His glory.

C. *The Prison Correspondence: 'This-worldly' Living*

I mentioned above that Bonhoeffer never finished *Ethics* due to his arrest. Rather than continue his work on his *magnum opus*, Bonhoeffer instead was locked away in a prison in Berlin, dispossessed of his relationship to the earthly goods and relationships that had made up his life to that point. Perhaps it is not surprising that a man in prison found himself longing for the simple pleasures of earthly life. The foundation for this thinking had been laid years earlier, but the full flowering of Bonhoeffer's vision of what it means to be human occurred in a most inhuman place, a Nazi prison, in the midst of the diabolical destruction of bomb raids and blackouts. In other words, his profound and moving reflections on living a fully engaged, "this-worldly" life that we read in the prison correspondence arise from the cell of one who has been forcibly removed from the joys of home that he speaks of in *Ethics*. His arrest has separated Bonhoeffer from his parents, his siblings, the security of his own room in his own home, the piano that he loved to play as the family gathered around and sang together, meals with his loved ones and, perhaps most painful of all, his anticipated future life with his fiancé. Bonhoeffer experienced dispossession, and it made him long for the goodness of possessing.

In a letter to his best friend Eberhard Bethge, written on July 27, 1944, Bonhoeffer comments on the contrast between the presentation of earthiness in the Old Testament and the "spirituality" of the New Testament. This contrast is not a contradiction; Bonhoeffer is not driving a wedge between the Old and New Testaments. However, he is offering a criticism of the church's overemphasis on the spirituality of the New Testament to the detriment of the earthiness of the Old Testament, and bemoaning the way this has effected the church's vision of what it means to be human.

In his letter of June 27, 1944, Bonhoeffer engages Bethge regarding what he calls "redemption myths" in order to raise the question of whether or not Christianity should properly be understood as a "religion of redemption."¹⁷ Bonhoeffer asserts that Christianity has always been understood as such, but raises the question about whether this is so. By redemption, Bonhoeffer is referring to the notion that Christianity is primarily concerned with the afterlife. He argues that we should not understand Christianity as a religion of redemption, and that we do so only when we make the "cardinal error" of separating Christ from the Old Testament and so interpret him "in the sense of redemption myths."¹⁸

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens; Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 447).

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 447.

Rather than do this, the church must see the integral relationship between Christ and the Old Testament, and so pay attention to the way in which redemption occurs for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. On this, Bonhoeffer writes that Old Testament redemption “is redemption *within history*, that is, *this side* of the bounds of death, whereas everywhere else the aim of all the other myths or redemption is precisely to overcome death’s boundary.”¹⁹ So, while there is certainly redemption in the Old Testament, it does not have the same emphasis as other redemption myths. “Israel is redeemed out of Egypt so that it may live before God, as God’s people *on earth*.”²⁰

This last sentence should sound familiar to us by now, as Bonhoeffer directs our attention to the earthly nature of the Israelites. The faith of Israel is presented in the Scriptures in a very material way: the heart of the promise to Israel surrounds a geographically defined plot of land; the festivals of Israel are celebrations of God’s goodness and grace through sacrifices of blood, through gifts of grains, through eating and drinking. Bonhoeffer fears that an overemphasis on some supposed New Testament “spirituality” takes us away from the reality of our life on earth, and has a tendency toward the Docetism that Bonhoeffer rejects throughout his theological *corpus*.

This emphasis on the Old Testament raises an important question regarding the teaching of the New Testament: What of resurrection? Doesn’t the New Testament emphasis on resurrection lead us to emphasize “eternity outside of history beyond death”?²¹ Bonhoeffer rejects this interpretation of the New Testament. Certainly, he is not denying that the New Testament teaches about eternal life and life after death. However, Bonhoeffer is fighting against the tendency to allow this teaching to overwhelm the Biblical teaching on the earthiness of human life. We read,

The Christian hope of resurrection is different from the mythological in that it refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way, and more sharply than the OT. Unlike believers in the redemption myths, Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks...into eternity.²²

This emphasis on resurrection sending people to their life on earth in a wholly new way is critical to seeing the consistency of Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology from *Creation and Fall*, through *Ethics*, and now in the prison correspondence. People are created to live on earth, and even resurrection must not distract us from this reality. As those who know Christ, and who participate in Him, we are called to live on earth in a different way, but we are called to live *on earth*, as earthly, material beings. This Bonhoeffer terms “this-worldly” Christianity, a theme that we will explore as our final stop on our tour of Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 447.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 447. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 447.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 447-448.

In the letter of July 27th just discussed, Bonhoeffer speaks about the importance of this-worldliness. In speaking of the way that resurrection sends us back into the world in a wholly new way, Bonhoeffer writes, “Like Christ...[Christians] have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and only when they do this is the Crucified and Resurrected One with them, and they are crucified and resurrected with Christ. This-worldliness must not be abolished ahead of its time; on this, NT and OT are united.”²³ What is the time of this-worldliness? It is the time of our mortal life on earth, the time of our living in the reality of our earthiness.

In a letter written six days earlier, on July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer offers his most detailed reflections on this-worldliness, as well as pens one of his most personal letters. The reason for the deeply reflective tone of this letter, which he doesn’t share with Bethge, is that the day before, July 20th, the final assassination plot on Hitler’s life failed. The result of this failure, Bonhoeffer surely knew, is that he would never walk as a free man out of Tegel prison, but would instead die at the hands of the Nazi regime. As a result, Bonhoeffer writes a letter in which he looks back over his life and, in a few words, focuses on the core themes of his life. The July 21 letter reads almost like a theological testament, a summing up of Bonhoeffer’s theological legacy.

In this letter, Bonhoeffer’s focus is on the theme of this-worldliness. He writes, “In the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus* but simply a human being....”²⁴ Humanity is not created to be some kind of religious human, but simply a human. He goes on to reflect on an experience from his time at Union Theological Seminary in 1930-1931:

I remember a conversation I had thirteen years ago in America with a young French pastor.²⁵ We had simply asked ourselves what we really wanted to do with our lives. And he said, I want to become a saint (—and I think it’s very possible that he did become one). This impressed me very much at the time. Nevertheless, I disagreed with him, saying something like: I want to learn to have faith. For a long time I did not understand the depth of this antithesis.²⁶

In making the distinction between becoming a saint and learning to have faith, Bonhoeffer is making a distinction between an otherworldly faith and a this-worldly faith. He writes, “I thought I myself could learn to have faith by trying to live something of a saintly life. I suppose I wrote *Discipleship* at the end of this path.”²⁷ But he has realized that the way to

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 448.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 485.

²⁵ The pastor Bonhoeffer is referring to is John Lasserre, a fellow student at Union.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 486.

²⁷ This comment about *Discipleship* has been a point of debate among Bonhoeffer scholars for years. Is Bonhoeffer distancing himself from what he said in *Discipleship*? Is this the end of Bonhoeffer’s more “conservative” phase, as he pivots toward a more liberal emphasis? He follows this sentence with a statement that adds confusion rather than clearing it up: “Today I see clearly the dangers of that book, though I still stand by it”

have faith, the way to truly follow Christ, is not to try to become a saint but to live a this-worldly life:

Later on I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself—whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader (a so-called priestly figure!), a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person—then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities....²⁸

In this autobiographical letter in which Bonhoeffer rehearses what he has learned about learning to have faith, he again points to the earthiness of his theological anthropology. The way to follow God is not to strive to become a saint; in fact, it is not to attempt to be a *homo religiosus* at all, striving to become just, unjust, sick, healthy (a New Radical?). Rather, it is to live fully in the realities of this world, its “tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.” In other words, to live the earthy lives we were created to live, including the enjoyment of all God has created for us. This is a remarkable thing: in a time when his fate is sealed and he is facing almost certain death, one would expect Bonhoeffer to turn his mind toward the afterlife: what awaits him after his execution? What will it be like to step into the glory of God's presence? Instead, his thoughts focus on this-worldliness. The reason for this is clear. Through our exploration of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology, a strong emphasis in his theology has emerged: a full-throated endorsement of human materiality that emphasizes the goodness of our earthly being. From the beginning to the end of his theology, Bonhoeffer consistently expresses that human beings are good creations of God, not in spite of, but because of our constitution as earthly beings. Part and parcel of our material being is the blessing of the material goods that are inherent in our life. These goods are not to be understood as distractions, temptations, or mere necessities. Rather, homes, food, clothes, and other material goods are to be seen as, well, goods. Goods because they are good gifts from God that are essential to the joyful life we were created to live, and in which we worship God by experiencing the joy He gives us through them.

(Ibid.). What are the dangers that Bonhoeffer refers to in *Discipleship*? As we will see, he is referring to the attempt to make something of oneself through religious performance, or, in context, the attempt to make a saint of oneself. The book contains some of the most thoroughgoing “renunciation” emphases in Bonhoeffer's writings, and Bonhoeffer is here warning of the danger of that emphasis, while still standing by the book. Regardless, this is a warning to readers who focus solely on *Discipleship*: he himself has tipped us off that we must be aware that that book isn't the last word. This is particularly interesting in light of Platt's usage of *The Cost of Discipleship* cited above, and drives home one of the central arguments of this paper: we can't use Bonhoeffer as a supporter for “radical” Christianity without understanding the context of his holistic theological vision, especially his theological anthropology.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 486.

3. CONCLUSION: POSSESSING AS PROTEST

The goal of the Radical Moment in American Christianity is to challenge followers of Christ to resist the consumerism of our day through a call to simplicity that entails the dispossession of stuff, and to take Christ's commands to follow Him more radically. This is a reaction against the demeaning of materiality that we see so evidently around us, and find so deeply entrenched within us, today. In this essay, I have suggested that, while the New Radicals have rightly identified the need for a protest, their cure is lacking due to their failure to base their arguments on a theological anthropology. I have engaged with the theological anthropology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer with the purpose of suggesting a stronger foundation on which to build our ecclesial response to the demeaning of the material that is represented by the conspicuous consumerism of American society. I want to conclude this essay with some observations on the way that Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology provides another option for countering the materialism and conspicuous consumption of our age that threatens our ability to faithfully following Jesus, and in doing so assert my defense for having stuff.

Like Bonhoeffer in his prison cell, our world is longing for the goodness of the creation that has been given us by the Creator. What we find in the materialism of our age is not a true valuing of the created world, but a demeaning of the material world. Our consumerist passions don't express a love for our created nature or the created world, but rather are a deep attack on both the creation as well as our own status as material beings. In this moment, the church has an opportunity to present the world with a vision of the goodness of creation that protests against the demeaning of creation that is inherent in our materialism. But of what should this protest consist?

I propose that this protest consist of the creation of ecclesial communities who possess goods in a way that witnesses to the world the goodness of our earthly nature as well as the goodness of created things. It would require a discipline of the heart that seeks not to possess in order to create our identities through our possessions, but that possesses in order to worship and honor God by joyfully embracing the stuff of his creation that he created for our good: we can worship God through living our human lives in joyful celebration of homes, food, clothes and possessions, without these becoming gods to us. It would require a discipleship in which we are trained to be filled with joy in our material constitution. It would require a call to follow Christ that doesn't despise our being creatures made from the union of the breath of God and the dust of the earth. This "defense of having stuff" is a call to the American church to reject consumerism in order to accept the joy of being who we are: beings whose Father is God, and whose mother is the earth, who fully revel in our unique status of being human, and call others to honor the God who has created them out of the dust of the earth by living lives of joyful, material celebration, worshipping their Creator while enjoying His creation.