

Beware the bottom line

“SUCCESS” AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

By Bob Mesle

The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *ETHICS*

These are the parts of the work which it was possible to conceal in a place of safety before they could be seized by the police. They have been retrieved from their garden hiding-places in the same disorder in which they were put there. And then there are other parts which were already in the hands of the Gestapo before 5th April 1943, the day of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's arrest.

EDITOR'S PREFACE, *ETHICS*

NOT MANY BOOKS HAVE A STORY LIKE THAT. These fragments now form Bonhoeffer's book, *Ethics*, written when Hitler was the most successful man in the Western world and aiming to establish a Reich which would last 1,000 years. Who, at that time, could confidently say that he would not succeed? Certainly not Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in a Nazi prison camp in April of 1945.

My wife, Barbara, often remarks that we who were born after World War II cannot possibly feel what life was like for people living in the midst of it who could not know how it would turn out. Particularly we who live in the U.S., with our hindsight and vast national hubris, cannot feel in our deepest hearts the genuine fear, the real uncertainty about who would win. We can only listen to those who, like Bonhoeffer, lived then and rightly wondered if the Gestapo and the S.S. would last a millennium. After all, most of human history since the founding of civilization has been presided over by some form of tyranny. Biblical prophets



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such as Isaiah and Jeremiah had no trouble accepting Yahweh as punishing His chosen but sinful children by handing the world over to the conquering armies of Assyria and Babylon. Why not see Nazi Germany as also destined for success by the mighty hand of God?

One of Bonhoeffer's brief fragments, probably written in September of 1940 when Hitler must have seemed invincible, is titled "The Successful Man."

Success heals the wounds of guilt. There is no sense in reproaching the successful man for his unvirtuous behavior, for this would be to remain in the past while the successful man strides forward from one deed to the next, conquering the future and securing the irrevocability of what has been done. The successful man presents us with accomplished facts which can never again be reversed. What he destroys cannot be restored. What he constructs will acquire at least a prescriptive right in the next generation.¹

As we know, victors write the history books to justify their actions. They paint themselves as enlightened heroes, perhaps fulfilling God's manifest destiny of bringing light to the "natives," or clearing away the "savages" to make way for "civilized people." Their values become accepted as universal, eternal, and divine, those by which the conquered will be judged as lesser people. And the conquerors will be shown as justified even in their most brutal actions. Given enough time, and a total enough victory (as in the European invasion of the Americas), the victors may even look back and grieve over the admitted sins of the conquest, as if such confessions served to confirm their virtue.

Bonhoeffer knew how much we bow to success and shift our values in approval.

When a successful figure becomes especially prominent and conspicuous, the majority give way to the

idolization of success. They become blind to right and wrong, truth and untruth, fair play and foul play. They have eyes only for the deed, for the successful result. The moral and intellectual critical faculty is blunted. It is dazzled by the brilliance of the successful man and by the longing in some way to share in his success Success is simply identified with good.²

After every election, we hear the winners shout that this (51% to 49%) success proves the rightness of their cause and justifies the further conquests they plan. The Biblical equation of piety with prosperity compounds our tendency to identify success with good. In the modern West, where capitalism so invades every fiber of society that Christianity and capitalism seem inseparable, we easily nod our heads to affirm that victory at the polls, in the market place, or in the “sales” of a particular religion stands as the decisive proof of inherent superiority, just as surely as winning does in athletic competition. If life is competition, success is the sure measure of the good.

Bonhoeffer's critique of success is concise: “The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard.”³

Standing in the shadow of the cross, Christians have, from the beginning, struggled with the meaning of success. By worldly standards, Jesus was a failure. Yet Paul found a way to preach Christ crucified so that the gospel succeeded among Gentiles. When the early disciples were unable to convert most Jews, Gentile converts began to condemn Jews altogether. Even the New Testament includes anti-Jewish propaganda. (See, for example, John 8:39–47.) One common Christian explanation of the failure of the mission to the Jews is that the Jews wanted a successful Messiah, a leader on a white horse who would march them to victory

over their enemies. We Christians have prided ourselves on our willingness to accept the humble, suffering servant who hung on the cross. Yet, at the very same time, we've been saying something like, “Jesus may be humble now, but pretty soon he's going to come back from the sky and slaughter our enemies. *Then* you'll see success!” Just read the book of Revelation.

Alfred North Whitehead put his finger on the deep theological impact of the hunger for success in early Christianity.

When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly. In the official formulation of the religion it has assumed the trivial form of the mere attribution to the Jews that they cherished a misconception about their Messiah. But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.

There is, however, in the Galilean origin of

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Christianity yet another suggestion which does not . . . emphasize the ruling Caesar . . . It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love.⁴

Those tender elements of love which work quietly do not display the neon signs which signal success to the world, so

we Christians have rarely been satisfied with them. We want something grander and more visible.

Latter Day Saint movements have struggled with conflicting models of success. In our earliest years, we shared a dream whose essence was recently captured in the *Harry Potter* stories. We were orphans, nobodies, the poor and oppressed of the land. Then, we believed, God revealed that we had a great destiny and secret powers. We were the true children of the ancient heroes, given marvelous powers to speak forgotten languages and to perform great and marvelous works in the land. On the one hand, as with the crucified Christ, the proof of our success is our rejection by those around us. Rejection proved that we were the pure ones, the

righteous remnant. At the very same time, especially in Nauvoo, our success was proved by the contrasting fact that so many had converted so rapidly.

I GREW UP IN the Community of Christ (then the RLDS Church) with this deeply conflicted vision of success. We were then, as now, a small church, so we turned to that fact as proof of our spiritual truth. Like Harry Potter at home for the summer, we were forced to live in a world that

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did not appreciate our royal ancestry and glorious destiny. We watched the rapid growth of our Utah cousins—our sibling rivals—and sometimes told ourselves that they must have achieved such success by abandoning the true path. At the same time, envying their membership increase and material wealth as a church, we challenged ourselves to more vigorous missionary work that would bring about our own more visible success.

This inner struggle is almost inescapable within Christianity. We are torn between the redemptive failure of a man hung as a criminal on a cross and the great commission that we go into the world and make disciples of all nations. Clearly we continue to struggle with this paradoxical vision of success. We look at the rapid growth of conservative religions such as Southern Baptists, and wonder what to make of it.

On the one hand, I want to strongly warn all of us to resist the temptation to reduce evangelism to the model of the capitalist marketplace where the bottom line is profit and the path to profit is successful marketing. In capitalism, people achieve success partly by finding out what other people want and selling it to them—whatever it is. Like pornography, advertising usually sells by appealing to people's desires, fears, and hopes with little regard for deeper moral values. That is a model we must reject. After all, look at the many world religions which do not seek converts and yet survive for centuries, even millennia. My Amish neighbors do not seek to convert me.

Neither do Buddhists, Quakers, most Hindus, or Jews. Indeed, orthodox Jews make converting extremely difficult. For these communities, success does not mean numerical growth.

Still, we cannot deny that one legitimate measure of the real value of a message to the world is its ability to speak to the hearts of many people. If our preaching is not heard as good news, what good is it? So surely there is some legitimate sense in which success can, even must, be measured by whether those around us find value in our message. So, if no one seems interested in our gospel, we cannot simply pat ourselves on the back for our righteousness.

We reflect on Bonhoeffer and his own struggles with working as a Christian theologian under Hitler's rule. "The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard." "Christ confronts all thinking in terms of success and failure with the man who is under God's sentence, no matter whether he be successful or unsuccessful. It is out of pure love that God is willing to let that man stand before Him."⁵

For Bonhoeffer, Christ was not just Jesus of Nazareth nor a Christ in heaven. Building on the Apostle Paul's proclamation that the church is the body of Christ, Bonhoeffer identified Christ in his time and place with that portion of the German Lutheran church which opposed Hitler's anti-Jewish policies. It was partly this identification which, years after Bonhoeffer's death, was to galvanize Western Christians reeling in shock from a half-century of war, groaning in awareness of Christianity's own deep, anti-Semitism as a cause of the Nazi "final solution," and the deep racism expressed in so much Christian opposition to the civil rights movement. In the midst of that pain, we heard Bonhoeffer's vision:

The church is not a religious community of worshippers of Christ but is Christ Himself who has taken form among men.⁶

In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other.⁷

These words succeeded because they spoke directly to the hearts of millions of Christians who could no longer interpret Christian discipleship in terms of a passive piety that simply threw a few alms to the needy. I know how powerfully they changed my own life when I first read them. I know many church leaders whose vision of the church was transformed by Bonhoeffer and voices like his.

Success for the church cannot just mean figuring out how to market ourselves so that people buy our religious product. No community standing in the shadow of the cross can define success like that without losing its soul. But neither can we simply take worldly failure as the proof of our spiritual success, of our secret election by God to be a righteous remnant. Surely, as Bonhoeffer says, success for Christians must somehow be tied up with loving involve-

ment in the world in order to make something better, whether the world applauds us for it or not. To some extent, the success of the church's love must be measured by whether it speaks to human hearts for good, whether, in the language of the Community of Christ, it actually creates communities of joy, hope, love, and peace.

The RLDS church became the Community of Christ partly because we grew into the mature realization that we were not the one true church—that Christ's truth and love could be found in the larger Christian tradition which we decided to join. Now we face the great challenge that we have joined that larger Christian community just as so many Christians are growing into the mature realization that Christianity is not the one true religion—that truth and love can also be found in other religious communities. Has our recent spiritual growth prepared us to make that next transition, or will it prove to be too much too soon? What will the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations mean for spiritual communities who come to see the diverse wisdoms of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Humanists, and others as vital and cherished sources of spiritual growth for us all? What does an evangelistic community committed to peace do when peace means coming to value, rather than convert, people of other religions? What, then, is the meaning of successful evangelism? This is just one challenge we face today. I am very interested in hearing how thoughtful LDS people struggle with these issues.

This I'm sure of: Love is always wanted, always longed for, always needed in this world. If we can see and feel how to embody that love so that people clutch it joyously to their hearts, then perhaps we can continue to find new life, new success, without selling our souls. Personally, I believe that our current vision of building communities of joy, hope, love, and peace is exactly right. But we must face the fact that there is no final point at which we can stop and say "Success is ours." Love must go on because life goes on, even after you and I have passed the torch to others. Success in any final sense lies beyond the grasp of finite creatures like us. Like Bonhoeffer, we must be faithful to ourselves, living in hope and in love, doing our best to work for peace, joy, and liberation here and now, handing on to those who come afterward the best church and world we can. Our spiritual children will have to make their own successes out of their own faithful vision.

NOTES

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, (N.p.: Macmillan Paperback, 1955), 75.

2. *Ibid.*, 76.

3. *Ibid.*, 77.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 342–343.

5. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 77.

6. *Ibid.*, 83.

7. *Ibid.*, 195.