

# Soteriology as Pre-condition for Bonhoeffer's Ethical Thought

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## ABSTRACT

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The article proposes soteriology as the pre-condition for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethical thought. Particular analyses are given of Bonhoeffer's 1929 lecture *Basic questions of a Christian ethic* and the 1932 seminar *Is there a Christian ethic?* It uses excerpts from student notes from the early period and two *Ethics* manuscripts from the late period of his theological work. The analyses are made bearing in mind the political, economic and theological context in which Bonhoeffer's ethical thoughts emerged.

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## Introduction

The article first examines the gist of *Basic questions of a Christian ethic* and *Is there a Christian ethic?* suggesting the manner in which soteriology informs Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethic. The two documents were written in 1929 and 1932, respectively. The period was characterised by political uncertainties and economic challenges. The Weimar Republic was drifting towards its collapse. Questions abounded in Germany as regards the role of Christianity in the Great War and post-war national rebuilding. Bonhoeffer set out to examine the ethic that undergirded Christianity's stance in the war and post-war periods. In his explanation, the prevailing philosophical ethic and Christian ethic were inadequate to address the political and economic challenges of the time because those ethics tended to move from humanity to God. Bonhoeffer proffered a typically Christian ethic that accepted God's movement towards the sinful and unholy humanity. In the early period, soteriology foregrounds Bonhoeffer's ethical thought.

We proceed to consider *Ethics* which was written later, between 1940 and 1943, during the Second World War. Two manuscripts, "Christ, Reality and Good: Christ, Church and World" and "Heritage and decay", are selected. The examination of the manuscripts reveals the doctrine of salvation as the base of Bonhoeffer's ethical reflections. Bonhoeffer's earlier ethical thoughts, such as the will of God critique of the *Volk* ideology and exploring the essence of a Christian ethic, appear in these *Ethics* manuscripts.