

# “Who Stands Fast?” Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton on Obedience

By William D. Apel

Who stands fast? This was the question asked by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his essay entitled “After Ten Years,” written during Christmas 1942 for fellow conspirators in the plot against Hitler. In one of the most famous of his passages, Bonhoeffer directly, and without equivocation, answers his own question:

Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.<sup>1</sup>

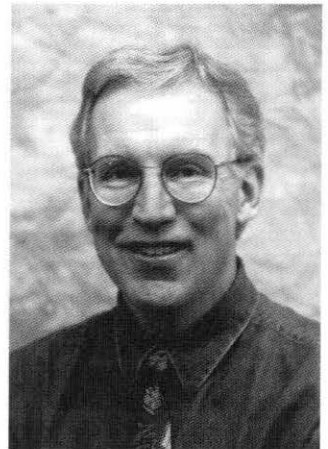
Who stands fast? For Bonhoeffer the answer resides in obedience to God in responsible action. But this is no facile submission, and it requires of the individual an oftentimes unconventional response. Standing fast in radical obedience means to be transformed and therefore changed. The one who stands fast must, ironically, be the one who is prepared to move. Standing fast means acting in freedom, and actually moving ahead, all the while trusting God for the forgiveness and grace that such obedience necessitates.

Thomas Merton also discovered that to “stand fast” meant to move forward in freedom, trusting God for the rest. In 1958, a decade and a half after his decision to remove himself from “the world” to the Trappist Abbey at Gethsemani, the monk Thomas Merton learned this same lesson. While in the city of Louisville to see about printing a postulants’ guide for his monastery, Merton had an epiphany that brought about a revolution in his entire outlook on life. This defining moment caused him to be transformed and brought him to a deeper understanding of obedience: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.”<sup>2</sup>

Merton understood he could no longer harbor any pretense of

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turning his back on the world. While maintaining his vocation as a monk, he embraced a commitment to humanity that resulted in a new form of obedience. This led to a compassionate response to a world in need far beyond his monastic walls. “To think,” wrote Merton, “that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion [of a separate holiness] that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking.”<sup>3</sup> With this reorientation Merton became an active voice for peace, justice, and radical reconciliation during the Cold War era—all the time maintaining a transformed monastic life.

The type of obedience that emerged in the lives of both Bonhoeffer and Merton was truly paradoxical. It involved extraordinary acts of obedience and disobedience. According to conventional wisdom, this would appear to be contradictory. But ultimately it was not, and herein lies my thesis. From the time of Bonhoeffer’s work on *The Cost of Discipleship* through the remainder of his life, his conflicts and crises gave rise to a transforming type of obedience that was simultaneously a “yes” to God and a “no” to various kinds of human authority. Likewise, from as early as Merton’s work in *The Seven Storey Mountain* to the close of his life, his transformations also related to a constant struggle to remain obedient to God. This, too, often placed him in conflict with lines of authority within and outside the church.

### *Bonhoeffer and Obedience*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into an upper-class German family in 1906. He was one of eight children (a twin) raised in a happy and secure home; he had the advantages of an excellent education, and he benefited from his well-placed position in his nation and culture. Bonhoeffer’s father was a noted professor of psychiatry and his mother was the product of a proud Prussian family whose paternal head had been the chaplain in the court of William II.

The First World War, beginning in his eighth year, interrupted Bonhoeffer’s otherwise sanguine childhood. He saw two of his older brothers march off to war; one returned badly wounded, and the other did not return at all. Living in Berlin, the Bonhoeffer family heard daily reports from the front. Young Dietrich was deeply affected by the war. He later recalled, “Death stood at the door of almost every house.”<sup>4</sup> As a result of these early experiences, he had no taste for war and in his early adulthood years embraced a pacifist position.

Bonhoeffer’s religious training was typical of the bourgeois families of Germany in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Christian holidays were observed, but beyond that the family rarely attended church. Within the home itself Bonhoeffer received religious instruction from his mother. However, when at the age of seventeen young Dietrich announced that he would study theology, the entire family was surprised. Perhaps he was carving out space for himself within a professional family of attorneys and scientists. In any case, by the age of twenty-one he had completed his doctorate, and shortly thereafter he finished the additional academic work necessary for becoming a university lecturer.

As Eberhard Bethge has so brilliantly illustrated in his biography of Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer’s adult years were marked by two significant turning points. The first change occurred about 1931–1932 when Bonhoeffer the theologian became Bonhoeffer the Christian. It was during this period, shortly after a year’s study abroad at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, that Bonhoeffer “consciously grasped the fact that he was a Christian.”<sup>5</sup> He never said publicly precisely when, or

how, that turning point came, but the conversion is mentioned in a letter written to a close friend, Elizabeth Sinn, in the winter of 1935–36. In this letter, Bonhoeffer referred to the period of time around 1931–1932 and confessed: “I know that until then I had been using the cause of Jesus Christ to my own advantage.”<sup>6</sup> According to Bethge, “In 1932 he found the unmistakable language in which he wrote his characteristic contribution to theology: well-rounded books, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*.”<sup>7</sup>

Bonhoeffer the Christian also turned his attention toward the menace of Nazism that was permeating Germany. In 1933 Hitler had gained control of the German nation, and the universities and churches (Bonhoeffer’s two primary communities) offered faint resistance to this new form of tyranny. He challenged the Nazification of German society and his church in what he called “the great masquerade of evil.”<sup>8</sup> Working with the Confessing Church, a small segment of Protestant Christians within Germany who questioned Nazi domination, Bonhoeffer claimed that Hitler must be opposed from the very center of the Christian faith. The non-Aryan laws of 1933 compelled him to speak out publicly against Hitler. These racist laws led to the definition of Jews as nonpersons in Germany. Bonhoeffer understood the deadly implications of these laws and, from a theological perspective, noted that whenever anyone is victimized by another individual or group, then Jesus Christ himself is victimized. He called the churches of Germany to action against the Third Reich: “When the church sees the state exercising too little or too much law and order, it is its task not simply to bind the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel, but also to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1939, Bonhoeffer became an active participant in a major political conspiracy against Hitler within the military ranks of high command and among certain government officials of Germany. Its ultimate aim was to remove the Führer from power, by assassination if necessary. According to Bethge, Bonhoeffer the young Christian theologian had reached a second major turning point in his life when he joined these courageous co-conspirators.

If in 1932 Bonhoeffer had answered his calling, then in 1939 he realized his destiny. The steady movement in Bonhoeffer’s life, as understood by Bethge, proceeded from theologian to Christian to contemporary. In 1939, Bonhoeffer had an opportunity to remove himself from the dangers of Nazi Germany by remaining at Union Seminary in New York City where ecumenical contacts had offered him a “safe harbor,” but he decided instead to return to his homeland. With a “contemporary” conscience, he wrote of his brief New York stay and the sudden decision to return to 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.”<sup>10</sup>

During this tumultuous final period, he still managed to write if not publish. What resulted were his two most important works, *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Both were published posthumously. When the attempt on Hitler’s life failed in July of 1944, Bonhoeffer, already imprisoned under suspicion of sedition, was linked to the assassination plot. On April 9, 1945, only weeks before the war’s end, Bonhoeffer was hanged along with fellow conspirators by orders of the Führer.

As a Christian, Bonhoeffer had sought in all things to be obedient and faithful to God. He came to understand this obedience in relation to a world in which there seemed to be no solid ground upon which to stand. The first turning point had sealed his calling as a Christian and its course was relatively predictable. This, according to Bethge, “had put Bonhoeffer into a world where things were comparatively clear-cut, where it was a matter of confessing and denying, and therefore in his case of the one Church for the whole world and against its betrayal to nationalist particularism.”<sup>11</sup> It required

a form of single-minded obedience—one that was transformative, but one that moved mostly along traditional lines of responsibility and accountability.

The second turning point, however, was of a different order. It required of Bonhoeffer that his Christian vocation become “contemporary,” meaning he could no longer entertain the luxury of clear-cut choices. Life was far more complex than the easy delineation of the pious good from the earthly evil. Bonhoeffer could no longer stand at a distance from moral ambiguities. He refused to stand with one foot tentatively placed on earth and the other safely located in heaven. He knew now that he must stand squarely in the midst of life, in the center of the world, without secure footing. His ground, and the source of his obedience, would continue to be God—but it would be the God who “let himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross” for the sake of that world. Bonhoeffer understood that he must release himself fully into the world and love it as completely as God did.

This new calling required an even deeper form of obedience from Bonhoeffer. It, too, was transformative, but far more costly. It exacted a tremendous price—it cost him his life and called into question for some his very right to be called a Christian pastor. For the sake of obedience itself, it became necessary to act in truly unconventional ways. To be an obedient contemporary Christian meant to be at one and the same time obedient and disobedient—obedient to God but disobedient to national, and even ecclesiastical, authority. In the end this caused Bonhoeffer to risk his most prized treasure—his own identity and reputation as a follower of Christ. It meant he had to act in obedience without immediate certainty of the rightness or efficacy of his actions. Very similar things happened to Thomas Merton.

### *Merton and Obedience*

Thomas Merton’s early life, shuttling between France and America and England, losing his mother when he was six and his father when he was fifteen, was much less settled and orderly than that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Merton’s unquenchable thirst for intellectual stimulation was matched only by his desire for all kinds of experiences—especially pleasurable ones. There was a serious side to Merton, as in the surprising discovery of Christ in his wanderings around the churches of Rome in 1933; however, his teenage years for the most part lacked meaning and direction.<sup>12</sup> Later, Merton noted the transiency of his experience in Rome and bemoaned his frame of mind at his grandparents’ home in America: “When I got back to New York I had lost most of my temporary interest in religion. My friends in that city had a religion of their own: a cult of New York itself, and of the peculiar manner in which Manhattan expressed the bigness and gaudiness and noisiness and frank animality and vulgarity of this American paganism.”<sup>13</sup>

Aside from the fact that Bonhoeffer and Merton both experienced New York City in the 1930s, they had little in common at this point. The earnest Bonhoeffer, living securely within his family’s care and support, worked with purpose and direction, while a more youthful Merton lived essentially out of control. His start in higher education at Cambridge in 1933 was a disaster. Enrolled subsequently at Columbia University, Merton found the intellectual and social climate more to his liking. In this setting, he became a promising writer and journalist. But still something was missing. Following his very brief association with campus communists, Merton and a small group of friends became interested in Catholicism and Catholic writers. In August of 1938, Merton began attending Mass at “the little brick church of Corpus Christi, hidden behind Teachers College on 121st Street,” where he

was baptized as a Catholic in November. But this was just the first stage in the journey of faith that would bring him to the austere, silent Trappists of Gethsemani in December of 1941.

At Gethsemani Merton discovered the only true home he ever knew. He was fully prepared to leave his old life behind, and, for the next fifteen years or so, Merton seemed to revel in his monastic life. His best-selling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* remains a testament to the single-minded obedience that he discovered during this period. In fact, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was written as an act of obedience by Merton to the instruction of his abbot. The daily life of the monastery was indeed difficult and very austere, but things were very clear-cut. Here he could strive toward what he had earlier thought quite impossible—sainthood. Later he would even enter a hermitage.

Merton, now Father Louis, undoubtedly struggled during this period of renunciation with “the writer” in him who seemed an unwelcome intruder and reminder of an undesired past. Yet, it was the very writer in Merton that gave voice to his new life and helped him to explore its depths. This he also understood. In the supportive community of Gethsemani, he grew to understand the seeds of contemplation that God had spread in his life and that blossomed into his monastic vocation. Paradoxically for Merton, it was only in his cloistered and constrained life that he believed himself free enough for the growth of God’s seeds of love and saintliness.

Like the earlier Bonhoeffer, Merton became a teacher of others within his religious tradition. His instruction of scholastics and novices at Gethsemani was somewhat akin to Bonhoeffer’s instruction of Lutheran seminarians at Finkenwalde, the underground seminary of the Confessing Church. Both realized that the difficult vocation they asked of their students required a life of personal discipline and obedience to God. (Bonhoeffer was often accused of being too Catholic in his insistence upon spiritual discipline and communal life.) The circumstances certainly differed, but in each case the necessity for firm spiritual moorings was undeniable. Just as the first major turning point in Bonhoeffer’s life had sealed his calling as a Christian pastor, so too the first turning point of Merton’s life had confirmed his life as a Trappist monk. Neither man would ever depart from these commitments.<sup>14</sup> Neither would ever abandon his new found faith, although both would have it greatly challenged in the years ahead.

The next turning point in Merton’s life, like Bonhoeffer’s, was of an even more radical nature. Merton the traditional monk of Gethsemani was about to become Merton the contemporary Christian. Much like Bonhoeffer, Merton would have to learn how to relate to the world in an almost entirely new way—a way that would require a form of obedience that was even more transformative and costly than his initial monastic calling.

Indeed, Merton’s life was to change dramatically as a consequence of his “Louisville vision” in 1958. This event marked the end of the first stage of Merton’s adult years of monastic vocation and ushered in the second, and last, period of his life’s journey. Merton wrote of this paradigmatic shift: “It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.”<sup>15</sup> He could no longer conveniently separate himself from the contemporary world. Like Bonhoeffer before him, he realized he would have to write and relate to the world in a new and far more costly and complex manner.

Merton now realized that obedience to God was to bring him closer and closer to a genuine love for a suffering and fragmented world. Just as Bonhoeffer, writing from prison, had viewed *The Cost of Discipleship* as “the end of that path” of living a life of traditional piety and obedience,<sup>16</sup> so too,

Merton noted the limitations of his earlier work in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He confessed, “Life is not so simple as it once looked in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Unfortunately, the book was a best-seller and has become a kind of edifying legend or something—that is a dreadful fate.”<sup>17</sup> With his new commitment, Merton’s writings exploded in a rich literary output during the later 1950s and early 1960s. He addressed the most pressing social problems of his day. According to Paul Wilkes, “Once he was again aware of the pains and struggles of the world outside, he wrote forthrightly about the antiwar and civil rights movements, the nuclear arms buildup, and the crucial need for peace and justice in the modern world.”<sup>18</sup> These writings, which often criticized the church’s timidity in peace and justice, were to place Merton in direct conflict with his own ecclesiastical authorities.

When Merton was silenced by his order’s censors in the early 1960s, it was clearly because he had disturbed the conservative Catholic establishment. His insistence that peacemaking is a religious obligation, and not one option among many for Christian people, was a hard pill to swallow for many schooled in theories of just wars and holy crusades against communism. Because of this, Merton was forbidden to publish his completed manuscript called *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.<sup>19</sup> Many inside and outside the church accused Merton of being a Communist, primarily because of his early, and persistent, opposition to the war in Vietnam. According to Merton himself, the abbot general in Rome had been informed by the F.B.I. that this misguided monk was being used by Communists.<sup>20</sup>

It is in response to his own silencing that we gain some insight into Merton’s transformed understanding of what obedience to God involves in the complexities of living the monastic vocation in the modern world. True to his monastic vows of obedience, Merton publicly accepted the censorship and silencing. But privately, he did not. Or, at least, he hedged on the matter. In a clandestine plan, he permitted his correspondence with personal friends to be mimeographed and distributed to hundreds in what came to be called the “Cold War Letters.” He also published in *The Catholic Worker* under other names. According to James Forest, editor at the time, Merton became “the parish priest of the Catholic Peace Movement.”<sup>21</sup> All of this was quite remarkable for a cloistered monk living in the hills of Kentucky. Merton’s voice became a testament to the radical demands of a transforming obedience. He could not be silent.

### *Transforming Obedience and Freedom*

Merton, like Bonhoeffer, had arrived at a point at which to stand fast in obedience meant to move forward in responsible action. True obedience for Merton, in his new-found public voice, demanded acts that looked like both obedience and disobedience. He had to place his credibility as a Christian monk on the line. Unusual times demanded uncommon responses, and Merton was quicker than most to recognize the prophetic tenor of his day. Using Bonhoeffer’s language, Merton sensed that he “stood at a turning-point in history” in which “something new was emerging.” He wrote in the early 1960s:

We are living in the greatest revolution in history—a huge, spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race; not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race, or nation, but a deep, elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.<sup>22</sup>

In 1965 Merton gained approval for the publication of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, perhaps the most representative piece of his new writings. This work brought Merton the contemporary closer to Bonhoeffer the contemporary. Derived from his personal notebooks kept since 1956, *Conjectures* drew directly upon insights from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It reveals to us a transformed Merton. His years as a "petulant ascetic" had passed, and now his transformed obedience linked him in solidarity with movements for peace and justice throughout God's wider world.

In *Conjectures*, Merton quotes freely from Bonhoeffer. He bemoans what Bonhoeffer referred to as "the failure of reasonable people to perceive either the depths of evil or the depth of the holy."<sup>23</sup> Merton continued, "We are living under a tyranny of untruth which confirms itself in power and establishes a more and more total control over men in proportion as they convince themselves they are resisting evil."<sup>24</sup> Noting the insanity of the nuclear arms race, the rampant violence in American society, its racism and brutal escalation of the war in Vietnam, Merton unmasked the "masquerade of evil" he identified in American militarism abroad and racism at home. In short, Merton had discovered Bonhoeffer's observation that most "reasonable people" would rather acquiesce in the "tyranny of untruth" than ask the hard questions that uncover the Lie.

Ultimately, for Merton and Bonhoeffer the issue of obedience was related to the question of freedom. Genuine freedom could only be realized on the other side of transforming obedience. Freedom for self and for others was located in responsible, albeit oftentimes ambiguous, actions. In the final analysis, that was what it was all about—a transforming obedience leading to a liberating freedom on both the personal and societal level. Merton expressed it this way:

Freedom from domination, freedom to live one's own spiritual life, freedom to seek the highest truth, unabashed by any human presence or any collective demand, the ability to say one's own "yes" and one's own "no" and not merely to echo the "yes" and the "no" of state, party, corporation, army, or system. This is inseparable from authentic religion.<sup>25</sup>

Less than three years after the publication of these words on obedience and freedom, Thomas Merton was dead. However, by this time, Merton "the contemporary" had been able to expand his horizons to encounter men and women of good will in numerous religious traditions. Just as Bonhoeffer's peace efforts had led him to reach out to the European and American ecumenical communities, Merton, at the close of his life, reached out in peace to a broader global community—to peoples of all religious traditions, and no religion at all.

In his address to the Bangkok conference of Catholic and Buddhist monastics on the day of his death, Merton spoke of ways in which the contemplative life must "come of age" in an ever deepening form of obedient engagement with God and the world. He told the story of a Tibetan monk and abbot who was forced to flee his country because of a communist takeover. This monastic leader asked a nearby abbot friend what to do. Merton reported that the reply came back, "From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet." Merton then told the conferees, "If you forget everything else that has been said, I would suggest you remember this for the future. 'From now on, everybody stands on his own feet.'"<sup>26</sup> This, according to Merton, "is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about—if you understand it in terms of grace."<sup>27</sup> Here is the answer to who stands fast: it is the

same for Bonhoeffer and Merton. The one who stands fast is the responsible self who stands in the freedom of authentic faith—a faith that knows of an obedience to God that is transformative and costly; and, in the end, a faith that is joyous beyond imagination.

### Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enl. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 5.
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966; Garden City, NY: ImageDoubleday, 1968) 156.
3. Merton, *Conjectures* 157.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* (New York: Harper, 1965) 78.
5. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper, 1970) 581.
6. Peter Vorking, ed., *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 80.
7. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 581.
8. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers* 4.
9. Eberhard Bethge, *Costly Grace* (New York: Harper, 1979) 62.
10. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 559.
11. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 582.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948) 109.
13. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain* 117.
14. My working assumption in relation to both Bonhoeffer and Merton is that there exists more continuity than discontinuity in their lives. However, to speak of turning points makes good sense for it recognizes change while not denying that ultimately a person's life is of one piece. For these reasons, I appreciate and affirm Bethge's evaluation of Bonhoeffer's life in terms of major turning points and believe the same sort of assessment can be made of Merton's life.
15. Merton, *Conjectures* 157.
16. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers* 369.
17. This quotation is taken from *Merton: A Film Biography*, produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn and distributed by First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10014.
18. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984) xvi.
19. Wilkes, *Merton* 59.
20. Wilkes, *Merton* 59.
21. Wilkes, *Merton* 47.
22. Merton, *Conjectures* 66–67.
23. Merton, *Conjectures* 62.
24. Merton, *Conjectures* 68.
25. Merton, *Conjectures* 90.
26. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Dimensions, 1973) 338.
27. Merton, *Asian Journal* 338.