

# FREEDOM

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

We must therefore conclude our analysis of the structure of responsible action by speaking of freedom.

Responsibility and freedom are corresponding concepts. Factually, though not chronologically, responsibility presupposes freedom and freedom can consist only in responsibility. Responsibility is the freedom of men which is given only in the obligation to God and to our neighbor.

The responsible man acts in the freedom of his own self, without the support of men, circumstances, or principles, but with a due consideration for the given human and general conditions and for the relevant questions of principle. The proof of his freedom is the fact that nothing can answer for him, nothing can exonerate him, except his own deed and his own self. It is he himself who must observe, judge, weigh up, decide and act. It is man himself who must examine the motives, the prospects, the value and the purpose of his action. But neither the purity of the motivation, nor the opportune circumstances, nor the value, nor the significant purpose of an intended undertaking can become the governing law of his action, a law to which he can withdraw, to which he can appeal as an authority, and by which he can be exculpated and acquitted. For in that case he would no longer be truly free. The action of the responsible man is performed in the obligation which alone gives freedom and which gives entire freedom, the obligation to God and to our neighbor as they confront us in Jesus Christ. At the same time it is performed wholly within the domain of relativity, wholly in the twilight which the historical situation spreads over good and evil; it is performed in the midst of innumerable perspectives in which every given phenomenon appears. It has not to decide simply between right and wrong and between good and evil, but between right and right and between wrong and wrong. As Aeschylus said, "right strives with right." Precisely in this respect responsible action is a free venture; it is not justified by any law; it is performed without any claim to a valid self-justification, and therefore also without any claim to an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil. Good, as what is responsible, is performed in ignorance of good and in the surrender to God of the deed which has become necessary and which is nevertheless, or for that very reason, free; for it is God who sees the heart, who weighs up the deed, and who directs the course of history.

With this there is disclosed to us a deep secret of history in general. The man who acts in the freedom of his own most personal responsibility is precisely the man who sees his action finally committed to the guidance of God. The free deed knows itself in the end as the deed of God; the decision knows itself as guidance; the free venture knows itself as divine necessity. It is in the free abandonment of knowledge of his own good that man performs the good of God. It is only from this last point of view that one can speak of good in historical action. We shall have to take up these considerations again later at the point at which we have left off.

Before that we still have to give some space to a crucial question which makes an essential contribution to the clarification of our problem. What is the relationship between free responsibility and obedience? It must seem at first sight as though everything we have said about free responsibility is applicable in practice only when a man finds himself in what we call a "responsible position" in life, in other words, when he has to make independent decisions on the very largest scale. What connection can there be between responsibility and the monotonous daily work of the laborer, the factory worker, the clerk, the private soldier, the apprentice or the schoolboy? It is a different matter already with the owner-farmer, the industrial contractor, the politician or statesman, the general, the master craftsman, the teacher and the judge. But in their lives, too, how much there is of technique and duty and how little of really free decision! And so it seems that everything that we have said about responsibility can in the end apply only to a very small group of men, and even to these only in a few moments of their lives; and consequently it seems as though for the great majority of men one must speak not of responsibility but of obedience and duty. This implies one ethic for the great and the strong, for the rulers, and another for the small and the weak, the subordinates; on the one hand responsibility and on the other obedience, on the one hand freedom and on the other subservience. And indeed there can be no doubt that in our modern social order, and especially in the German one, the life of the individual is so exactly defined and regulated, and is at the same time assured of such complete security, that it is granted to only very few men to breathe the free air of the wide open

spaces of great decisions and to experience the hazard of responsible action which is entirely their own. In consequence of the compulsory regulation of life in accordance with a definite course of training and vocational activity, our lives have come to be relatively free from ethical dangers; the individual who from his childhood on has had to take his assigned place in accordance with this principle is ethically emasculated; he has been robbed of the creative moral power, freedom. In this we see a deep-seated fault in the essential development of our modern social order, a fault which can be countered only with a clear exposition of the fundamental concept of responsibility. As things stand, the large-scale experiential material for the problem of responsibility must be sought for among the great political leaders, industrialists and generals; for indeed those few others who venture to act on their own free responsibility in the midst of the pressure of everyday life are being crushed by the machinery of the social order, by the general routine.

Yet it would be an error if we were to continue to look at the problem from this point of view. There is, in fact, no single life which cannot experience the situation of responsibility; every life can experience this situation in its most characteristic form, that is to say, in the encounter with other people. Even when free responsibility is more or less excluded from a man's vocational and public life, he nevertheless always stands in a responsible relation to other men; these relations extend from his family to his workmates. The fulfillment of genuine responsibility at this point affords the only sound possibility of extending the sphere of responsibility once more into vocational and public life. Where man meets man-and this includes the encounters of professional life-there arises genuine responsibility, and these responsible relationships cannot be supplanted by any general regulation or routine. That holds true, then not only for the relation between married people, or for parents and children, but also for the master and the apprentice, the teacher and his pupil, the judge and the accused.

But we can go one step further than this. Responsibility does not only stand side by side with relationships of obedience; it has its place also within these relationships. The apprentice has a duty of obedience towards his master, but at the same time he has also a free responsibility for his work, for his achievement and, therefore, also for his master. It is the same with the schoolboy and the student, and indeed also with the employee in any kind of industrial undertaking and with the Soldier in war. Obedience and responsibility are interlinked in such a way that one cannot say that responsibility begins only where obedience leaves off, but rather that obedience is rendered in responsibility. There will always be a relation of obedience and dependence; all that matters is that these should not, as they already largely do today, leave no room for responsibilities. To know himself to be responsible is more difficult for the man who is socially dependent than for the man who is socially free, but a relationship of dependence does not in any case in itself exclude free responsibility. The master and the servant, while preserving the relationships of obedience, can and should answer for each other in free responsibility.

The ultimate reason for this lies in that relation of men to God which is realized in Jesus - Christ. Jesus stands before God as the one who is both obedient and free. As the obedient one He does His Father's will in blind compliance with the law which is commanded Him, and as the free one He acquiesces in God's will out of His own most personal knowledge, with open eyes and a joyous heart; he recreates this will, as it were, out of Himself. Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will. Obedience restrains freedom; and freedom ennobles obedience. Obedience binds the creature to the Creator, and freedom enables the creature to stand before the Creator as one who is made in His image. Obedience shows man that he must allow himself to be told what is good and what God requires of him (Micah 6:8); and liberty enables him to do good himself. Obedience knows what is good and does it, and freedom dares to act, and abandons to God the judgement of good and evil. Obedience follows blindly and freedom has open eyes. Obedience acts without questioning and freedom asks what is the purpose. Obedience has its hands tied and freedom is creative. In obedience man adheres to the decalogue and in freedom man creates new decalogues (Luther).

In responsibility both obedience and freedom are realized. Responsibility implies tension between obedience and freedom. There would be no more responsibility if either were made independent of the other. Responsible action is subject to obligation, and yet it is creative. To make obedience independent of freedom leads only to the Kantian ethic of duty, and to make freedom independent of obedience leads only to the ethic of irresponsible genius. Both the man of duty and the genius carry their justification within themselves. The man of responsibility stands between obligation and freedom; he must dare to act under obligation and in freedom; yet he finds his justification neither in

his obligation nor in his freedom but solely in Him who has put him in this (humanly impossible) situation and who requires this deed of him. The responsible man delivers up himself and his deed to God.

We have tried to define the structure of responsible life in terms of deputyship, correspondence with reality, acceptance of guilt, and freedom. Now the demand for a more concrete formulation brings us to the question whether it is possible to advance a more exact definition of the place, the *locus*, at which responsible life is realized. Does responsibility set me in an unlimited field of activity? Or does it confine me strictly within the limits which are implied in my daily concrete tasks? What must I know myself to be responsible for? And what does not lie within the scope of my responsibility? Is there any purpose in regarding myself as responsible for everything that takes place in the world? Or can I stand by and watch these great events as an unconcerned spectator so long as my own tiny domain is in order? Am I to wear myself out in impotent zeal against all the wrong and all the misery that is in the world? Or am I entitled, in self-satisfied security, to let the wicked world run its course, so long as I cannot myself do anything to change it and so long as I have done my own work? What is the place and what are the limits of my responsibility?

## VOCATION

In having recourse to this concept which has come to be of almost unique significance for the history of ethics, namely, the concept of the calling, we must from the outset bear clearly in mind the following four points. First of all we are not thinking here of the secularized concept of the calling which Max Weber defines as a 'limited field of accomplishments.' Secondly, we are not thinking of that pseudo-Lutheran view for which the concept of vocation simply provides the justification and sanctification of secular institutions. Thirdly, even Luther's own conception of vocation cannot unreservedly be identified with the New Testament conception, just as in his translation of Romans 3:28 he very boldly ascribes to the New Testament concept (I Corinthians 7:20) a fullness of meaning which is indeed essentially justified but which goes beyond the normal linguistic usage. We shall therefore base ourselves on the biblical text as we find it. Fourthly, even though the terms 'vocation' and 'responsibility' in our current language are not identical with the New Testament concepts, they nevertheless correspond so remarkably happily that there is especially good reason for employing them.

In the encounter with Jesus Christ man hears the call of God and in it the calling to life in the fellowship of Jesus Christ. Divine grace comes upon man and lays claim to him. It is not man who seeks out grace in its own place - God dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto (I Timothy 6:16), but it is grace which seeks and finds man in *his* place - the Word was made flesh (John 1:14) - and which precisely in this place lays claim to him. This is a place which in every instance and in every respect is laden with sin and guilt, no matter whether it be a royal throne, the parlor of a respectable citizen or a miserable hovel. It is a place which is of this world. This visitation of man by grace occurred in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and it occurs in the word of Jesus Christ which is brought by the Holy Ghost. The call comes to man as a Gentile or as a Jew, free man or slave, man or woman, married or single. At the precise place where he is he is to hear the call and to allow it to lay claim to him. This does not mean that servitude or marriage or celibacy in itself is thereby justified; but the man who has been called can in any of these places belong to God. It is only through the call which I have heard in Christ, the call of the grace which lays claim to me, that, as a slave or as a free man, married or celibate, I can live justified before God. From the standpoint of Christ this life is now my calling; from my own standpoint it is my responsibility.

This will have excluded two disastrous misunderstandings, the secular Protestant one and the monastic one. It is not in the loyal discharge of the earthly obligations of his calling as a citizen, a worker and a father that a man fulfills the responsibility which is imposed on him, but it is in hearing the call of Jesus Christ. This call does indeed summon him to earthly duties, but that is never the whole of the call, for it lies always beyond these duties, before them and behind them. The calling, in the New Testament sense, is never a sanctioning of worldly institutions as such; its 'yes' to them always includes at the same time an extremely emphatic 'no,' an extremely sharp protest against the world. Luther's return from the monastery to the world, to the 'calling,' is, in the true New Testament sense, the fiercest attack and assault to be launched against the world since primitive Christianity. Now a man takes up his position against the world *in* the world; the calling is the place at which the

call of -Christ is answered, the place at which a man lives responsibly. Thus the task which is appointed for me in my calling is a limited one, but at the same time the responsibility to the call of Jesus Christ breaks through all limits.

The misunderstanding on the part of medieval monasticism does not lie in its recognition of the fact that the call of Jesus Christ involves man in a struggle against the world but in its attempt to find a place which is not the world and at which this call can, therefore, be answered more fitly. In this vain endeavor to escape from the world no serious consideration is given either to the `no' of God, which is addressed to the whole world, including the monastery, or to God's `yes', in which He reconciles the world with Himself. Consequently, even in its `no' to the world, God's call is taken less seriously in the monastic undertaking than in the secular calling as Luther (though not indeed pseudoLutheranism) understood it. It is entirely in line with Luther if we say that in a certain concrete instance the answer to the call of Jesus Christ may even consist in leaving a particular earthly calling in which one can no longer live responsibly. This thought is unacceptable only to pseudo-Lutheranism, with its belief in the sanctity of vocational duties and of earthly institutions as such, and with its belief that the world is everywhere good. Monasticism is right in so far as it is a protest against the misrepresentation of the New Testament idea of vocation. Luther, in his return to the world, was concerned solely for the total responsibility to the call of Christ. In this respect the monastic solution is doubly wrong. It restricts the compass of ultimately responsible life to the walls of the monastery, and it can only interpret as worthless compromise the life in which a man endeavors to unite in concrete responsibility to the call of Jesus Christ the `yes' and the `no' to life in the world which are implicit in that call. In answer to this failure to appreciate the responsibility of men, Luther invested this responsibility with a significance which is limited and yet at the same time has its foundations in the limitless. While doing this he rewarded the fulfillment of the earthly calling in responsibility to the call of Jesus Christ with the free and joyful conscience which springs from fellowship with Jesus Christ. The good and free conscience, therefore, does not come from the fulfillment of earthly vocational duty as such, for here conscience continues to be wounded by the unresolved conflict between a plurality of duties, so that the best that can be hoped for is the compromise of a divided conscience. It is only when the concrete vocation is fulfilled in responsibility towards the call of Jesus Christ, it is only upon the foundation of the knowledge of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, that conscience can be free in concrete action. The call of Christ alone, when it is responsibly obeyed in the calling, prevails over the compromise and over the conscience which this compromise has rendered insecure.

It follows from this that on the one side the center of my responsibility is determined by the call of Jesus Christ which is addressed to me.

Our enquiry as to the place and the limit of responsibility has led us to the concept of the calling. This answer is properly applicable only when the calling is understood simultaneously in all its dimensions. The calling is the call of Jesus Christ to belong wholly to Him; it is the laying claim to me by Christ at the place at which this call has found me; it embraces work with things and relations with persons; it demands a `limited field of accomplishments,' yet never as a value in itself, but in responsibility towards Jesus Christ. Through this relation to Christ the `limited field of accomplishments' is freed from its isolation. Its boundary is broken through not only from above, that is to say by Christ, but also in an outward direction. If, for example, I am a physician, then in the concrete instance I serve not only my patients but also medical science and with it science and the knowledge of truth in general. Although in practice I perform this service at my concrete position, for example at the bed-side of a patient, yet I am continuously aware of my responsibility for the whole, and it is only in this that I fulfill my calling. Furthermore, it may happen that I, as a physician, am obliged to recognize and fulfill my concrete responsibility no longer by the sick-bed, but, for example, in taking public action against some measure which constitutes a threat to medical science or to human life or to science as such. Vocation is responsibility and responsibility is a total response of the whole man to the whole of reality; for this very reason there can be no petty and pedantic restricting of one's interests to one's professional duties in the narrowest sense. Any such restriction would be irresponsibility. The essential character of free responsibility makes it impossible to establish laws defining when and to what extent such a departure from the `limited field of accomplishments' forms part of a man's calling and of his responsibility towards men. Such a departure can be undertaken only after a serious weighing up of the vocational duty which is directly given, of the dangers of interference in the responsibility of others, and finally of the totality of the question which is involved; when this is done I shall be guided in the one direction or the other by a

free responsibility towards the call of Jesus Christ. Responsibility in one's calling obeys only the call of Christ. There is a wrong and a right restriction and there is a wrong and a right extension of responsibility; there is a breaking-down of all limits, and there is a legalistic setting-up of limits. It is difficult, or even impossible, to judge from outside whether in a particular concrete instance an action is responsible or whether it is enthusiastic or legalistic; there are, however, criteria for self-examination, though even these cannot afford complete certainty about one's own ego. The following are among such criteria. Neither the limitation nor the extension of my responsibility must be based on a principle; the only possible basis for them is the concrete call of Jesus. If I know myself to be by character inclined towards reforming zeal, towards knowing better and towards fanaticism and unrestraint, then I shall be in danger of extending my responsibility in an arbitrary fashion and confusing my natural impulses with the call of Jesus. If I know myself to be prudent, cautious, diffident and law-abiding, then I shall have to guard against representing the restriction of my responsibility to a narrow field as the call of Jesus Christ. And, finally, it is never in thinking of myself, but it is always in thinking of the call of Christ, that I shall be set free for genuine responsibility.

Nietzsche, without knowing it, was speaking in the spirit of the New Testament when he attacked the legalistic and philistine misinterpretation of the commandment which bids us love our neighbor. He wrote: `You are assiduous in your attentions to your neighbor and you find beautiful words to describe your assiduity. But I tell you that your love for your neighbor is a worthless love for yourselves. You go to your neighbor to seek refuge from yourselves and then you try to make a virtue of it; but I see through your "unselfishness" . . .Do I advise you to love your neighbor? I advise you rather to shun your neighbor and to love whoever is furthest from you! Beyond the neighbor who is committed to us by the call of Jesus there stands also for Jesus the one who is furthest from us, namely Jesus Christ Himself, God Himself. If beyond his neighbor a man does not know this one who is furthest from him, and if he does not know this one who is furthest from him as this neighbor, then he does not serve his neighbor but himself; he takes refuge from the free open space of responsibility in the comforting confinement of the fulfillment of duty. This means that the commandment of love for our neighbor also does not imply a law which restricts our responsibility solely to our neighbor in terms of space, to the man whom I encounter socially, professionally or in my family. My neighbor may well be one who is extremely remote from me, and one who is extremely remote from me may well be my neighbor. By a terrible miscarriage of justice in the United States in 1831 nine young negroes, whose guilt could not be proved, were sentenced to death for the rape of a white girl of doubtful reputation. There arose a storm of indignation which found expression in open letters from some of the most authoritative public figures in Europe. A Christian who was perturbed by this affair asked a prominent cleric in Germany whether he, too, ought not to raise his voice in the matter, and on the grounds of the `Lutheran' idea of vocation, that is to say, on the grounds of the limitation of his responsibility, the clergyman refused. In the event the protests which came in from all parts of the world led to a revision of the judgment. Here perhaps it is from the point of view of the call of Jesus Christ that we may understand the saying of Nietzsche: `My brothers, I do not counsel you to love your neighbor; I counsel you to love him who is furthest from you.' We do not say this in order to pass judgement in the particular case to which we have just referred. We say it in order to keep open the boundary.

No one can fail to hear the Bible's admonitions to do what is waiting to be done (Ecclesiastes 9:10), to be exact in small matters (Luke 16:10 and 19:17), to discharge one's domestic obligations before undertaking greater duties (I Timothy 3:5); and to refrain from interfering in the functions of others (I Peter 4:15). Yet all these admonitions are contingent on the call of Christ, and they do not, therefore, imply any law which sets limits to the free responsibility towards this call. In the course of the struggle of the churches in Germany it happened often enough that a minister refused to intervene publicly and responsibly in cases of distress and persecution of various kinds precisely because his own flock were not yet themselves affected; he did not do this from cowardice or from lack of enterprise but solely because he considered such an intervention to be an unlawful overstepping of the calling which had been given to him, namely, his vocation to assist his flock in their distress and in their temptations. If subsequently his own flock came to be involved, then there often ensued an act of thoroughly authoritative and free responsibility. This again is not said in order to anticipate judgement but in order to preserve the openness of the commandment of brotherly love in the face of any false limitation and in order to safeguard the concept of vocation in the liberty with which the gospel invests it.

But is not all responsible action in one's calling confined within inviolable limits by the law of God as it is revealed in the ten commandments as well as by the divine mandates of marriage, labor

and government? Would not any overstepping of these limits constitute an infringement of the manifest will of God? Here there arises once again in its most acute form the problem of law and liberty. This problem now threatens to implant a contradiction in the will of God itself. Certainly there can be no responsible action which does not devote extremely serious consideration to the limit which is given through God's law, and yet it is precisely responsible action which will not separate this law from its Giver. It is only as the Redeemer in Jesus Christ that responsible action will be able to recognize the God who holds the world in order by His law; it will recognize Jesus Christ as the ultimate reality towards which it is responsible, and it is precisely by Him that it will be set free from the law for the responsible deed. For the sake of God and of our neighbor, and that means for the sake of Christ, there is a freedom from the keeping holy of the Sabbath, from the honoring of our parents, and indeed from the whole of the divine law, a freedom which breaks this law, but only in order to give effect to it anew. The suspension of the law can only serve the true fulfillment of it. In war, for example, there is killing, lying and expropriation solely in order that the authority of life, truth and property may be restored. A breach of the law must be recognized in~all its gravity. `Blessed art thou if thou knowest what thou doest; but if thou knowest it not, then art thou accursed and a transgressor of the law' (Luke 6:4 in Codex D). Whether an action arises from responsibility or from cynicism is shown only by whether or not the objective guilt of the violation of the law is recognized and acknowledged, and by whether or not, precisely in this violation, the law is hallowed. It is in this way that the will of God is hallowed in the deed which arises from freedom. But since this is a deed which arises from freedom, man is not torn asunder in deadly conflict, but in certainty and in unity with himself he can dare to hallow the law truly even by breaking it.