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In 1986, 23 years after establishing the Righteous Among the Nations project, Yad Vashem brought down the first of its many decisions to deny the title to the martyred Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As recently as October 2003, when the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the summary of the reasons behind the committee’s rejection could be published, Yad Vashem has consistently maintained that Bonhoeffer falls outside the scope of the legal definition. While he does deserve recognition as a meritorious fighter against the Nazi regime—according to Mordecai Paldiel, he was ‘one of the good guys’—Bonhoeffer simply does not fit the criteria of righteous, as established by the Yad Vashem Law (5713/1953) of August 1953.

Curiously, Bonhoeffer’s own ecclesiastical authorities adopted a similar stance during the Nazi era. As Victoria Barnett has noted, neither Bonhoeffer’s nor Niemoeller’s names were included in churches’ weekly Fürbittenlisten because their resistance was deemed to be political rather than theological. As far as the bishops were concerned, Bonhoeffer did not deserve prayerful intercession within the context of corporate worship, as his imprisonment had nothing to do with his faith.

The intent of this article is neither to argue against Yad Vashem’s decision (with which I nonetheless disagree), nor to explore the church-political context which gave rise to the general malaise from which the German churches suffered during the Nazi period. Rather, this paper will seek to suggest that Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the Beatitudes provide a more appropriate paradigm of Ἰσχύς/δικαιοσύνη (righteousness) and correlative
I. Costly Discipleship

By 1935, when Bonhoeffer began writing the lectures that would later become *Nachfolge*, he had already seen, at least from a distance, how bitter Christian discipleship under Nazism could be. He was well aware of how ferocious the Church Struggle could—and would—become, having confronted Reich Bishop Müller and even the head of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels, over the Church elections of 1933. Moreover, the increasingly precarious circumstances of his brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz and good friend Franz Hildebrandt gave a disturbingly close perspective of what was in store for ‘non-Aryans’ in Germany.

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer himself was under no direct threat—at least, no threat that could not at this early stage have been avoided had he chosen a different path—in the years up to 1935. Even his appointment to the directorship of the Finkenwalde seminary was not, at least initially, sufficiently illegal to cause him any great concern. One could (somewhat churlishly) argue that the most damaging hit that Bonhoeffer had had to take between 1933 and 1935 was Karl Barth’s scathing criticism of his decision to leave Germany for England. Given the high esteem in which Bonhoeffer regarded Barth, it must have been deeply upsetting to be likened by him to ‘Jonah under the gourd’.

Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer was astute enough to realize that the advent of Nazism presented a most serious challenge to Christian witness. Indeed, the
entire concept of discipleship—of nachfolge Christi, the imitation of Christ—was, in Bonhoeffer’s view, in need of a radical overhaul. It is likely that even without the particular problems caused by Hitler’s rise to power, Bonhoeffer would have explored a more far-reaching understanding of discipleship. Without question, though, the Nazi Machtergreifung raised the urgency of the issue to a new level of priority in Bonhoeffer’s mind, even before he became a direct victim of its consequences. However, before exploring the content of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of discipleship and righteousness as it evolved throughout the period of the Third Reich, it is useful to contrast this with the concept of righteousness as modelled by both Yad Vashem on the one hand, and Protestant theology on the other.

II. Yad Vashem: who are the righteous?
The word for ‘righteous’ in the Hebrew Scriptures (ts’daqah / צדקה ) refers not only to an individual’s state of justification before God, but also to the merits of a king or government and, ultimately, to the moral purity of God himself. Most importantly for our purposes here, however, it also carries with it the critical implication of ethical propriety. It is this connotation that, quite naturally, lies behind the criteria that need to be fulfilled by anyone who has a legitimate claim to being honoured by Yad Vashem as a ‘righteous among the nations’. It is, in other words, simple but nonetheless crucial to state that, unlike traditional Christian paradigms, Yad Vashem requires no proof or even hint of religious faith in order to bestow its highest honour. If St. Paul claims that ‘the righteous shall live by faith’, no such demand is made by Yad Vashem. Instead, a far more down-to-earth and, indeed verifiable, criterion is required—that of documented ethical behaviour in the face of direct danger.
The Yad Vashem Law of 1953, by which the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority was established, entrusts the authority ‘to commemorate the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their helpers; the Jewish communities and their institutions that had been liquidated and destroyed; the valor and heroism of the soldiers, the fighters of the underground, and the prisoners in the ghettos; the sons and daughters of the Jewish people who had struggled for their human dignity; and the “Righteous among the Nations” who had risked their lives in order to save Jews.’

The commemoration of the rescuers and their designation as ‘righteous’ has, since 1963, been under the control of a commission headed by a member of the Israeli Supreme Court. Protocols of the commission’s debates concerning particular individuals’ claims to be recognized are not made public, but the criteria for assessing the merits of a claim include:

- A description of the aid extended.
- Whether any material compensation was paid in return for the aid, and, if so, in what amount.
- The dangers and risks faced by the rescuer at the time.
- The rescuer’s motivations, in so far as this is ascertainable; e.g., friendship, altruism, religious belief, humanitarian considerations, or others.
- The availability of evidence from the rescued persons (an almost indispensable precondition for the purpose of this program).
• Other relevant data and pertinent documentation that might shed light on the authenticity and uniqueness of the story.

Evidently, ‘righteousness’, as far as Yad Vashem defines the term, requires no measure of faith but rather places the highest of premiums on ethical bravery. Instead of rewarding the ‘faithful’, Yad Vashem rewards those whose lives have exemplified moral purity by their willingness to sacrifice their own safety to help rescue one or several Jews, within a historical context in which to do so was to be guilty of treason.

Two features of this definition stand out. First, and has been noted before, there is no requirement of faith. Second, the scope of moral or ethical propriety needs to extend only so far as the rescuing of Jews from Nazism’s genocidal machinery. Of course, the phrase ‘only so far as’ does not minimize the enormity of such conspiratorial acts of rescue. The very fact that the designation of ‘righteous’ by Yad Vashem requires that the rescuers risked their own lives testifies to the magnitude of their bravery. On the other hand, ‘only so far as’ does mean that Yad Vashem’s particular brand of righteousness overlooks moral/ethical flaws in general, insofar as those flaws did not hinder the rescuer from in fact rescuing Jews. The case of Oskar Schindler—at the very least a Gauner (swindler) in business, and serially unfaithful to his wife—illustrates the point made by Berenbaum and Peck; that the title of ‘righteous’ bestowed upon non-Jewish rescuers ‘misrepresents the historic reality. Many rescuers were not righteous.’ Indeed, even Mordecai Paldiel, Director of the Department of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, agrees that the rescuers were not motivated necessarily by any particular ethic because, by and large, they did not seek to be rescuers. Rather,
they were confronted by circumstances in which they had to choose—often immediately—between rescuing or refusing, irrespective of other moral or ethical attitudes.\(^8\)

There is nothing inherently wrong with a certain moral ambiguity surrounding the concept of righteousness. To the extent that Yad Vashem has clearly delineated its own criteria of righteousness, it cannot be accused of unfair dealing. In the case of Bonhoeffer, it can legitimately be argued whether or not he meets the requirements, but it cannot be argued that Yad Vashem does not have the right to set the criteria as it sees fit. Nonetheless, it remains the case that those who are so honoured by Yad Vashem need only have met a very narrow set of obligations, albeit that those obligations entailed certain risks and dangers. So, while acknowledging Yad Vashem’s prerogative to define righteousness for its own purposes, the definition itself seems nonetheless to contain deficiencies of applicability. In turning to the understanding of righteousness as held by orthodox Protestantism, it can be seen that similar deficiencies appear.

III. **Faith and works? Protestant ethics of righteousness**

The dialectic of faith and works, and their respective roles in the attribution of righteousness, has been a cause of tension within Christianity since the very earliest days of the community’s existence. Sts. James and Paul are typically held up as examples of the tension, on the basis of a comparison of texts such as the Pauline Rom.3:22, 28 and James 2:14-26. For Paul, the righteousness of God is forensically attributed to those whose faith is in Christ. For James, faith is deficient unless accompanied by ‘works’, that is, by ethical praxis.
Needless to say, this rather straightforward dialectic is an oversimplification of the matter. James does not at all oppose Paul, as both understand the state of righteousness to be a forensic declaration by God on the basis of the sufficiency of the cross, and not at all as an infusing of holiness into the individual.9 Similarly, the Pauline emphasis on faith does not discount the necessity of good works as an essential outcome of grace (e.g. Eph.2:10).

Nonetheless, the history of the Church suggests that the oversimplistic dichotomy between faith and works (ethics) has acquired more significance than it deserves. Since the Reformation, Luther and Calvin have been separated from one another roughly along the (alleged) Paul-James divide. In much the same way that Paul has been caricaturized as eschewing the value of good works per se, Luther’s position has too often—and wrongly—been restricted to the catch-cry of sola fide.10 Similarly, Calvin’s model of justification, according to which good works flow from God’s gracious declaration of righteousness, when combined with the Calvinist view of (predestined) vocation/calling11, has led to Calvinists feeling compelled ‘to perform good works to show themselves that they were predestined to be saved.’12

Both of these representations—of Luther on the one hand and Calvin on the other—are caricatures. ‘By faith alone’ was indeed what Luther unashamedly emphasized: but simul iustus et peccator; the Christian lives under the Law (as to the flesh) and under Gospel (as to the spirit), and so ‘the Law, although abrogated, is still in force.’13 As for the Reformed view, Calvinism’s ‘work ethic’ does an injustice to Calvin’s own insistence on the primacy of grace.
However, there remains a kernel of truth in them, to the extent that Luther and followers such as Thielicke regard Law and Gospel to be in unresolved tension, whereas Calvin and followers such as Barth perceive a harmonious correlation between the two. Barth sums up the differences this way: in Luther, we see a ‘hesitant uncertainty... face to face with the ethical problem’, whereas in Calvin we have ‘a Christianity equipped for action and armed to the teeth...’ While no doubt Barth has to a degree perpetuated the stereotype, he does remind us of the general truth, that throughout the history of Christian thought the Church has struggled to adequately reconcile the injunction to concrete ethical action with the apostolic insistence on the sufficiency of grace. With this tension in view, it becomes easier to see why, in the context of Nazi Germany, there was a stronger core of resistance from within the Reformed churches than from amongst the Lutherans.

There is a further question, consequent upon establishing the legitimacy of good works within Christianity, which is as follows: if ethical praxis is enjoined of the Christian as a sign (but not cause) of righteousness, what sort of actions constitute this sign? We have seen that the Yad Vashem framework restricts righteousness to those acts by which non-Jews sought to rescue Jews from the Holocaust at their own personal risk. How tightly restricted are Christian works of righteousness?

According to Karl Barth’s amplification of the Heidelberg Catechism, ‘it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.’ What this means in practice is clarified when Barth states that
only that human action is obedient to God’s command which keeps the right of man (sic) established in Jesus Christ in such a way that it also respects human dignity, preserves and furthers human life in every form, brings honor to the relationship between man and woman, creates a real community of work and compensation, and makes human speech to be an instrument of truth.18

On the one hand, this ethical awareness is broadly inclusive of all people, an inclusivity which returns in Barth’s Church Dogmatics 1/2.19 On the other hand, Barth’s description of Christian ethical righteousness suffers from a certain practical vagueness—a ‘lack of specificity [as to what constitutes] right conduct toward fellow humans’, as Nigel Biggar puts it.20 Perhaps not surprisingly, it was precisely this lack of ethical concreteness in Barth—at least in the period immediately prior to the Nazi seizure of power—that was so disappointing to Bonhoeffer, for whom the (divinely-commanded) outworkings of righteousness were so vital.21

But Barth’s ambiguity in this regard is hardly unique to him. The very fact that there has been division throughout Christian history between those for whom good works are important and those for whom they are irrelevant has resulted, inevitably, in ambiguity as to the nature of Christian ethical righteousness. There is no distinctively Christian answer to such ethical dilemmas as war, homosexuality, abortion, political conspiracy, suicide, and many others besides. Most acutely in the context of Bonhoeffer’s own life, there is no distinctively Christian ethic of statehood, or of the Church’s relationship to the State. Within traditional Lutheranism, for example, there
are two separate social moralities existing side by side, the spiritual and the worldly. As McGrath has said, Luther makes the Sermon on the Mount a ‘splendid moral guide for the individual Christian—but its moral demands are not necessarily applicable to the public morality.’ Conversely, because the Church lies within the world, it is enjoined to submit to the magisterial order of the world, irrespective of the manner in which secular authorities wield their power. In the Reformed view, on the other hand, the Church-State relationship is characterized by a far greater reciprocity, enabling the ‘ministry’ to confront the ‘magistracy’ with the Word of God in a manner undreamed of by Luther. What is regarded as righteous ethical praxis vis-à-vis the State thus differs according to confession, and helps explain further the relative strength of resistance against Nazism by the Lutheran and Reformed Churches.

### IV. Bonhoeffer’s Righteousness: the evolution of a concept

This article has thus far made the claim that both Yad Vashem and traditional Protestant theology embody an ethical ambiguity with regard to how they respectively understand the practical application of righteousness. For Yad Vashem, all manner of moral and criminal flaws can be overlooked if, to compensate, it can be demonstrated that the individual in question nonetheless risked her or his life to rescue Jews from the Nazis. For Protestantism, the ambiguity lies in the value of righteous praxis itself, and the extent to which the premium placed upon faith serves in fact to diminish the place of ethics. But what of Bonhoeffer himself? The rest of this paper will explore the evolution of Bonhoeffer’s ethic of righteousness to see how far his theology provides us with a viable alternative to the previous two options.
a. *Thoughts of a young theologian*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was, and remained, a Lutheran. His theological training and early academic career must be seen in this light if we are to begin at the right place. Studying at Tübingen under Schlatter and Heim, and then in Berlin under Harnack, Holl and Seeberg, the young Bonhoeffer was immersed deeply in the rich seam of Lutheranism. He most likely would have heard Harnack teach lessons like this: that ‘Jesus was no political revolutionary [and he] laid down no political programme’. On the contrary, ‘[Jesus] recognised that [those who wielded the sword] had an actual right to be obeyed, and he never withdrew...from their jurisdiction.’23 It is because of this thoroughly Lutheran education, according to Bethge, that the costly view of discipleship that was to become so characteristic of Bonhoeffer’s more mature thought finds no concrete expression in his first two publications, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Akt und Sein*. In his early career, Bonhoeffer was ‘still a traditional Lutheran who [had] learned the lesson of how to escape the directness of the Sermon on the Mount; the literal understanding makes it law, and the law is abolished in Christ.’24 Even Seeberg seems to have recognised this deficiency, writing to Bonhoeffer in late 1928 that the young scholar would be well-advised to choose for his post-doctoral work ‘perhaps...a systematic and historical treatment of ethics from the Sermon on the Mount to the present day.’25 In spite of this urging, however, ‘epistemology still took precedence over ethics.’26

When, therefore, did the question of righteous praxis—as opposed to philosophy and ecclesial sociology—begin to come to the forefront of Bonhoeffer’s mind? Both Paul Lehmann and Eberhard Bethge identify
Bonhoeffer’s visit to the USA in 1930-31 as the watershed. Not only did his friend Frank Fisher introduce him to the urgent problem of race relations, but through his studies at Union Theological Seminary, he saw theologians troubling themselves with the social questions of labour exploitation, civil rights and youth delinquency. Bethge notes that his UTS teachers Reinhold Neibuhr and John Baillie regarded him as politically naïve—but the American experience nonetheless had a profound effect upon him.\(^{27}\) It is probably no accident that in a letter to Erwin Sutz shortly after his return to Germany, Bonhoegger remarked, in a fashion unimaginable before America, that ‘I sometimes simply cannot see the right thing to do...in the unprecedented situation of our public life in Germany.’\(^{28}\)

\textbf{b. The Sermon on the Mount}

Evidently, the ‘disinterest’ in social activism characteristic of Bonhoeffer’s pre-America years was unambiguously shattered in the tumultuous years immediately preceding the Nazis’ seizure of power. Ethics, not epistemology, was now his primary concern. Inasmuch as he was still committed to exploring the nature of the Church, it was now in terms of concrete and authoritative commandments, not merely sociological existence. As mentioned earlier, it was precisely in this area—the location of the foundations of the Church’s ethical commandments—that Bonhoeffer felt disappointed by Barth who, he believed, had surrendered both ethical certainties and principles.\(^{29}\)

This difference between the two men over ethical ‘certainties’ was to become most evident in late 1933, in the aftermath of the ‘Brown Synod’ when the Prussian synod voted to endorse the ‘Aryan Paragraph’. Both Barth and
Bonhoeffer agreed that the event placed the Church in \textit{status confessionis}, but whereas Barth cautioned against initiating a schism, Bonhoeffer felt that an ‘immediate exodus’ would be both theologically logical and politically astute.\textsuperscript{30} It was in part a consequence of this conviction that Bonhoeffer, when the opportunity arose in October 1933, went to London to take up the pastorate of a German-speaking parish. The chief significance of this period is that it was in London that Bonhoeffer began seriously to reflect upon the Sermon on the Mount. From that time on, the \textit{Bergpredigt} was his touchstone and measure of what discipleship should look like. As he wrote to his friend Sutz in 1934, ‘it always comes back to keeping the commandment and not evading it. Discipleship of Christ—I’d like to know what that is—is not exhausted in our concept of faith.’\textsuperscript{31}

What, then, were Bonhoeffer’s conclusions? How did he understand the Sermon on the Mount to outline the requirements of discipleship? And what are the consequences for his understanding of righteousness?

The best summary of \textit{Nachfolge} is possibly the statement that ‘only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.’\textsuperscript{32} By this, Bonhoeffer makes a claim for the fundamental unity (but not identity) of faith and law. Neither law nor works are causal preconditions of faith, but obedience is nonetheless a presupposition of faith; without this initial step, faith will be ‘a pious humbug’ and will result in ‘grace that is not costly’.\textsuperscript{33} Insofar as one evades the concrete commands of Christ—whether that be by sophistry and academic speculation as to what obedience ‘means’\textsuperscript{34}, or by a purer form of simple defiance—faith is absent. For Bonhoeffer, therefore, discipleship is necessarily worldly; to follow the law of Christ is to immerse oneself in the pain, suffering and guilt of the world. It is ‘to be experienced
and recognized precisely in the strongest engagement in this world.’ The Sermon on the Mount is thus no mere allegory, nor is it a generalized charter of ethical principles. Rather, it is the concrete command of Christ that ‘retains exclusive power over them [the hearers].’ No matter how many interpretations of it are possible, ‘Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience, not interpreting it or applying it, but doing and obeying it.’

The ramifications of this uncompromising exegesis are startling, but nor, perhaps, in the ways that might be expected. The emphasis in Nachfolge on doing and obeying might lead one to expect that Bonhoeffer leans toward a semi-Pelagian endorsement of a causal relationship between works and righteousness, in which case he would confirm Yad Vashem’s framework, even if arguably not meeting the specificity of the work required. At the very least, it could be construed that he has abandoned his Lutheran heritage and adopted a Calvinistic works-ethic. Indeed, does he not complain that Luther’s formulae—sola fide and pecca fortiter—have been perverted into a ‘carcase of cheap grace’? He goes on to argue that ‘to be “Lutheran” [has meant that we have left] the following of Christ to legalists, Calvinists and enthusiasts...The result was that [Germany] became Christian and Lutheran, but at the cost of true discipleship.’

In fact, Bonhoeffer has become neither Pelagian nor Reformed. He remains committed to Luther’s perception of grace and argues only against its ‘fatal misunderstanding’. Similarly, while justification accrues to the ‘doers of the law’ (Rom.2:13)—oί ποιηται νόμου—the good works themselves, which are the aim of the Christian life, are ‘those which God himself works in us’—
singly, Christ. It is in this context that his understanding of righteousness needs to be seen.

‘Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled’ (Matt.5:6). With this verse, Bonhoeffer makes his first reference in Nachfolge to righteousness. His commentary on this beatitude combines a typically reformational understanding of forensic righteousness—‘they are blessed because...here and now...they are sustained by the bread of life, the bliss of sinners’—with an eschatological fulfilment of the promise, ‘the future righteousness of God’ in the ‘Messianic Feast’. True to his heritage, Bonhoeffer also insists that this righteousness cannot be established by anyone but God. Moreover, it accrues only to those who renounce both their rights and their own sense of goodness. Self-satisfaction in one’s morality bars the way to being genuinely declared righteous by God.

However, Bonhoeffer’s exegesis is not restricted to the eschaton or to some transcendent realm divorced from the world. On the contrary, his vision of righteousness is very much embedded in the experience of profound worldliness, with all the attendant suffering that that entails. Those who hunger and thirst ‘are still involved in the world’s curse’, not only due to their own sin but also by virtue of having put aside their (human) rights and letting themselves thus be exposed to the sinfulness of others. Georg Strecker vindicates this view that righteousness is thoroughly grounded in human praxis, and is not merely the reward for passively waiting upon God. According to his reading of the Gospels, the first evangelist uses the word δικαιοσύνη seven times, of which five are in the Sermon on the Mount. With the exception of Matt.6:33, all other usages of the word refer to ‘a human
attitude that is supposed to be realized through active deeds.’ The image of hungering and thirsting is therefore not an image of passivity but of ‘a decisive ethical initiative that stakes everything on realizing righteousness here and now.’43 This is precisely what Bonhoeffer is saying—except that for Bonhoeffer, the ethical initiative is not so much an act but a renunciation.

The theme of suffering continues through the rest of the beatitudes, culminating in Matt.5:10, ‘blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ It is here that Bonhoeffer strikes out on a path that was rare among his contemporaries but unsurprising in the context of his own preceding arguments: the blessing of heavenly citizenship is bestowed not merely upon those who are persecuted for their confession of Christ, but for those who suffer ‘in any just cause.’44 As Strecker has noted, ‘the beatitude relates specifically to an attitude that can be termed righteous...The conditio sine qua non of this beatitude is thus a human ethical attitude.’45 There is, in other words, an echo of Yad Vashem in Bonhoeffer’s exegesis of this verse: righteousness can be independent of the requirement of faith.

Conversely, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, former minister of London’s Westminster Chapel and widely regarded as one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century, has levelled an oblique, but nonetheless recognizable criticism of Bonhoeffer, in his own—very different—interpretation of this beatitude. ‘[T]here have been men...who have suffered, and have even been put into prisons and concentration camps, for religion. But they have not been suffering for righteousness’ sake.’46 Nor does the persecution referred to in this beatitude correspond to ‘religio-political’ persecution. In a disturbing parallel to the refusal of the German Lutheran Church to take a stand against
the Nazi regime per se, Lloyd-Jones remarks that those Christians in Nazi Germany who mixed religion and politics were naturally persecuted, but not for righteousness’ sake. ‘If you choose to suffer politically, go on and do so. But do not have a grudge against God if you find that this Beatitude, this promise, is not verified in your life.’\(^47\) Such a restrictive interpretation of the text blasphemes against the memory of Bonhoeffer and other martyrs of the time, like Bernhard Lichtenberg and Paul Schneider.

It is evident from Bonhoeffer’s treatment of the Beatitudes in *Discipleship* that the tyranny of Nazism—perhaps most acutely experienced by him in the context of the Church Struggle and the persecution of the Jews—had proven to him how urgent it was to concretize the ethics of the Church as a visible community. His understanding of what discipleship entails had clearly evolved since his days as a young academic under Seeberg. It was to evolve even further as the costliness of discipleship led Bonhoeffer into ever-more dangerous situations.

c. *Righteousness and resistance*

The closure of the Finkenwalde seminary on or around 28 September 1937 ushered in a third and final stage of evolution in Bonhoeffer’s theology of righteousness and ethics that was to find practical expression in his political conspiracy, and literary expression in his prison writings. Building on the foundations laid in *Nachfolge*, Bonhoeffer personified in this period precisely the ethical concreteness, renunciation of rights, and persecution in a just cause that, as has been seen, figures so prominently in *Discipleship*.

Other studies have detailed the nature of Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the Canaris conspiracy and the U-7 plan fully, so there is no need to repeat the
history here. Of greater interest is the way in which his theological framework was reconciled with his political activism. From as early as the winter of 1939-40, during which time Bonhoeffer became party to the embryonic treachery of Dohnanyi and Oster, he was able to accept that treason and patriotism had swapped values. The ‘borderline situation’—those circumstances in which ‘I cannot live without conflict and suffering, in which I must take upon myself unavoidable guilt, in which I must die’—had arrived, and with it, at least for Bonhoeffer, came the inner necessity truly to live the text of the Beatitudes.

According to Bethge, 17 June 1940 marked a watershed in Bonhoeffer’s life and thought. It was on that day—the day that France surrendered—that it became clear to him that the Hitler regime had fundamentally changed the world, and would be around for longer than any of its opponents had previously thought possible. It was at this point that Bonhoeffer moved from conversation partner to active participant in the conspiracy and, not surprisingly, it was in this context that he began drafting his *Ethics*.

From the winter of 1941-42 through until the summer of 1942, Bonhoeffer was busy with the section of his *Ethics* entitled ‘Die Geschichte und das Gute’. This was the period in which he began his various journeys to Norway, Sweden and Switzerland under the cover of his *Abwehr* responsibilities, but in reality to further the work of the Canaris conspiracy and the U-7 project. It was also at this time that Bonhoeffer first met Helmut von Moltke, the founder of the Kreisau Circle. In spite of their common faith and shared conviction that Germany’s plight was desperate, Bethge notes that they nonetheless differed on the matter of resistance. For Moltke, it was still uncertain whether or not the removal of the regime by force was necessary. Bonhoeffer, meanwhile, had become convinced of the need to assassinate

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Hitler. As he writes in *Ethics*, there comes a point in which ‘the domain of
the normal and regular...is confronted by the extraordinary situation of
ultimate necessities...[in which] the technique of statecraft has now been
supplanted by the necessity of state.’ In such circumstances, ‘necessity obeys
no commandment. Precisely in [the] breaking of the law the validity of the law
is acknowledged.’ As a result, responsible action becomes guilty action. In the
same way that Bonhoeffer has already admonished those Christians who are
willing only to suffer for the sake of Christ, he now contends that ‘[if] any man
*sic* tries to escape guilt in responsibility he...cuts himself off from the
redeeming mystery of Christ’s bearing guilt without sin and *has no share in
the divine justification which lies upon this event.’ In precisely the same way
that hungering and thirsting after righteousness are seen by Bonhoeffer to be
deeply embedded within the world of sin and guilt, truly Christ-like ethical
action—in the context of *necessità*—now also requires a willingness to share in
the fellowship of guilt. Clearly, this was no mere armchair ethics, but a
course of action to which Bonhoeffer, as a Christian, was unflinchingly
committed.

By the autumn of that year, Bonhoeffer was in Klein-Krösin, again
reflecting upon the Beatitudes and the nature of righteousness. ‘In times
which are out of joint,’ he writes, ‘when lawlessness and wickedness triumph
in complete unrestraint, it is...in relation to the few remaining just, truthful
and human men that the gospel will make itself known.’ But who are these
just and honest people? Those who are ‘persecuted for the sake of a just
(*gerechten*) cause, and, as we may now add, for the sake of a true, good and
human cause.’ According to Bonhoeffer, it is these people—people who have
quite likely never before confessed Christ—who are now beatified
(seliggepriesen) and taken under Christ’s care and responsibility. Conversely, those Christians who shun persecution for the sake of a cause, no matter how just, because they wish only to be persecuted for an explicit confession of Christ, are rebuked by Bonhoeffer for their lack of generosity and their meanness of spirit.54

In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer repeats much the same sentiments that had occupied his thoughts throughout 1942. In a letter to Bethge on 21 July 1944, Bonhoeffer remarks that ‘it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.’ By this, he means ‘living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and complexities. In doing so, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own suffering, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane.’55

From this, it is evident that Bonhoeffer’s role in the resistance to Hitler, and all the suffering that that role entailed for him and his family, was grounded firmly in his conviction that discipleship—as the incarnational initiative to realize righteousness in the here and now—is necessarily costly and inherently activist. As he put it in his baptismal message for Dietrich Bethge, ‘[w]ith us thought was often the luxury of the onlooker; with you it will be entirely subordinated to action. “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”...’56

V. Conclusion
This paper began with the question, does Bonhoeffer’s concept of righteousness offer greater possibilities than either the restrictive definition
from Yad Vashem or the ambiguous understanding from within Protestantism? It was shown that righteousness, as defined by Yad Vashem, is indeed concerned with actions, performed in the service of justice, but without regard to the presence or absence of faith or even the overall moral probity of the doer. Within Lutheran and Reformed Protestantism, on the other hand, it was clear that in both traditions faith in Christ is the necessary precondition for righteousness, with the value of good works consequent upon the forensic declaration of righteousness varying according to confession.

The theology and life of Bonhoeffer, however, give us a refreshingly new framework. After initially concerning himself with the Church as a social structure57 and having no real regard for the importance of political engagement, Bonhoeffer became far more cognisant of Christian ethical action—as discipleship—as a result of his first trip to America. In those early days of the 1930s, Bonhoeffer’s political awareness was sharpened, and his theology began to be more closely focussed upon the Sermon on the Mount. His reflections upon the Beatitudes, refined in the context of his prophetic insights into the real dangers of Nazism, convinced Bonhoeffer that true righteousness is embodied in obedience to concrete ethical commandments. According to his paradigm, faith is important insofar as the doer of righteousness shares in the sufferings of Christ. But the explicit confession of Christian faith is not, for Bonhoeffer, a necessary precursor; on the contrary, ‘in our day’, he says, ‘we must say...that before a man [sic] can know and find Christ he must first become righteous (ein Gerechter) like those who strive and who suffer for the sake of justice, truth and humanity.’58

In contrast to Yad Vashem, Bonhoeffer’s view of righteousness embraces a raft of concrete deeds, done in the name of ‘justice, truth and
humanity’, and not therefore restricted to the act of rescuing Jews. Like Yad Vashem’s definition, though, and unlike the traditional Protestant concept, faith is not a precondition and the doing of righteousness is similarly likely to lead to danger and great personal cost. In Bonhoeffer, therefore, we see personified a rich view of righteousness—deeply faithful to the commands of Christ but not demanding that same faith from others, inherently concrete in its visible expression but not restrictive as to the nature of that praxis, and committed to perseverance to the point of martyrdom. Perhaps most significantly, however, is the fact that the righteousness which Bonhoeffer embodied was in the name and path of Christ—but for the sake of the world. Maybe not ‘Christian humanism’, but most definitely Christian humanity.

1 This paper was originally presented at the IX International Bonhoeffer Congress, held in Rome in June 2004.
2 Mordecai Paldiel, quoted in The Jerusalem Post, 29 April, 1998.
4 Note that while Bonhoeffer’s lectures to the Finkenwalde seminarians were begun in the summer of 1935, his preoccupation with the topic of discipleship, and its roots in the Sermon on the Mount, dates from the eighteen months he spent in London from October 1933. See Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie, (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser Verlagshaus, 1994): 382.
6 See http://www.yad-vashem.org.il/
7 Michael Berenbaum & Abraham J. Peck (eds), The Holocaust and History: The known, the unknown, the disputed and the re-examined, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, repr.2002): 649.
11 See for example, John Calvin Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.x.6
16 Although the respective confessional attitudes toward Church-State relations was also a dominant factor in this regard.
21 See for example, Bethe, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 219.
25 See for example, Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 219.
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