

# A QUESTION OF ETHICS

An SCM Workshop

Can a Christian ever be justified in the purposeful and premeditative murder of someone else?

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A Bible is optional. All you need is thoughtful voices and a piece of paper for each participant reading:

Exodus 20:13 (KJV) – “Thou shalt not kill”

Exodus 20:13 (NRSV) – “You shall not murder”

Is this difference in translation important? If so, why?

## EXODUS 20:13 (15)

Ask the group what translation of the Bible they use. Is the type of translation you read important to you and to your experience of scripture?

In academia, the translation NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) is most often used. It's one of the most direct and accurate translations of the Bible available to us right now. While often not as poetically worded as the aspirational quotes you may have seen on Facebook or Instagram, their NRSV counterparts generally share the core sentiments... but not always.

One of the most popular translations of the Bible used in the UK is KJV (King James Version). This translation makes some Bible passages much longer, is very descriptive and a lot more focused on narrative and characters.

Put the group into pairs (or large groups if preferred) ready for the activity to begin. Ask, “does anyone know what Exodus 20:13 says?”

Hand out the slips of paper and give everybody 5 minutes to discuss what their initial thoughts are.

## QUESTIONS BUILD CHARACTER

What sort of questions come to mind when distinguishing if there is a difference between killing and murder? Discuss as a group (feel free to come up with your own questions and discussion points):

Did you 'kill' someone if it was accidental?

Is self-defence 'murder'?

Is it still murder if you yourself do not do the killing (this is known as conspiracy to murder)?

In your opinion, which translation of Exodus do you think best reflects your own interpretation of the Bible's message?

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### DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (30)

On 20th July 1944, a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler failed.

7000 people were arrested in connection with the plot, some before it even took place. 5000 of those people were executed by the Gestapo, one being a Lutheran pastor and theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Ask if anyone has heard on Bonhoeffer before or know anything about him?


## THE TIMELINE

For many years Bonhoeffer identified as a pacifist. He was a highly educated inquisitive man who, after living in New York in this mid-twenties, developed a deep understanding of the relationship between faith and action.

In 1937, living in Germany again, Bonhoeffer published his most famous work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he began preaching the theological decree of disobedience and single-mindedness when society is faced with an unjust regime. He was actually one of the first people to openly criticise Hitler even before he rose to high heights of power.

The following year, 1938, he made his first contact with the resistance through his brother-in-law and the intelligence corps of the German military. Bonhoeffer became a covert courier for the German resistance working under the guise of official military business.

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By 1941, Bonhoeffer was banned from public speaking and his actions closely monitored by the police. By now, Bonhoeffer's perspective on pacifism was beginning to waver as the resistance moved into the territory of political conspiracy.

On 5th April 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and taken to Tegel prison. Here he wrote countless letters, which have since been published, expressing his struggle with remaining strong and trusting in scripture and the will of God. Shortly after the failure of the 20th July plot, evidence was discovered directly linking Bonhoeffer to the assassination plans.

He was hung to death on 9th April 1945, age 39, at Flossenbürg concentration camp just two weeks before its liberation, 21 days before Hitler's suicide and 28 days prior to the unconditional surrender of Germany.

## WHAT MAKES A MURDERER?

Feel free to look at a Bible for this next part.

Execution refers to the 'lawful' killing of a condemned person by the state/government.

Murder, on the other hand, is defined as the unlawful (often) premeditated killing of one person by another. Assassination is just a fancy term highlighting the high status of the person who's been murdered.

Consider these quotes from Bonhoeffer alongside moral questions regarding the ethics of killing. Crucially, there are no right answers and you do not need to discuss in depth all/any of them, they are merely prompts for participation if the quotes alone are not enough to spark conversation. This exercise is designed to allow you to openly question the complexities of morality, particularly when certain situations are not comparable to events from the Bible:

“There is meaning in every journey that is unknown to the traveller.”

Can the (attempted) assassination of Hitler be considered 'a means to an end'?

Is that concept in itself questionable?





"The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world that it leaves to its children."

Where do we draw the line when pursuing the happiness of our futures?

How do we determine what constitutes an exceptional circumstance in which murder might be made acceptable?

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die"

How do you think a pastor like Bonhoeffer justified his involvement in the plot?

Is it right to risk your life in the pursuit of the greater good?

"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

Do you think the killing Hitler would have made a difference?

Do you believe the background/denomination of a Christian might affect their dedication to social action?.. i.e. students from evangelical backgrounds have pondered that, even though they may no longer consider themselves part of the denomination, evangelical Christians might be the 'best' activists due to their passion and moral certainty.

"We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

With the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in mind, is murder always wrong?

Even if it's not always wrong, can murder ever be considered moral?

## **CLOSING THE WORKSHOP (5)**

To end this workshop, writing down individually your thoughts on the slips of paper you were given earlier, return to this previous question:

Having thought about it further, taking into consideration Bonhoeffer's contribution to both ethics and activism, which translation of Exodus 20:13 do you think best reflects the Bible's message of love?

**Dear God,**

**Grant us, oh Lord, a vision of your world as your love would have it:**

**A world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;**

**A world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;**

**A world where different races and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect;**

**A world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.**

**Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**Amen.**

