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The Sacramentality of Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the development of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of the bodily presence of Christ *pro nobis* in, with, and through the church-community. In studying his ecclesiology, the Christological basis for his comprehension of the church is displayed. The first chapter discusses the formation of Bonhoeffer's early thoughts on the church as shaped by several individuals and circumstances. Chapter two explores his two doctoral works as foundational for his ecclesiology, captured by his terminology of "Christ existing as church-community." Chapter three concerns Bonhoeffer's ideas on the form of Christ in the church while a pastor and professor in Berlin. Chapter four examines his works in the second half of the 1930s when the strength of Christ's presence in the church enhanced in meaning to withstand worldly pressures and to follow Christ in costly discipleship. The fifth chapter inspects Bonhoeffer's late ecclesiology as he proclaimed the hidden Christ-reality in *all* the earth from which the church participates in disclosing by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout this thesis, it is argued that Bonhoeffer viewed the church *sacramentally* in looking exclusively to Christ's living presence as the foundation for a proper self-understanding of the purpose and place of the church in the fallen world. He did not proclaim mere principles and methodologies as the substance of the church or suggest human faculties are involved in its creation or preservation. Instead, Bonhoeffer promoted a "religionless" Christianity where it is upheld and taught that the church is completely God's actions on behalf of fallen humanity through the work of Christ. Considered as a whole, the sacramentality of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology displays the continuity of his theology.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DBW 1	<i>Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church</i>
DBW 2	<i>Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology</i>
DBW 4	<i>Discipleship</i>
DBW 5	<i>Life Together</i>
DBW 6	<i>Ethics</i>
DBW 8	<i>Letters and Papers from Prison</i>
DBW 9	<i>The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927</i>
DBW 10	<i>Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931</i>
DBW 11	<i>Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932</i>
DBW 12	<i>Berlin 1932-1933</i>
DBW 13	<i>London: 1933-1935</i>
DBW 14	<i>Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-37</i>
DBW 15	<i>Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940</i>
DBW 16	<i>Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945</i>

INTRODUCTION

Recently, two developments of interest to this thesis have arisen within Dietrich Bonhoeffer studies. The first, led largely by Peter Frick, concerns gaining a better grasp of the formation of Bonhoeffer's theology. He is the editor and major contributor of *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*. Michael P. DeJonge's research provides an intersect into the second area of intrigue, as in his enquiry into the formation of Bonhoeffer's theology he has found Luther's theology to be the hermeneutical key to grasping the content and continuity of Bonhoeffer's contribution to Christian theology, the second topic of inquiry. DeJonge's work of note in this regard is *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, & Protestant Theology*, although his research into Luther's impact on Bonhoeffer's works continues. He is not the only scholar doing related research, as H. Gaylon Barker's work, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology*, is also of note concerning the importance of Luther's theology in Bonhoeffer's. Neither of these areas of Bonhoeffer studies are necessarily new, but they are being pushed further in the context of the now-complete edition of Bonhoeffer's writings in English translation, entitled *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*.

In this study, we attempt to continue alongside the contributions mentioned above while focusing on a particular aspect of Bonhoeffer's theology we find in need a further discussion and understanding: Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. Within Bonhoeffer studies, his Christology is appropriately the dominant area of interest. In the process, the close relationship between his Christology and ecclesiology is frequently noted and discussed. Still, despite the fact that his thoughts on the church are regularly acknowledged as

inseparable from his thoughts on Christ, the emphasis is most often put towards his Christology while mentioning its bearing for his ecclesiology only on occasion. We find such a portrayal as potentially diminishing the fact that, for Bonhoeffer, the centrality of Christ and a proper understanding of Christology meant much more than this in declaring something about the nature and place of the church necessarily; therefore, we see his ecclesiology as so intrinsic to his Christology that Bonhoeffer rarely speaks of either subject in a separate manner. The reason for this assertion is that he considers the church the body of Christ in a very real way, crucially depicting a high view of Christ's immanent presence which uplifts the reality of the church-community.

Bonhoeffer frequently and consistently refers to the real presence of Christ "in, with, and through the church," the phrase used in this thesis to describe his ecclesiology. Terminology he himself employed is also helpful and recapitulated at various points: "Christ existing as church-community." A Lutheran acceptance of Christ's real bodily presence in, with, and under the elements of the sacraments governed much of these thoughts, for our purposes, most notably in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper giving the very body and blood of Christ to the church-community in a mysterious and paradoxical way. Importantly, when bearing in mind the sacraments, he was wary of any notion that restricted the work of the church and the fundamentally related reality of Christ to a sacramental *system* on the periphery of life. At the heart of his ecclesiology, Bonhoeffer holds firmly to Chalcedonian Christology in the two distinct natures of the fully human and fully divine Son of God subsisting in the one person (*hypostasis*) of Jesus Christ. Further detailed, he asserts the Lutheran view of the full communication of attributes (*communication idiomatum*) through which Christ is *bodily* present in the Lord's Supper by means of the omnipresence of the divine nature being attributed to human nature at the incarnation (*genus majesticum*). This

belief contrasts with a Nestorian idea of the union of natures in Christ being merely moral or of a shared purpose, as well as a Monophysite interpretation of the two natures of Christ resulting in only one through the incarnation (the absorption of the human nature into the divine). Instead, Bonhoeffer insists that the incarnation marks a substantial union in the one person of Jesus Christ which involves no annihilation of either nature, pushing against any abstract rationalism that states otherwise. Relatedly, he asserts that the finite *can* contain the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*) over against a Reformed stance that the finite *cannot* contain the infinite (*finitum non capax infiniti*), especially relevant to embracing the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper as well. This entire belief, coming from a Lutheran understanding of Chalcedonian Christology, then guides Bonhoeffer's proclamation of the church being the true presence of Christ.

That a proper historic doctrine of the person and work of Christ directs Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is evidenced by the consistent weight he gives to the incarnation of the God-human. He consistently points to the little child in Bethlehem, placed in manger, as a mystery of God's gracious work and the starting point to Christian theology. God gives God's own self to humanity in Christ, not just the human nature of Jesus, and this informs Bonhoeffer's claims of the real bodily presence of the Jesus Christ as the foundation and meaning for all aspects of the church. His musings from prison reflect the same perception he has elsewhere: "This is the crucial distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help."¹ With Christ, God suffered *pro nobis* ("for us"), not only the human nature of Jesus.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Eberhard Bethge, July 16, 1944, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. W. de Gruy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss

Jesus Christ is not a symbol or representation of God but “true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father” (Nicene Creed).

In describing his understanding of Christ’s unrelenting presence, we assert in this study that Bonhoeffer’s comprehension of the real bodily presence of Christ in the church-community is a belief in the sacramentality of church. Analysis of the development of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology shows that Bonhoeffer’s conception of the church is always informed by and directing towards Christ’s real presence in, with, and through the church-community *pro nobis*. Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God is present not merely in principle or in part, but wholly, so that the reality of the church *is* “Christ existing as church-community.”

The first chapter concerns Bonhoeffer’s early formative experiences. We begin this area of interest by deliberating on Bonhoeffer’s upbringing and the influence of his family. We then discuss the impact of two professors of interest from his year of studies at the University of Tübingen as well as his first real experience of “the church” during his trip to Rome that followed. Next, we look at Bonhoeffer’s liberal Protestant professors at the University of Berlin, where Adolf von Harnack had him looking for the essence of Christianity, Karl Holl taught him Luther’s theology, and Reinhold Seeberg placed the sociality of the church firmly into his view. We end the chapter looking at a Karl Barth’s effect on Bonhoeffer as a refreshing alternative to the theology he encountered in Berlin.

We look more towards Bonhoeffer’s works themselves starting in chapter two, first with those from 1927 until 1931, as they display his ecclesiological development. His

and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010; hereafter *DBW* 8), 479. Quoted again more fully in chapter five below.

dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, and habilitation, *Act and Being*, take focus as the foundational studies from which the rest of his theological contributions persistently draw. Along with these doctoral studies, Bonhoeffer's significant experiences while a vicar in Barcelona and a post-doctoral student in New York are considered.

In the third chapter, attention is given to Bonhoeffer's works while a pastor and professor in Berlin from 1931 until 1933, when the form of Christ in, with, and through the church-community was a prominent theme and his "Christology Lectures" are the prominent area of significance.

Chapter four jumps to Bonhoeffer's time as a seminary director for the Confessing Church during the second half of the 1930s. From his experimenting and teaching of this period, he produced arguably his two most widely read and influential works: *Discipleship* and *Life Together*. At that time and with these books, Bonhoeffer encourages Christians to draw from the strength of the church-community and to follow the present body of Christ into costly ministry for the world.

In chapter five, we look at Bonhoeffer's thoughts upon his return from a shortened stay in the United States at the beginning of World War II, along with his incomplete *Ethics*, and ecclesiology from prison. Thru these final years of his life, he looks more to the Christ-reality in all the earth as he ponders Christianity in the modern age.

A conclusion is included, where the sacramentality of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is summarized and its relevance for Bonhoeffer studies and the life of the church is further deliberated.

CHAPTER 1

EARLY FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES FOR BONHOEFFER'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH: UPBRINGING AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The trajectory towards sacramentality in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is not easily definable. Insights into this difficulty of origins are found in the struggles to comprehend the twentieth-century Christian theologian in general. At this point, two aspects of Bonhoeffer studies are particularly evident. First, most acknowledge a certain eclecticism to his theology. Bonhoeffer did not limit his studies or experiences to only certain ideas or contexts but sought diversity in both. Second, the reception of Bonhoeffer's theology today extends much wider than his own eclecticism should dictate, as there has continually been a truly remarkable assortment of people interested in advancing the pastor and theologian's life and works.¹ Without addressing these two realities here, it is important to note that there is certainly validity in both occurrences. Near the end of his life, Bonhoeffer describes himself as "a 'modern' theologian who has nevertheless inherited the legacy of liberal theology," and suggests: "There are probably not many among the younger generation who combine these two elements."² Similarly, Bonhoeffer was among the first to join the Confessing Church and take leadership in the movement's formation, yet he came to resent the inaction of this more

¹ Robert P. Ericksen remarks: "Bonhoeffer was a very lonely figure in the church, and we are denying history if we pretend that he was not." Robert P. Ericksen, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer in History: Does Our Bonhoeffer Still Offend?" in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 27. For an in-depth study on the diversity of Bonhoeffer's reception, see Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Eberhard Bethge, August 3, 1944, *DBW* 8:498-99.

conservative response to Nazi atrocities. Time and time again, he struggled to find satisfaction in the church circles he encountered. Still, it would be wrong to suggest he simply sought a “middle ground” or to be a “moderate” theologian. Though it can be tempting to identify him this way, Bonhoeffer also resisted being identified as a “dialectical” theologian like Karl Barth. In surveying his life and works, it is clear that he went a different way than these more easily definable labels can capture. What is not so evident is how he ended up on the path he did, specifically in his consistent and profound emphasis on the centrality and real presence of Christ in, with, and through the church-community.

While we explore the sacramentality of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology directly more in the remaining chapters, at this juncture we focus on what may have prompted his eclecticism as it relates particularly to the development of his thoughts on the church. In doing so, we quite predictably begin by looking at his family and upbringing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Family and Upbringing

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s immediate family did not regularly attend worship services, yet Christianity still played an important part in the children’s upbringing.³ Both parents did not trust the German Evangelical Church, the country’s Protestant state church, a trait Dietrich largely retained throughout his life. This contributed to the family’s lack of church attendance, even on holidays. Still, the children were baptised and confirmed, received

³ For this section, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is referred to as “Dietrich” to avoid confusion between him and his family members. Following this section on his family and upbringing, he is referred to primarily as “Bonhoeffer.”

religious instruction, read the Bible, said prayers, and sang hymns as part of the household's customs and traditions.⁴

Counter to the Christian elements of his upbringing, fostered largely by Dietrich's mother, Paula, his father, Karl, was a firm agnostic who did not understand or participate in the Christian activities in the home, but did not seek to stop these rituals either. The chair of psychiatry at the University of Berlin, Karl committed to working with things known through reason alone, and as such disagreed with Freud's psychoanalytic approach to their shared profession.⁵ This influence from his father likely resulted in the much more philosophical approach to theology Dietrich took as he began university, when epistemology interested him most. Dietrich's main focus quickly changed but his interest in epistemology continued throughout his life. Consequently, Dietrich admitted later on that Karl played a significant role in his own transition "from phraseology to reality,"⁶ although Dietrich came to identify concrete reality as residing only in the hidden but real bodily presence of Jesus Christ. This assertion contrasted greatly to his father's naturalistic acceptance of empirical evidence.⁷ Dietrich also learned from Karl to remain objective and uphold the truth.⁸ This intellectual honesty, along with a down-to-earth realism, were then both brought out in Dietrich's

⁴ See Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1968), 3-57.

⁵ See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed., ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 21-23.

⁶ See Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 22, 1944, *DBW* 8:358.

⁷ Cf. Larry Rasmussen, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Friedrich: The Brothers Bonhoeffer on Science, Morality, and Theology," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 44 (2009): 100-01.

⁸ See Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers*, 15.

theology. When Dietrich began to write on “the world-come-of-age” in prison, it is highly likely that the secular humanism in his family influenced whatever he meant.⁹

Dietrich’s decision to become a theologian surprised Karl, who later admitted that he initially thought such a quiet and comfortable career would be a pity for his son. Already in 1934, Karl had to confess that he did not foresee anything of the sort that transpired in the church and the country at the time, which made Dietrich’s life anything but uneventful.¹⁰ Dietrich’s struggle against the Third Reich made both his parents proud, who were united in their mistrust of Hitler and the Nazis from early on, and gave their full support to their children’s resistance efforts while accepting the dangers involved.

In his curriculum vitae of the summer, 1923, Dietrich discloses that he made the decision to become a theologian by the age of thirteen.¹¹ Once he made this decision public, at age fourteen, Bethge notes how Dietrich’s siblings soon challenged “that he was taking that path of least resistance, and that the church to which he proposed to devote himself was a poor, feeble, petty, and bourgeois institution.”¹² In response, Dietrich is noted as confidently proclaiming: “In that case I shall reform it!”¹³ This statement, considering his lack of experience with the church at the time, is part of what Bethge identifies as Dietrich’s

⁹ He was also effected by the secular individuals he encountered among other Nazi resisters the Second World War, who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others in the face of Nazi oppression. See *DBW* 8:366; Cf. Rasmussen, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl-Friedrich,” 101.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter from Karl Bonhoeffer, February 2, 1934, in *London: 1933-1935*, vol. 13 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007; hereafter *DBW* 13), 97.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Curriculum Vitae, Summer 1923, in *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927*, vol. 9 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Paul D. Matheny, Clifford J. Green and Marshall D. Johnson, trans. Mary Nebelsick with assistance of Douglass W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003; hereafter *DBW* 9), 60.

¹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*

“basic drive toward independence” and “need for unchallenged self-realization” involved with his decision to become a theologian. Still, Dietrich’s life certainly suggests a commitment to the resolve he displayed as a fourteen-year-old in the face of his siblings’ rebukes.¹⁴

Bethge summarizes well Bonhoeffer’s pursuit of a career in theology while coming out of the largely secular atmosphere of his parent’s home:

He plunged with intellectual curiosity into theology as a branch of knowledge. Only later did the church enter his field of vision. Unlike theologians who came from families that were active in the church and theology, and discovered the existence of ‘world’ only later, Bonhoeffer embarked on his journey and eventually discovered the church.¹⁵

From this unique perspective, Bonhoeffer came to his understanding of the real presence of Christ in, with, and through the church in an almost matter-of-fact manner, and then spent the rest of his life trying to figure out what this concrete reality was all about. When and why he came to this discovery remains more mysterious.

Tübingen Influences: Adolf Schlatter and Karl Heim

Before going to the University of Berlin to continue his studies, Bonhoeffer began, as customs in his family dictated, with a year of study at the University of Tübingen, from the fall of 1923 until the spring of 1924. While very early in Bonhoeffer’s development, his time

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

in Tübingen deserves at least a passing reference. The reason for this is the impact of two particular professors on the formation of his ecclesiology.

The first, Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938), was a Swiss Reformed Church scholar, whose down-to-earth approach to biblical studies had him focus more on his students than his next publication. Schlatter devoted himself to the church, and not academia, which contributed to him being labelled a conservative theologian. Along with this, Schlatter believed firmly in the authority of Scripture and sought to apply rigorous scholarly methods to biblical texts to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Through this, Schlatter looked to see God both in nature and in the Scriptures and therefore accepted this realm as much as possible. In doing so, he countered the tendency during his life in New Testament studies to see the natural world and natural tendencies as associated primarily with sin instead of acknowledging the good in the material world brought out and confirmed in the biblical texts. Bonhoeffer took up a similar task of confirming the good in the natural world, though for him this explicitly referred to an incarnational perspective of the reality of Christ. At a most basic level, since God came down to earth and used physical means, the natural world itself should not be denied, yet Bonhoeffer's Christological focus on reality moved well beyond such a plain idea. Regarding his ecclesiology, this incarnational perspective meant proclaiming the profoundly "this-worldliness" of Christianity and the place of the church. The foil to this perspective concerned a spiritual focus which only looks towards the afterlife or separates itself from the world, but also a material focus apart from the reality of Christ's real bodily presence. For Bonhoeffer, a Christian should accept and live entirely within the elements of *this* life, because it is in this world that God became human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ

and brought about the new Christ-reality.¹⁶ The dynamics of these thoughts were barely on his radar at this time but continued to form throughout his life, especially when challenging what he referred to as thinking in “two-realms” in his *Ethics*.¹⁷ In any case, while at Tübingen Bonhoeffer admits: “Up until now I have found Schlatter the most interesting.”¹⁸

The second professor of note from Bonhoeffer’s time in Tübingen was Karl Heim (1874-1958), who worked within Bonhoeffer’s chosen field of systematic theology. In comparison to Schlatter, Heim fully identified within liberal Protestantism with his work. Heim primary focused on interdisciplinary and apologetic research by engaging with the natural sciences in order to speak to the challenges of skeptics. Related to this, Heim had the goal to proclaim Jesus as Lord of *all* reality, and carried the idea that modern thinking needed to be confronted by the experience of God’s grace. Especially in Bonhoeffer’s later theology, themes of the lordship of Christ over all reality and not just the church, along with meeting the challenges of the modern world, featured prominently.

In his response to friend and fellow student Helmut Rössler about Heim’s assertion that the church is all about prophecy, written on Christmas Day in 1932, we are given a window into how Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology developed partly in interacting with Heim’s theology:

The church is more than prophecy (not less!), for it is *Christus praesens* in the flesh, to be sure, in the form of a human organization, but still, *Christus praesens*. And this Christ has the power to command us, even from within the veil of the church, and

¹⁶ See Jens Zimmermann, “Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological Humanism,” in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, ed. Jens Zimmermann and Brian Gregor (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 42-44.

¹⁷ See chapter five below.

¹⁸ Letter to His Parents, undated letter mailed from Tübingen during the latter half of May, 1923, *DBW* 9:52. On Schlatter’s enduring impact on Bonhoeffer, see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 54.

being Christ, he gives very concrete commands. You say the law is already there; the church cannot create *a novos decalogos*—I share your view completely; but what does it mean to proclaim the law in the church? What does “Love your neighbor” mean in the church (and not in the synagogue!)?¹⁹

Long before he inquired in such a way as to the role of the church as Christ’s real presence in, with, and through the church-community, Bonhoeffer moved from the teachings at Tübingen to encountering the church in an entirely new way while in Rome.

Bonhoeffer’s First Exposure to “The Church” in Rome

Between his year of study in Tübingen and his move back home to Berlin to continue his university education, Bonhoeffer went on a seminal trip to Rome in the formation of his ecclesiology. We know of the importance of this experience largely through his surviving letters and diary entries from the two months he spent in the Eternal City.²⁰

Before this trip, Bonhoeffer knew little of “the church.” Protestantism in Germany spoke of itself primarily only as that: Protestantism. Rarely was it even referred to as “the church” outside reference to the organising structures of the state institution. As such, the much greater and more purposeful expressions of the universality of the church within Roman Catholicism stood out to him. Even the sheer idea of devoting oneself to the church as opposed to “being a Protestant” came across as interesting and new.²¹ Evidence of his

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Helmut Rössler, December 25, 1932, in *Berlin 1932-1933*, vol. 12 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009; hereafter *DBW* 12), 83-84. The essay Bonhoeffer refers to, “On Karl Heim’s *Glaube und Denken*,” is found in *DBW* 12:243-58.

²⁰ His diary entries and letters written during the trip can be found in *DBW* 9:82-128.

²¹ Before heading to Rome, Bonhoeffer knew much more about the ancient Eternal City than contemporary Rome. In part, this was because relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants were still cold at the time. In any case, Bonhoeffer sought to maintain a critical openness to the expressions of

changing perspective is found in places like his diary entry for Holy Tuesday. After attending the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore for the second time, Bonhoeffer enters: “I will probably come to this church more often to observe the life of the church rather than to look at it from an artistic standpoint, even though it is among the most beautiful of churches.”²² He began to find in Rome an interest he did not expect, “the life of the church.” His curiosity only grew that week, as Bonhoeffer reflects in his diary entry for Palm Sunday: “The day had been magnificent. It was the first day on which something of the reality of Catholicism began to dawn on me—nothing romantic, etc.—but I think I’m beginning to understand the concept of ‘church.’”²³ In the same diary entry, Bonhoeffer writes of how “the universality of the church was illustrated in a marvellously effective manner. . . . Everyone was in clerical robes united the church. It truly seems ideal.”²⁴

Coinciding with his broad interest in the church, Bonhoeffer developed a curiosity for the liturgy of the church, and studied the Catholic Missal:

For the most part the texts are wonderfully poetic and lucid. Every text flows from the main theme of the Mass: the sacrificial death and its continuous re-enactment in the sacrificial Mass of communion. These concepts are historically very interesting. Now, however, they are being pushed so terribly into symbols by modern Catholic theology that they are almost incomprehensible.²⁵

Catholicism he would encounter, trying to bring “as few preconceptions as possible.” See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 57.

²² Italian Diary, April 15, *DBW* 9:90.

²³ Italian Diary, Palm Sunday, 1924, *DBW* 9:89.

²⁴ *DBW* 9:88.

²⁵ Letter to his parents, Holy Saturday, April 19, *DBW* 9:111.

These thoughts, written to his parents, reflect his thoughts from the previous day: “Catholic dogma veils every ideal thing in Catholicism, without knowing that this is what it is doing. There is a huge difference between confession and dogmatic teachings about confession—unfortunately also between ‘church’ and the ‘church’ in dogmatics.”²⁶ Before he knew much about the church, and while interested most in the philosophical aspects of systematic theology, Bonhoeffer’s intellectual curiosity displays real, practical concerns. For him, good concepts and proper theology were always crucial, but they needed to be placed within concrete reality, which Bonhoeffer came to understand as centring on the hiddenness of God’s presence in Jesus Christ. The evidence for this assertion in his early theology is minimal and largely theoretical. Theory turned to practice, and with that the concrete reality, once his formal student years were over. Then, for instance, he moved from thinking about the importance of individual confession and absolution to actually practicing it himself.²⁷

Bonhoeffer’s experience in Rome had him reflect further on his own state church in Germany, which until then remained only a passing curiosity. Much in line with the views of his parents and siblings, he believed that the German Evangelical Church was overly nationalistic and narrow-minded.²⁸ In response, he suggests that the church needs to dissociate from its dependence on state privileges, giving it more freedom to have its own voice and truly *be* the church. The concept of divorcing from the state became more central

²⁶ Italian Diary, entry for Easter Saturday, *DBW* 9:93.

²⁷ See Italian Diary, entry for Monday, the 14th [of April], *DBW* 9:89. For an example of where his thoughts and practices concerning individual confession and absolution grew, see his chapter on “Confession and the Lord’s Supper,” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtress (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009; hereafter *DBW* 5), 108-18.

²⁸ See Italian Diary, Ascension Day, 1924, *DBW* 9:106.

to Bonhoeffer during the Third Reich, where state pressure became even more dominant. Still, Protestantism developed a reputation for catering to the powers of the state and to the changes of the prevailing culture long before Hitler took power. Bonhoeffer provides his own assessment of the situation: “It is not the content of the gospel of the Reformation that repels people so much as the form of the gospel, which one still tries to tie to the state. If it had remained a sect it would have become the church the Reformers intended. Now it can no longer be called that.”²⁹ He witnessed Protestantism act largely out of self-preservation which compromised both its mission and identity as Christ’s bodily presence on earth in the proclamation of the gospel and in vicariously acting for others. These concerns of his never changed, but continued to form from this early stage in his development in different ways. In any case, Bonhoeffer took the apprehensions of his family seriously, but looked for a renewed self-understanding of the church instead of abandoning it.

Furthermore, in his search for the proper identity of the church, Bonhoeffer committed to reform much more than innovation. As such, the modern tendencies of the Protestant Church in Germany did not impress him: “The only thing about Protestantism that is still considered valuable and is still taken into account is the possibility of thinking freely.”³⁰ He knew that the Reformation vision for the church was not in accordance with what he primarily witnessed in Germany; instead, Bonhoeffer saw Protestantism as associated with a lot of things that were simply materialism. To counter this phenomenon, he believed if formal ties to the state were severed the German Evangelical Church would be

²⁹ See *DBW* 9:106.

³⁰ *DBW* 9:106.

confronted with the truth of its being for far too long “an asylum for the homeless and a shelter for ill-bred enlightenment.”³¹ Bonhoeffer even suggests:

Maybe Protestantism should not have tried to become an established church; perhaps it should have remained a large sect, which always have an easier time, and so might have avoided the present calamity. . . . If Protestantism had never become an established church, the situation would be completely different. It would still have a not inconsequential number of enthusiastic adherents. In view of its size it would hardly be designated as a sect but would represent an unusual phenomenon of religious life and serious thoughtful piety. It would therefore be the ideal form of religion, which is sought after in so many ways today.³²

Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer does not explain these thoughts any further here, although it is evident that he believed Protestantism lost something in the way it had been institutionalized in Germany, especially in regards to his contemporary situation.

The trend of these thoughts continues and often repeats. Bonhoeffer writes that the church needs “to limit itself,” to separate itself entirely “from the state and maybe even give up the right to provide religious instruction.”³³ He was cautiously optimistic towards what these changes might bring:

It wouldn’t be long before the people return, because they must have something. They would have rediscovered their need for piety. Could this be a solution? Or not? Have absolutely all alternatives been exhausted? Will everyone soon return to the bosom of the ‘only fount of salvation’ under the guise of brotherhood? I would really like to know.³⁴

³¹ *DBW* 9:106.

³² *DBW* 9:106.

³³ *DBW* 9:106.

³⁴ *DBW* 9:106-07.

Despite all these musings, Bonhoeffer considered unification with the Roman Catholicism out of the question and never returned to the idea, and rarely speaks of the need for piety when advancing the Christological basis of his ecclesiology.³⁵

Bonhoeffer's reflections from his trip to Rome are indeed interesting but were mostly suggestive. They display his original conjectures on the problems he saw in the church. His Christological focus came later, which brought clearer responses to ecclesiological issues. In any case, Bonhoeffer returned to his studies with a new understanding of and appreciation for "the church."

Bonhoeffer's Berlin Professors

In becoming a student in the theological faculty at Berlin, Bonhoeffer entered one of the most well-renowned theological schools at the time. In doing so, he intentionally placed himself in the centre of liberal Protestantism in Germany. Charles Marsh describes the setting:

Theological studies at the University of Berlin meant a total immersion in the currents of Protestant liberal thought. Bonhoeffer read Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. He read Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*—the most beautiful of all works in German Romantic theology—which praises religion "as a sense and taste of the infinite," the ultimate source of all human striving toward beauty and goodness, these being deemed objective realities, in accordance with the early Christians' Platonic inheritance. He read Ernst Troeltsch's writings on Christian ethics.³⁶

³⁵ See Letter to His Parents, Holy Saturday, April 19, *DBW* 9:111. Bonhoeffer remained interested in Catholic practices and ecclesiology for the rest of his life. One example of this continued interest was in Bonhoeffer's reserving of the topic of "The Catholic Church" for himself to present to his "Thursday Circle." See "Paper on the Catholic Church" for the Thursday Circle, written sometime between the beginning and middle of July 1927, *DBW* 9:525-29.

³⁶ Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 46.

Consequently, Bonhoeffer's views never aligned with those of his professors in Berlin, even as he learned much from them and continued to engage with their works throughout his life.³⁷

Adolf von Harnack and Getting to the Essence of Christianity

Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) was among the leading spokesman of liberal Protestantism during his life. He inherited this mantle from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the father of liberal Protestantism, in part by taking up Schleiermacher's post as the chair of the theological faculty at the University of Berlin. However, Harnack's stature did not intimidate Bonhoeffer, who knew Harnack from living in the same Grunewald neighbourhood in Berlin. Bonhoeffer got to know Harnack personally from a young age while among a group of children to whom Harnack frequently read stories.³⁸ The two of them also rode the train together when Bonhoeffer began his university studies in Berlin.

Positively, Bonhoeffer saw in Harnack an honest search for truth, done in freedom, and sought to do so in his own development.³⁹ In this, he was indeed a pupil of Harnack,

³⁷ See Martin Rumscheidt, "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 59. After meeting with Barth for the first time, Bonhoeffer sent a letter to his friend Erwin Sutz which clearly displays his thoughts on the Berlin theological faculty he encountered: "This is really someone from whom one can learn something, and there one sits in poor, desolate Berlin and is discouraged because there is no one there from whom one can learn theology and some other useful things along with it." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Erwin Sutz, July 24, 1931, in *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-32*, vol. 11 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Mark Brocker, and Michael B. Lukens, trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange with Isabel Best, Nicholas S. Humphrey and Marion Pauck (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; hereafter *DBW* 11), 36.

³⁸ See Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 45; Martin Rumscheidt, "The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 209.

³⁹ For a more thorough study on Harnack's role in Bonhoeffer's theological development, see Rumscheidt, "The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 209-24.

even and especially as his theological development and understanding went in a very different direction. Both were in search of the essence of Christianity, but the answers they found were far from the same. Harnack, a child of Enlightenment thought, and taking an outlook synonymous with typical German idealism, looked for the answer to this question of “essence” in reason and humanity’s ability to attain knowledge. For Harnack, religion, specifically referring to Christianity, resulted not from supernatural forces but historical and social ones. Because of this, it was best studied through historical-critical methods.⁴⁰ As part of Harnack’s mission to get to the core, essential elements of Christianity, he also sought to remove what he considered stale tradition. In doing all this, Harnack found the simple notion that “God is love” to be the main point of Christianity.⁴¹ Bonhoeffer could appreciate Harnack’s resistance to what Bonhoeffer called a “positivism of revelation,” but he did not accept the misuse of dogma as a reason to remove dogma altogether.⁴² In fact, Bonhoeffer saw the lack of proper dogma as one of the main issues in the church.

In any case, Bonhoeffer, encouraged by his parents not to be defined by any epoch, went a different way than Harnack. He greatly admired the achievements of those who relied heavily on or even solely on human faculties, but Bonhoeffer did not accept Harnack’s “knowing faith.” Instead, he believed reality to be a much more complicated issue which could not be merely grasped. For Bonhoeffer, methodology had limits; therefore, he considered the whole truth to be found only with God and disclosed to humanity only in

⁴⁰ See Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 45.

⁴¹ See Ibid., 45-46.

⁴² For more information and sources regarding Bonhoeffer’s use of the phrase, “positivism of revelation,” see *DBW* 8:365, n17; *DBW* 8:429.

God's freedom in revelation. From this reality, he then turned back to worldliness.⁴³ Still, Bonhoeffer engaged with Harnack's teachings willingly and wholeheartedly and, despite their disagreements, Harnack gave praise to Bonhoeffer during his seminars, which rarely happened for any of his students.⁴⁴ At the end of his time at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote of Harnack: "What I have learned and come to understand in your seminar is too closely associated with my whole personality for me to be able to ever forget it."⁴⁵

In a seminar paper on 1 Clement written for Harnack during winter semester 1924-25, the earliest surviving paper of Bonhoeffer's while a student at Berlin, we are given insights into the criticism he had concerning Harnack's theology from early on. Also, most importantly for our purposes, the much more sacramental view Bonhoeffer developed throughout his life is displayed:

How did it happen that the person of Christ was forced from the centrally significant role in religious and salvation history to become the object of religious contemplation? How is it that Christ was reduced from the position he occupied in Paul, which was the intersection of the divine and human planes, to a religious-heroic model?⁴⁶

⁴³ See Rumscheidt, "The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 212; Rumscheidt, "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 54.

⁴⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 67-68.

⁴⁵ Graduation Theses, *DBW* 9:439; see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 68. Bonhoeffer wrote this on his copy of his thesis along with farewell notes to other teachers as well. For more on Bonhoeffer's thoughts of Harnack, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Eulogy for Adolf von Harnack," in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, vol. 10 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Reinhart Staats and Hans Christoph von Hase, Holger Roggelin, Matthias Wünsche, and Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008; hereafter *DBW* 10), 379-81. See also Letter to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer, March 2, 1944, *DBW* 8:316-17.

⁴⁶ Seminar Paper on 1 Clement, "The Jewish Element in First Clement: Its Content and Relationship to the Whole Letter," *DBW* 9:253.

For Bonhoeffer, Christ as simply a long-since-dead exemplar wholly misrepresents not only the gospel texts but also the persistent reality of Christ. Despite such criticisms, Harnack's continued impact on Bonhoeffer's thinking is found with Bonhoeffer's assessment of Bultmann's demythologization project later on, as brought out in *New Testament and Mythology*:

I belong to those who welcomed that writing – not because I agree with it. ... in this regard perhaps I have remained Harnack's student to this day. To put it bluntly: Bultmann has let the cat out of the bag, not only for himself but for a great many people (the liberal cat out of the confessional bag), and in this I rejoice. He has dared to say what many repress in themselves (here I include myself) without having overcome it. He thereby has rendered a service to intellectual integrity and honesty. Many brothers oppose him with a hypocritical faith that I find deadly. Now an open account must be given. I would like to speak with Bultmann about this and open myself to the fresh air that comes from him. But then the window has to be shut again. Otherwise the susceptible will too easily catch a cold.⁴⁷

Bonhoeffer considered himself a modern theologian and thought of himself working alongside individuals like Harnack and Bultmann to develop a more robust faith and witness, even as he rarely agreed with their findings. He stayed open to the ideas of other nonetheless, seeing no benefit in acting as if opposing thoughts were not prevalent throughout the church. In large part, this stance of Bonhoeffer's can be traced to the lessons he learned from Luther's theology on the pervasiveness of sin in individuals and the church-community that is often ignored.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Winfried Krause, July 25, 1942, in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*, vol. 16 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Mark Brocker, trans. Lisa Dahill (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006; hereafter *DBW* 16), 347.

Karl Holl and Finding Luther's Theology

The importance of Karl Holl (1866-1926) in Bonhoeffer's development came largely from being the person who most persistently and prominently taught Luther's theology to the young theologian.⁴⁸ When Bonhoeffer initially referenced Luther, it was in large part from what Holl quoted in both his lectures and literature. Holl himself was the main figure of the so-called Luther Renaissance that started around the four-hundredth anniversary of Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517.⁴⁹ Even with Holl's stature, Bonhoeffer was always skeptical of Holl's overarching perception of Luther's Reformation discovery. From a positive perspective, Holl provided an alternative to the tendency in Germany to look at Luther predominantly as having a cultural impact as an icon of freedom in general rather than a theological impact centered on freedom through Christ.⁵⁰ From a negative perspective, Holl considered the main idea of Luther's theology to be about experiencing a free conscience, which Bonhoeffer found problematic. Among other faults, Bonhoeffer criticized this suggestion of Holl's as having a weak anchoring in Luther's Christology. Bonhoeffer's own Christological language and understanding were not well developed at the time,⁵¹ but still

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer attended two seminars of Holl's, one on church history, and one on creeds and confessions.

⁴⁹ Holl's book *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?* outsold the other big seller in theology which was published in 1922, the second edition of Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*, which launched Barth's own movement of dialectical theology. See Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 44.

⁵⁰ This was also in the context of the unionized Protestant church, where confessional identity was surely lacking.

⁵¹ See H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 136-37. At this early stage, Bonhoeffer speaks primarily about "God" in a more generic way, and then moves in the future to speak primarily of Jesus Christ in a Trinitarian way.

had him counter Holl in writing: “faith is based not on psychological experiences but on itself.”⁵² He considered Holl’s theology as threatening the external reliance of faith which Luther clearly conveyed, especially in Luther’s conception of grace.⁵³ Bonhoeffer knew Luther’s theology was not about freeing one’s conscience but a complete trust in Christ’s work in a life of daily repentance and seeking of the forgiveness of sins through the external means of grace.

Consequently, Holl’s most noticeable impact on Bonhoeffer concerned the ingraining of Luther’s doctrine of justification into Bonhoeffer’s theology. Particularly, this related to the belief that the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone is the article by which the church stands or falls; however, Bonhoeffer’s emphasis relied on the person of Christ much more than the focus on freedom he witnessed from Holl. Along with this, Holl taught Bonhoeffer of the severe state of the corrupt human heart. In this fallen state, drawing from Holl’s teachings on Luther’s theology, Bonhoeffer maintained that humanity has no hope of ascending towards God and becoming righteous by following the will of God. Bonhoeffer then came to resist any form of Christianity which set out such goals or practices, which became especially relevant to his thoughts on the paradoxical reality of the church-community. This emphasis on the *simul justus et peccator* dynamic of the church-community in Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology followed from yet another emphasis of Holl’s on Luther’s phrase *cor curvum in se*, “the heart turned in upon itself.” In his own work, Bonhoeffer referred to the church not only as the *sanctorum communio* but simultaneously as the

⁵² Graduation Theses, *DBW* 9:439.

⁵³ See Bonhoeffer’s inaugural lecture, “The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology,” *DBW* 10:400-01; Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 68-69.

peccatorum communio, which struggles to live as Christ's true body and exist for others even as the redeemed and vicarious representatives of Christ who have received the Holy Spirit and are brought into the Christ-reality.⁵⁴

Another trait of Holl's was to bridge the theology of Luther, which for Holl had a tendency to focus on the otherworldly, with Calvin, whose sense of the sovereignty of God had him focus much more on *this* world in Holl's view. This initiative meshed with Holl's cross-denominational interests in the hope of presenting a truly universal form of Christianity.⁵⁵ Ecumenical efforts also interested Bonhoeffer, even at this early stage, but Holl's ecumenism tended towards a blending of confessions which Bonhoeffer found simplistic and misguided.⁵⁶ In contrast, Bonhoeffer's ecumenical interests were founded on principles of mutual understanding, growth and cooperation in working as the one body of Christ instead of predominantly separated parts. With his ecumenical initiatives, Bonhoeffer strongly opposed ignoring or abandoning denominational distinctions.⁵⁷

When Bonhoeffer spoke of the word of God, Christ, sin, faith, and on many other subjects, he ended up being much more interested in Luther's works themselves than Holl's

⁵⁴ The dynamics of these distinctions Bonhoeffer outlines in his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, discussed in chapter two below.

⁵⁵ See Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 44. Marsh suggests that while Holl had an obvious influence on Bonhoeffer's ecumenical focus, his ecumenical interests began even before his university studies. Bonhoeffer's trip to Rome was an example of this.

⁵⁶ See essay titled "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-37*, vol. 14 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. H. Gaylon Barker, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick and Scott A. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; hereafter *DBW* 14), 393-412.

⁵⁷ The best example of this attitude of Bonhoeffer's is likely in how Barth provided a welcomed alternative to the liberal Protestant theology he encountered and found wanting at Berlin, but then in turn Bonhoeffer countered Barth's theology along confessional lines, with Bonhoeffer strongly aligning with Luther. We will discuss this further below in the section devoted to Barth's influence on Bonhoeffer below.

interpretations of them. Throughout Bonhoeffer's life, he displayed an indebtedness to Luther and Lutheran theology, even though it may be said that he sought to build upon Luther's theology more than strictly to adhere to Lutheranism.

Reinhold Seeberg and the Church as a Social Community

While Harnack pushed Bonhoeffer to focus on the essence of Christianity, and Holl brought the teachings of Luther into his view, Bonhoeffer chose a different professor at Berlin for his dissertation who challenged him in a third way. This person was Reinhold Seeberg (1859-1935), a historian of dogma and social ethics who directed Bonhoeffer more towards the social elements of Christianity.⁵⁸ Consequently, Bonhoeffer did not choose Seeberg as his doctoral supervisor because of similar interests but the vast degree of freedom Seeberg enabled the young theologian to have in pursuing his research interests.⁵⁹ Of this freedom, Bethge writes:

Bonhoeffer certainly sensed a greater inner strength in Harnack and in Holl, for whom everything was much gloomier and more difficult. But Bonhoeffer never voluntarily surrendered to strong personalities. Karl Barth and George Bell were the only men whose authority he ever truly accepted—although even then he struggled alone to reach the decisions he believed to be right. In Berlin, his choice of Seeberg as mentor reflected this spirit of independence, since Seeberg imposed the fewest restrictions and obligations on him. In addition, his own upbringing and his father's example gave Bonhoeffer a broader perspective, enabling him to respect and learn from those who taught something different from what he believed. Only with the church struggle in 1933 did Bonhoeffer's oppositional stance move from ideas to actively participating

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer enrolled in Seeberg's seminars every semester between 1925 and 1927. Seeberg himself was at the University of Berlin from 1898 until 1927. For more on Seeberg and his significance in Bonhoeffer's theological development, see Rumscheidt, "The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 202.

⁵⁹ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 81; see also Letter to His Parents, September 21, 1925, *DBW* 9:148-49.

in conflict and selecting his personal contacts carefully. At that point, the break with Seeberg became complete.⁶⁰

Seeberg's research concerned applying Christian morality to concrete social, political, and national problems. He wanted to move beyond theories into experienced-focused research.⁶¹ This practical approach helped Bonhoeffer take the social aspects of existence seriously, although Seeberg was certainly not the only one to push him to do so.

When Bonhoeffer critiqued elements of contemporary society as problems for Christians to address, including the growth of militaristic and industrial giant states, Bonhoeffer diverted from Seeberg.⁶² As Bonhoeffer continued to develop his views on how Christians ought to participate in society, he tended to move in the opposite direction of Seeberg, seeing the role of the church coming from *below* and not *above* society. In truth, his criticisms of Seeberg began before work on *Sanctorum Communio* had started, as Bonhoeffer had already encountered Barth's theology and, as Bethge writes, "summarily rejected Seeberg's attempt to harmonize the Bible and the modern spirit, Luther and idealism, theology and philosophy."⁶³

In any case, Seeberg is most prominently in the background of Bonhoeffer's emphasis on "Christ existing as church-community," even if Bonhoeffer developed this concept in

⁶⁰ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 71-72.

⁶¹ Cf. Rumscheidt, "The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 203.

⁶² See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, vol. 1 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhold Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998; hereafter *DBW* 1), 271.

⁶³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 70. Cf. Rumscheidt, "The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 207.

ways Seeberg certainly would not.⁶⁴ The influence of Seeberg in *Sanctorum Communio* is evident in quotes like: “*for the individual to exist, ‘others’ must necessarily be there.*”⁶⁵ For Bonhoeffer, from an ethical perspective, human beings exist “only in responsibility vis-à-vis an ‘other.’”⁶⁶ This ethical perspective of Bonhoeffer’s expanded over time, and became more important for him in response to the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer held a deep and lasting respect for his teachers in both Tübingen and Berlin, not just for what they thought or who they were but also for the historical and contemporary figures he encountered through them; however, he was also a product of his surrounding context in another way, as part of a generation which experienced the failures of the anthropological and theological optimism typical of liberal Protestantism in the face of the First World War, and the crisis which followed it especially in Germany. For Seeberg and others, these events did not cause fundamental reconsideration of their positions, claiming the war was only an unhappy episode. For Bonhoeffer, such an explanation fell well short of reality, and he instead gravitated towards “crisis theology,” especially its principal figure, Karl Barth.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 70. Rumscheidt notes: “‘Christ existing as church-community’ occurs 14 times in *DBW/E* 1, twice in *DBW/E* 2 and 4, once in *DBW/E* 5, 9, 13 and three times in *DBW/E* 10, 11, and 14.” Rumscheidt, “The Significance of Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg for Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 208, n26. By referring to “*DBW/E*,” Rumscheidt includes both the German and English editions of *DBW*. Rumscheidt assesses Seeberg’s influence overall on Bonhoeffer to be a negative one. See *ibid.*, 208.

⁶⁵ *DBW* 1:51, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

⁶⁶ *DBW* 1: 30. Bonhoeffer explains this further later in this study: “At the moment [*Augenblick*] of being addressed, the person enters a state of *responsibility* or, in other words, of decision . . . The person exists always and only in ethical responsibility . . . In the last analysis the reason why idealist philosophy fails to understand the concept of person is that it has no *voluntaristic* concept of God.” *DBW* 1: 48.

⁶⁷ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 71-72.

Karl Barth and Alternatives to Liberal Protestantism

When considering Bonhoeffer's teachers and contemporaries, one figure is most frequently mentioned alongside him, and stands out the most—the famous Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). That when discussing Bonhoeffer's influences Barth is mentioned is no mistake. These two were not only among the most widely read and influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, they got to know each other personally and frequently corresponded with one another. Nonetheless, they did not meet until after Barth's ideas impacted Bonhoeffer, and Bonhoeffer never formally studied under Barth. That said, when they finally did meet face-to-face, in July of 1931 in Bonn, they rather quickly impressed each other and, in a letter to his friend Erwin Sutz, Bonhoeffer expresses his remorse for not putting more effort into meeting Barth earlier.⁶⁸ More importantly, Barth's dialectical theology already helped Bonhoeffer frame and counter much of the theology he encountered in Tübingen and Berlin. What Barth provided him was a "liberation" from the tradition of liberal Protestantism he experienced, leading him towards a more critical stance in regards to his Berlin teachers than he already employed. Of this discovery of dialectical theology, Bethge comments:

A new certainty replaced Bonhoeffer's restless wanderings. It was like a liberation; he now began to take real joy in his work. The distinctive task of preaching—the earthly, concrete proof of God's word in the words repeated by human beings—was the starting point for this new theology, and this tore him away from the game of speculation. Initially, this theological experiment was somewhat inelegant. Bonhoeffer scorned apologies and left some inconsistencies unresolved. When he discovered that it was impossible to avoid drawing on philosophy and anthropology, despite the claims of some people, he remained convinced of theology's right to exist

⁶⁸ See Letter to Erwin Sutz, July 24, 1931, *DBW* 11:37. Concerning the aftermath of this meeting, Bethge writes: "subsequent relations between the two were characterized by complete frankness and, occasionally, completely frank disagreements." Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 176.

independently and in its own right. The derivative themes disappeared; the topic viewed so dubiously by his elders in Bonhoeffer's childhood finally had an independence that made the commitment worthwhile. It was much more than intellectual pleasure that he took in the brilliant rebel and fighter Karl Barth. Barth forced Bonhoeffer's attention away from those aspects of human nature that had been unmasked so terribly to that generation. He made the religious experience, which Bonhoeffer had long sought with youthful enthusiasm and was the source of such difficulties for him, seem inconsequential. For Barth, the certainty being pursued here was anchored not in people but in the majesty of God, and could not exist as a separate matter apart from God. In contrast to many who found Barth so gloomy, Bonhoeffer ascribed to him true *hilaritas*.⁶⁹

Andreas Pangritz suggests that when Bonhoeffer began his doctoral thesis, it was his "attempt at completing Barth's 'theology of revelation' with respect to sociality."⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer's subtitle for *Sanctorum Communio*, "A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church," and his definition of the church as "the revelation of God's Word, 'existing as church-community', [which] is the social concretion of revelation,"⁷¹ follow from his Barthian perspective. While Bonhoeffer agreed with the new dialectical theology of Barth in the theological insight that "the Christian Church is the church of the Word, that is, of faith," he expresses hesitation with Barth's assertion of the idea that the church can be "understood theologically 'in itself'"; instead, Bonhoeffer stressed that the church could only be

⁶⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 74-75. Bonhoeffer had likely read both the first volume of Barth's essay *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1924) and Barth's famous commentary on Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (second revised edition of 1922). Bonhoeffer's first encounter with Barth's writings happened in the winter of 1924 into 1925, and was first reflected in his seminar essay in the summer of 1925, "Can One Distinguish Between a Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture, and How Does Dogmatics Relate to This Question?" *DBW* 9:285-300. Bonhoeffer was rewarded with his lowest grade, "satisfactory," for the paper, which contained such statements as Scripture being where revelation is contained, because "this is where God speaks and this is where it pleases God to be personally revealed," and, "Like can be understood only by like. God can be understood only by God." *DBW* 9, 289; 290-91. The Barthianism within made Seeberg irate. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 79.

⁷⁰ Andreas Pangritz, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'Within, not Outside, the Barthian Movement,'" in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 247.

⁷¹ *DBW* 1:62.

understood “within a real historical dialectic – not a dialectic of concepts.”⁷² By “real historical dialectic,” Bonhoeffer “means the existential confrontation of one human being with the claims of another.”⁷³ This relates to a seminar paper from his time at Berlin, “On the Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture,” where he opens by stating: “Christian religion stands or falls with the belief in a historical and perceptibly real divine revelation.”⁷⁴

In Bonhoeffer’s dissertation, we begin to see Christ’s true presence in, with, and through the church as the guiding force to his theology in general growing out of a Barthian lens. He appreciated Barth’s much more theological focus, as opposed to so much of liberal Protestantism, yet Bonhoeffer went a different way with “a presentation of doctrinal theology” that begins “not with the doctrine of God but with the doctrine of the church.”⁷⁵ He criticized Barth’s emphasis on the free and inaccessible majesty of God as focusing too much on the distinction of God *from* humanity and instead believed along more typical Lutheran lines in God being centrally *for* humanity, *pro nobis*. This *pro nobis* reality of God was crucial to Bonhoeffer’s theology throughout his life in proclaiming how God entered the world through the incarnation of Christ, whose presence is sustained in the church.⁷⁶ He

⁷² See DBW 1:62.

⁷³ See DBW 1:62, n2.

⁷⁴ “Paper on the Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture,” DBW 9:285.

⁷⁵ DBW 1:134.

⁷⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996; hereafter DBW 2), 90-91. Bethge examines Bonhoeffer’s choice to begin with the church instead of revelation: “Bonhoeffer questioned whether the sequence in Barth’s thought, in which he moved from revelation toward the church, didn’t make the doctrine of salvation too secondary a factor. Bonhoeffer did not want a revelation cut off from its soteriological aspect.” Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 77.

focused on the person of Christ and not the sovereignty of God which he viewed as the dominant aspect to Barth's theology.⁷⁷ In Bonhoeffer's habilitation, *Act and Being*, he thoroughly explores this subject:

In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God—eternally remaining within the divine self . . . on the other side of revelation, as it is of God's coming out of God's own self in revelation. . . . It is a question of the freedom of God, which finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not *from* human beings but *for* them. Christ is the word of God's freedom. God is present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but—to put it quite provisionally for now—“haveable,” graspable in the Word within the church.⁷⁸

While Bonhoeffer opposed religiosity focused on what we can know through logic and reason, he was equally dissatisfied with theological concepts not centred on the incarnation of Christ. He found Barth's assertion that God is unknowable refreshing, yet Barth failed to see how the incarnation discloses the reality that God is not distant from humanity but present *pro nobis*. For Bonhoeffer, the Bible itself contains this paradoxical, hidden reality: “Each of these written words of the Spirit, which mediate the understanding of the facts, is an incarnate image of the person of Jesus Christ himself. These are contained in a fully historical, insignificant, and unimposing husk, but behind that there is the other, what ‘inculcates Christ,’ where Christ is truly alive and present.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ It is important to note that this engagement of Bonhoeffer's with Barth's theology relates specifically to Bonhoeffer's student years and in his two dissertations in which Barth's theology played a predominant role. A complication to these assessments today is the fact that Barth's theology developed and changed over time and is generally considered to have adopted a more christological focus before Bonhoeffer's death. For more detailed studies on the relationship of Bonhoeffer's theology to Barth's, see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷⁸ *DBW* 2:90-91, emphasis added.

⁷⁹ “Paper on the Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture,” *DBW* 9:294.

Barth's theology positively impacted him, but Bonhoeffer followed Luther's theology in proclaiming the mysterious hiddenness of God, since "wherever God speaks in divine unveiled majesty the only thing God can do is destroy."⁸⁰ Importantly, God does not leave humanity with nothing, as external, bodily means are used to accommodate God's purposes: "The Spirit accommodates itself to our ability to grasp, and thus remains the Holy Spirit. The Spirit must hide in earthly forms in order to be revealed to earthly beings."⁸¹ The primary and reliable places this happens is in word and sacrament ministry, where it pleases God to dwell. For Bonhoeffer, running along his confessional lines, the sacraments are not merely symbolic but the very means of grace where God provides God's own self: Jesus Christ in, with, and under the physical elements. For Bonhoeffer, this *real bodily presence* was crucial to understanding God—that God represents no mere idea or ideal, but *is* a concrete reality in the person of Christ. H. Gaylon Barker remarks:

Unlike both his teachers in Berlin, for whom Jesus Christ was not central, and Karl Barth, who reserved space outside of Christ for knowledge of God, Bonhoeffer sided with Luther and found God completely present in Christ. From his own statements, for him one cannot properly understand God, the church, justification, or the world without direct reference to Jesus Christ. This remains true throughout the remainder of his life.⁸²

Bonhoeffer echoes Lutheran theology in believing that the Logos can be known only in the flesh: *totus intra carem and numquam extra carem* ("wholly in the flesh and never outside the flesh").

⁸⁰ Seminar Paper on the Holy Spirit according to Luther, "Luther's Views of the Holy Spirit," *DBW* 9:340.

⁸¹ *DBW* 9:357.

⁸² Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 243.

In the following chapters, we discover more of how such an comprehension of God's real presence in Christ shaped Bonhoeffer's theology in many ways, but ecclesiology specifically, beginning with his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*.

CHAPTER 2

FOUNDATIONAL WORKS AND FURTHER EXPERIENCES: DISSERTATIONS, VICARAGE, AND POST-DOCTORAL STUDIES IN AMERICA

In the previous chapter, we focused on Bonhoeffer's significant influences more broadly and included references from his student years primarily to discuss the early development of his understanding of the church in a more or less a chronological fashion. In the remaining chapters, his influences are no longer delved into per se. Instead, we look at Bonhoeffer's works themselves throughout his life, while continuing to bring out relevant experiences and context when deemed appropriate. In this second chapter, roughly covering his life and works from 1927 until 1931, his aspirations and goals remained largely academic, yet the sacramentality of his ecclesiology was already firmly in place.¹

Sanctorum Communio: "Christ Existing as Church-Community"

A logical place to begin when studying Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*.² *Sanctorum Communio* displays central understandings which continued to manifest themselves in various ways for the rest of Bonhoeffer's life and more plainly represents his earliest

¹ Bonhoeffer eventually became critical of his academic writings and suggested to a friend: "academic work will not hold me for long." Letter to Helmut Rössler, February 23, 1930, *DBW* 10:205.

² This dissertation was not published till 1930. For Seeberg's comments on the work, see *DBW* 9:175-77. The book itself is not as inviting as his later, more popular, works and therefore is often left untouched by the casual reader.

published book. Vicarious representation, the proclamation of the word, and the sacraments, with a notable emphasis on confession and absolution, all continued after this work as important for Bonhoeffer and were expressed in similar fashions. On top of this, Luther was his main source, which overall never changed throughout his life. However, during this period Bonhoeffer began to read Luther's own works, instead of what was quoted by others, especially Holl. Most crucially, for our purposes, *Sanctorum Communio* builds the foundation for Bonhoeffer's works on and life in the church. Already in his dissertation, Bonhoeffer understands ecclesiology to pour out from, centre on, and, in fact, to *be* the body of Christ in such a way that his ecclesiology is inseparable from Christology.³

Bonhoeffer states the purpose of his dissertation clearly in the published preface: "This work belongs not to the discipline of sociology of religion, but to theology."⁴ As a further point of emphasis, he adds: "our purpose is to understand the structure of the given reality of a church of Christ, as revealed in Christ. . . . But the nature of the church can only be understood from within, *cum ira et studio* [*with* passionate zeal], never by nonparticipants."⁵ This last point is made clear later in the work: "*The reality of the church is a reality of revelation, a reality that essentially must be either believed or denied.*"⁶

³ Joachim von Soosten writes of this relationship between ecclesiology and christology in Bonhoeffer's theology as it developed at this time, suggesting: "It is consequently no longer possible to separate ecclesiology from Christology, since both are connected through the principle of vicarious representative action. This inseparable connection between ecclesiology and Christology, which already is present in Luther, can be pressed by Bonhoeffer to the point where the two become indistinguishable. It must be noted, however, that through this close connection both Bonhoeffer and Luther merely seek to establish the christological foundation of the concept of the church. In the unity between Christ and the church the relation of the former to the latter is therefore not reversible." Joachim Von Soosten, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," *DBW* 1:294.

⁴ *DBW* 1:21.

⁵ *DBW* 1:33.

⁶ *DBW* 1:127, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

Bonhoeffer's point is that the church is not just a social community, nor can it be understood simply in such terms, but *is* the body of Christ in a way that cannot be explained by those who do not believe in Christ. All this does not mean members of the body of Christ create or sustain the church: "The unity of the church as a structure *is* established 'before' any knowing and willing of the members; it is not ideal, but real."⁷ This statement echoes his proclamation earlier in the work:

In and through Christ the church is established in reality. It is not as if Christ could be abstracted from the church; rather, it is none other than Christ who 'is' the church. Christ does not represent it; only what is not present can be represented. In God's eyes, however, the church is present in Christ. Christ did not merely make the church possible, but rather realized it for eternity.⁸

Bonhoeffer insists that Christ's presence in the church is no mere concept but a concrete reality. The church is where Christ is present in the world. It is the community on earth being formed into Christ through the Holy Spirit in word and sacrament ministry.

Here, with his emphasis on the presence of Christ in the church, we can begin to understand what Bonhoeffer meant by his terminology for the church in *Sanctorum Communio*: "Christ-existing as church-community." Bonhoeffer borrowed from Hegel's phrase of "God-existing as church community," with a change of wording that coincides with the general thrust in Bonhoeffer's theology in focusing on the personal presence of Christ. Bethge tells us that his terminology might be explained as achieving "a third standpoint that transcended the Troeltsch-Barth antithesis."⁹ Bonhoeffer himself points us to several aspects

⁷DBW 1:199, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

⁸ DBW 1:157.

⁹ Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 83; See *ibid.*, 83-84.

built into this construct, including: “Community with God exists only through Christ, but Christ is present only in his church-community, and therefore *community with God exists only in the church*.”¹⁰ In this phrase, Bonhoeffer outlines an incarnational perspective in which the church does not involve or represent a flight from this world, as some spiritual sanctuary outside of the current reality, but “God’s new will and purpose for humanity.”¹¹

Bonhoeffer does not dive into the finer points of Christology in his dissertation, but does build from its suggestions: “It is ‘Adam,’ a collective person, who can only be superseded by the collective person ‘Christ existing as church-community.’”¹² He attests that the unity of the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ requires consideration of the concrete reality of God *pro nobis* who enters fully into this realm bodily in, with, and through the body of Christ which is the church-community; God condescends wholly into this world on behalf of humanity, taking on its flesh and then suffering in both natures by taking on its sin on the cross. Christ does not then ascend to another realm to sit at God’s right hand but continues to exist bodily as one person with two distinct natures. A mysterious and paradoxical reality extends to the church-community.

A central point to Bonhoeffer’s terminology is that “in history the church-community is, was, and remains *ecclesia militans* [church militant], not *triumphans* [triumphant].”¹³ While the church is certainly the community of saints (*sanctorum communio*), it remains simultaneously the community of sinners (*peccatorum communion*). Bonhoeffer provides a

¹⁰ DBW 1:158, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

¹¹ DBW 1:141.

¹² DBW 1:121.

¹³ DBW 1:138, n29.

communal version of Luther's *simul justus et peccator*. This reality of the *peccatorum communio* is not something that came about after Christianity grew from the original apostolic church communities but has always been the case: "The fundamental error of the views of both the pietist and the religious socialist is that they consider the earliest-Christian-community as actually 'pure.'"¹⁴ Being among the *sanctorum communio* does not mean the reality of sin has subsided, either inside or outside of the church. Humanity remains as those who have rejected the creatureliness to which God brought them into being. Instead of humanity's created intention, it goes on through life no longer loving God or neighbour, but only self.¹⁵ As a result, the church is concretely both *sanctorum* and *peccatorum communio*: "The Christian concept of person should be thought of historically, i.e., in the state after the fall, for history in the true sense only begins with sin and the fate of death that is linked with it."¹⁶ Bonhoeffer is not referring to dualism, where some actions are done by the *sanctorum communio* while others are done by the *peccatorum communio*. This dynamic of the church-community is a simultaneous, paradoxical reality, not a separable one in the body of Christ during this life.

For Bonhoeffer, it is crucial to see reality as it truly is and that this is the starting point for understanding God, humanity, and the church-community. Humanity lives as a broken community, unable to mend this inherited state from Adam. It is only with the work of Christ that the situation has changed, which makes it possible to speak of a new humanity:

The new humanity is entirely concentrated in the one single historical point, Jesus Christ, and only in Christ is it perceived as a whole. For in Christ, as the foundation

¹⁴ DBW 1:138, n29.

¹⁵ DBW 1:62.

¹⁶ DBW 1:63.

and the body of the building called Christ's church-community, the work of God takes place and is completed. In this work Christ has a function that sheds the clearest light on the fundamental difference between Adam and Christ, namely *the function of vicarious representative* [*Stellvertreter*].¹⁷

Bonhoeffer's understanding of vicarious representation, like other central aspects to his ecclesiology, grew over time, yet is unmistakably an important theme throughout much of *Sanctorum Communio*. Predominantly, vicarious representation serves as a focal point to his concern for the Christian faith being concrete in the reality of the world.¹⁸ Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the "this-worldliness" of Christianity takes many forms, but one of the main ideas here concerns his concept of person. For Bonhoeffer, as stated in our discussion of Seeberg's impact on his ecclesiology, there is a clear reciprocal relationship between individuals and community: "*for the individual to exist, 'others' must necessarily be there.*"¹⁹ The ethical responsibility that arises in the encounter with neighbours is his main depiction of personhood;²⁰ however, comprehension of the ethical situation properly happens only through Christ:

Thus our starting point must not be our love for God or for other human beings. Nor do we really know what love is from the dangers of war, the sacrificial death of our brothers, or from personal experiences of love shown to us; we know love solely from the love of God that manifests itself in the cross of Christ, in our justification, and in the founding of the church community.²¹

¹⁷ *DBW* 1:146, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

¹⁸ Cf. Von Soosten, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," *DBW* 1:291.

¹⁹ *DBW* 1:51, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

²⁰ *DBW* 1:43f., n30.

²¹ *DBW* 1:167.

Christians seek to love others as God first loved humanity in Christ; therefore, social relations should not be understood on a merely human level, but as analogies of divine-social relations. Bonhoeffer quotes Luther on the subject of the vicarious representation of Christ in the bearing “the burdens and sufferings of the neighbor”: “You must open your heart to the weaknesses and needs of others as if they were your own, and offer your means as if they were theirs, just as Christ does for you in the sacrament.”²² Joachim von Soosten further explains vicarious representation in relation to Christ’s presence *pro nobis* here in Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology: “The proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments make Christ’s vicarious representative action [*Stellvertretung*] present for us; and this vicarious representative action in turn finds expression in the church’s social form.”²³ Bonhoeffer insists that Christ does not work on our behalf only for a future in another realm but brings us into what he is accomplishing in this life for others; Christ’s presence strengthens the church-community for the ministry of the body of Christ in its existence for others.

Bonhoeffer identifies three acts of love in which being-for-each-other is actualized in the church-community:

Self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor; intercessory prayer; and, finally, the mutual forgiveness of sins in God’s name. All of these involve giving up the self ‘for’ my neighbor’s benefit, with the readiness to do and bear everything in the neighbor’s place, indeed, if necessary, to sacrifice myself, standing as a *substitute* for my neighbor.²⁴

²² Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods,” in *Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35, Luther’s Works, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 62. Quoted in *DBWE* 1, 179.

²³ Von Soosten, “Editor’s Afterword to the German Edition,” *DBW* 1:294.

²⁴ *DBW* 1:184, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

One of the acts of love Bonhoeffer mentions is especially relevant, which he describes as *“the deepest insight into the miracle of the church-community, namely that one person can forgive another’s sins with priestly authority.”*²⁵ He outlines his reasoning for this emphasis:

Nobody can forgive sins but the person who takes them upon himself, bears them, and wipes them out. Thus only Christ can do it, which for us means his church as the *sanctorum communio*. The individual Christian can do it only by virtue of membership in the church-community, and in that capacity ought to do it. The Christian takes sin from the others’ conscience and bears it; but clearly one can do that only by laying it in turn on Christ. Such action is thus possible only within the church-community.²⁶

Bonhoeffer goes on to further outline how and why this takes place in the church-community:

It [the church-community] bears the sins by receiving forgiveness through the word and seeing its sins wiped out on the cross. It indeed lives by the word alone, but in doing so it has the Spirit. It is bearer of the word, its steward and instrument. It has authority, provided it has faith in the authority of the word; it can take the sins of individuals upon itself, if it builds itself on the word of the cross, and knows itself reconciled and justified in the cross of Jesus. It has itself died and risen with Christ, and is now the *nova creatura* [new creation] in Christ. It is not merely *a means to an end but also an end in itself*. *It is the present Christ himself, and this is why ‘being in Christ’ and ‘being in the church-community’ is the same thing*; it is why Christ himself bears the sins of the individuals, which are laid upon the church-community.²⁷

For Bonhoeffer, Christ’s presence is not simply an idea, but a concrete reality in which the word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are properly distributed; however, he does not see Christ’s presence limited in this sense but sees many acts of the church involving sacramentality. Bonhoeffer had seen the Protestantism in Germany turn into a

²⁵ *DBW* 1:189, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

²⁶ *DBW* 1:189.

²⁷ *DBW* 1:190, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

sacramental religious system on the periphery of life, and he turned to discussing Christ's true presence in recapturing the purpose and place of the church. The mission of the church cannot be divorced from Christ, and by this, he does not mean the *idea* of Christ, or merely "Christlikeness." The work of the church is done only by Christ's presence through the work of the Holy Spirit since the *sanctorum communio* is "Christ existing as church-community." Bonhoeffer further states: "*The church is the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence of God.*"²⁸ DeJonge suggests that this bold statement reflects Bonhoeffer's view of the interconnectedness "between justification, Christ, and the church-community" where "justification as unconditional effective word necessitates Christ's presence; indeed, it is the very event of the self-giving of Christ's presence."²⁹ Continuing, DeJonge states: "And because Christ's presence must be personal, it must also be embodied. Since Pentecost, Christ's embodied presence is the church. . . . Christ's word, Christ's person, Christ's presence, justification, the church—all of these belong together for Bonhoeffer in an immediate relationship."³⁰ The fully human and fully divine one person of Jesus Christ has granted justification among sinners whom he gathers into his one body and lives on in, with, and through the sinful church-community as his very self yet without sin, and makes sinners into new humanity as they are received by Christ through the gift of faith.

In later works, Bonhoeffer alludes more directly to the sacramentality of the church-community. Still, his continual emphasis on the hidden but real presence of Christ, along with the sacraments themselves and religionless Christianity, all imply a focus on the true

²⁸ *DBW* 1:138, n29, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

²⁹ Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41.

³⁰ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther*, 41.

bodily presence of Jesus Christ. With this view of the sacramentality of the church-community, he is not attempting to alter the Lutheran criteria for an appropriate sacrament, or somehow include *anything* the church could do as sacramental. In fact, Bonhoeffer confessed Lutheran orthodoxy on this question of what constitutes a sacrament when it arose.³¹ Instead, his views concern following Christ with a recognition that Christ's work is being done and not that of individuals, whether collectively in the church-community or on their own, apart from Christ's true personal presence through the Holy Spirit. In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer understands Christ at work only through the church, and the church at work only through Christ, not because of any mutual goals but because they are the same thing in reality, and therefore the church does not exist apart from the reality of Christ.

With vicarious representation, he sees the church as putting into action and, in fact, being the body of Christ as "Christ existing as church-community." In vicarious representation, Christ is present. There is an encounter with the transcendent in human sociality. Bonhoeffer sees vicarious representation as a visible sign of God's being free not *from* but *for* humanity, which is a much greater theme of his works after *Sanctorum Communio*.

Sanctorum Communio represents far from a disposable collection of initial thoughts Bonhoeffer had on the church, but is a central place to see from where his ecclesiological development was built—its very foundations. In Bonhoeffer's habilitation *Act and Being*, the focus moves from the church-community directly to how God is revealed in general. He

³¹ Bonhoeffer's sacramental understanding is most definitively discussed in his "Lectures on Christology" of 1933. See chapter three below.

concentrates on the incarnation itself, and therefore more directly on the question: “who is Christ?”

Vicarage in Barcelona

Between writing his dissertation and habilitation, Bonhoeffer went on vicarage to Barcelona at a German expatriate congregation.³² His experience in Spain is often noted as where his concern for the concrete problems of this world really began to take shape as he was exposed to a different world outside the comforts of his privileged upbringing and tried to immerse himself in the lives of his parishioners.³³ In doing so, Bonhoeffer grappled with questions surrounding religion and Christianity, and where they might differ.³⁴ Namely, he continually worked to bring out that Christianity is not *our* path to God, but a true reflection of God’s path to humanity. While *Sanctorum Communio* focused on what the church *is*, Bonhoeffer’s works while on vicarage primarily concern how the church *comes to be*. With both subjects,

³² Bonhoeffer was installed February 19, 1928, and left Barcelona February 17, 1929. Bethge writes of Bonhoeffer’s vicarage in Barcelona: “His new position brought him into contact with a kind of person unfamiliar to him. In Grunewald, he had practically no contact with the type represented by these Germans living abroad: businesspeople with a petit bourgeois outlook. Here there was little sign of the hectic postwar years in Germany and the thirst for novelty and experiment that prevailed in Berlin; the small Protestant community in Barcelona clung to its old patterns and ways of thought.” Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 97. Bonhoeffer was also more fully exposed to Roman Catholicism than he had been before this.

³³ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 97. Bonhoeffer himself reflected: “I’m getting to know new people each day, at least their life stories. . . . one encounters people here the way they are, far from the masquerade of the ‘Christian world’; people with passions, criminal types, small people with small goals, small drives, and small crimes—all in all, people who feel homeless in both senses, people who thaw a bit when you speak to them in a friendly manner—real people. I can only say I have the impression that precisely these people stand more under grace than under wraith, but that it is precisely the Christian world that stand more under wrath than under grace.” Letter to Helmut Rößler, August 7, 1928, *DBW* 10:127. Another event helped to open him up to the burdened people of the world happened while on the way to Barcelona. He visited a mass in Paris attended by prostitutes and other marginalized people, and the experience had him reflect on “how close . . . these most heavily burdened people are to the heart of the gospel.” Spanish Diary, January-March 1928, *DBW* 10: 59.

³⁴ Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 112-13.

the mission of the church was of utmost importance for him; it is, therefore, Christ's real presence in, with, and through the church-community by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Our materials from Bonhoeffer's time in Barcelona primarily consist of sermons and a series of lectures. Concerning the sermons, he had not mastered the art of preaching but the theology within is full of insights into his thoughts from the period and those he discussed later on. In the first sermon he delivered in Spain, typical Bonhoeffer language is found: "Not religion, but rather revelation, grace, love; not the path to God, but rather God's path to human beings, that is the sum total of Christianity."³⁵ Of course, this was no abstract principle for him but came from him focusing more on the practical life of Christians while immersing himself in the lives of his parishioners. Another sermon displays this emphasis: "Christians are people of the present in the most profound sense. Be it political and economic problems, moral and religious decline, concern for the present generation of young people – everywhere the point is to enter into the problems of the present."³⁶

In a series of surviving lectures while in Spain, Bonhoeffer further unpacks his early thoughts on religionless Christianity and God's descent *pro nobis*. The second of the three lectures concerns "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity."³⁷ In it, long before his famous prison inquiry of "Who is Christ for us today?" Bonhoeffer poses a similar question:

³⁵ Bonhoeffer's first sermon delivered in Barcelona, on Romans 11:6, Barcelona, Oculi [the third Sunday in Lent], March 11, 1928, *DBW* 10:483.

³⁶ Sermon on Romans 12:11c, Barcelona, Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 23, 1928, *DBW* 10:529.

³⁷ December 11, 1928 lecture, "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity," *DBW* 10:342-59. This was second lecture of three Bonhoeffer delivered to his congregation in the winter of 1928. Bethge writes that this lecture "contains nuances and insights that had not been explicitly stated before, which were to make a powerful resurgence in Bonhoeffer's final working period." Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 116.

“What does the cross have to say to us, *today*?”³⁸ In fact, much of the language within brings striking parallels to his often considered radical and new ideas while in prison:

Christ is not the bringer of a new religion, but the bringer of God. Hence as the impossible path from human beings to God, the Christian religion stands alongside other religions. Christians can never boast of their own Christian religiosity, for it, too, remains humanly all-too-human. Christians do, however, live from God’s grace, grace that comes to us and to every person who opens up to it and comes to understand it in Christ’s cross. Thus Christ’s gift is not the Christian religion but God’s grace and love, which culminate in the cross.³⁹

In this passage, Bonhoeffer deliberates on an earlier statement in the lecture “the meaning of Good Friday and of Easter Sunday is that God’s path to human beings leads back to God.”⁴⁰ Part of his criticizing of religion certainly arose in response to the tendency of Protestantism to boast in the doctrine of grace and freedom at the expense of a theology of the cross. Bonhoeffer believed that Christ’s bodily presence was ignored. Even baptism and the Lord’s Supper were confined to mere spiritual rituals, and not the gift of grace and forgiveness that Christ’s real presence brings *pro nobis*.

Act and Being: God’s Freedom For Humanity not From Humanity

While still immersed in congregational life in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer contemplated what would come next. He wrote to Seeberg:

³⁸ December 11, 1928 lecture, “Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity,” *DBW* 10:358, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

³⁹ *DBW* 10:358. Bethge points out the statements made here are very similar to one of Bonhoeffer’s famous prison statements: “Jesus calls us, not to a new religion, but to life.” Letter to Eberhard Bethge, July 16, 1944, *DBW* 8:482; see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 118.

⁴⁰ *DBW* 10:357.

My thoughts are already busy with another project, albeit again not historical but rather systematic. It picks up the question of consciousness and conscience in theology and also several Luther citations from the big Galatians commentary. You also brought up the question of consciousness once in your seminar; but this will be a theological study rather than a psychological one. Perhaps when I am a bit further along you'll permit me to write to you about it in a letter.⁴¹

Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. states that in contrast to his first dissertation with Seeberg, “now he wanted to turn to theology per se, and to do so with a writing project that would be the entree to a serious academic career, not just a stepping stone to ecclesiastical life.”⁴² While thinking about and focusing on the church, Bonhoeffer’s primary concern at the time remained a future in academia, and his habilitation sought after this goal in more than just qualifying to be a lecturer at a university.⁴³ The societal situation and the inaction of the church might have been the greatest catalyst for him to consider less academic paths later on.

Bonhoeffer sought to find a methodology for theology that did not betray the uniqueness of its subject matter. In doing so, he sought to be neither antimodernist nor modernist.⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer again looked at how revelation becomes concrete in the *sanctorum communio* but, as Bethge notes, “emphasized it more by addressing the theological

⁴¹ Letter to Reinhold Seeberg, July 20, 1928, *DBW* 10:122. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer criticizes Holl’s psychological interpretation of both Luther and religion, remarking: “When conscience is said to be an immediate relation to God, Christ and the church are excluded, because God’s having bound the divine self to the mediating word is circumvented.” *DBW* 1:141. See also *DBW* 1:141, n11.

⁴² Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 2:3.

⁴³ A habilitation degree is a post-doctoral degree Bonhoeffer required to independently teach at the university level in Germany.

⁴⁴ Concerning Bonhoeffer’s goals here, Floyd writes: “Bonhoeffer wished theology to speak with all the resources of modern thought, yet with its own distinctive voice, including the prophetic tone of the critique of idolatry. Bonhoeffer therefore approached his chosen topic for *Act and Being*, a theology of consciousness, from within the perspective of the Reformation tradition’s insights about the origin of human sinfulness in the *cor curvum in se*—the heart turned in upon itself and thus open neither to the revelation of God, nor to the encounter with the neighbor.” Floyd, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 2:7–8.

discussion of the time.”⁴⁵ In the process, he once again found a great ally in Luther.⁴⁶ Specifically, Bonhoeffer’s habilitation focuses on the reformer’s understanding of the *cor curvum in se*, which in this context Floyd describes as “the heart turned in upon itself and thus open neither to the revelation of God, nor to the encounter with the neighbor.”⁴⁷ In framing the study, Bonhoeffer looks at transcendentalism, to which he accounts Kant as the representative, and ontology, with Heidegger as the spokesperson: “act” and “being” respectively. Bonhoeffer finds room for revelation in neither: “Thinking is as little able as good works to deliver the *cor curvum in se* from itself.”⁴⁸

Behind Bonhoeffer’s assertions was a confessional discussion long held between Lutheran and Reformed theologians on whether the finite can truly contain the infinite. The Lutheran point of view, *finitum capax infiniti*, over against the Reformed view, *finitum non capax infiniti*. Bethge explains:

To Bonhoeffer, the old *extra calvinisticum* was in error if it ultimately denied the complete entry of God’s majesty into this world. Bonhoeffer suspected it at work when he saw Barth establishing the majesty of God by the methods of Kantian transcendentalism. To greatly oversimplify: while the early Barth, desiring to proclaim God’s majesty, began by removing him to a remote distance, Bonhoeffer’s starting point, inspired by the same desire to proclaim his majesty, brought him into close proximity.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 131.

⁴⁶ Bethge points out how Luther is Bonhoeffer’s most quoted source in the book. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 133. See also Floyd, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 2:7, n29.

⁴⁷ Floyd, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 2:7.

⁴⁸ *DBW* 2:80.

⁴⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 134. See esp. chapter five of DeJonge’s *Bonhoeffer’s Theology Formation* titled: “The Lutheran Provenance of Bonhoeffer’s Alternative,” 83-100.

For Bonhoeffer, God is indeed unknowable and mysterious, and yet has made himself known concretely in Jesus Christ:

It is in being known by God that human beings know God. But to be known by God means to become a new person. It is the justified and the sinner in one who knows God. It is not because the word of God is in itself “meaning” that it affects the existence of human beings, but because it is God’s word, the word of the creator, reconciler, and redeemer.⁵⁰

In bringing out these elements, Bonhoeffer certainly sought to counter Holl’s religion of conscience as much as Barth, seen especially in statements such as: “If being-in-Christ means being oriented towards Christ, reflection on the self is obviously not part of that being.”⁵¹ Still, *Act and Being* primarily displays Bonhoeffer’s concern for Christ’s presence in how it can be truly personal presence only through the incarnation, to which he found a lack of emphasis and understanding among Barth and other Reformed theologians. James Woelfel wrote of the importance of this confessional distinction in Bonhoeffer’s theology back in 1970, which echoes the findings of this study:

The importance of Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran understanding of the Incarnation, in contrast to the Reformed interpretation of the early Barth, cannot be overstressed. *Finitum capax infiniti* could well be the theological motto of Bonhoeffer’s whole theological development. His writings show him pushing this “material” doctrine of the Incarnation in an ever more concrete direction with creative passion and rigor. Here is the key to Bonhoeffer’s whole theological method, including the final “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts”: God is God become man, the man Jesus Christ, and that is all we can concern ourselves with as men. The only majesty, sovereignty, glory, and freedom of God which we know are what he has revealed in Jesus Christ. God is God turned-toward-man in the Incarnation.⁵²

⁵⁰ DBW 2:134.

⁵¹ DBW 2:155.

⁵² James Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 141.

God is known only in the flesh, *totus intra carem and numquam extra carem*, and as the church *is* the body of Christ and participates in the ministry of Christ, making the Lord and Savior known, the church-community is the flesh of God in Christ.

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer's Lutheran comprehension of Christ *pro nobis* exemplifies his belief in Christ's bodily presence in the church-community as the basis of its nature and work which is externally bestowed upon humanity by Christ through the Holy Spirit. He then went to New York, and found his assertions even more scarce than he likely would have thought.

New Perspectives at Union Theological Seminary in New York

The significant experience mentioned most concerning Bonhoeffer's theological development is his time in America while a post-doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York.⁵³ The significance of this year in the United States for Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the church came from multiple sources. These included the friends he met and the extra-curricular activities he participated in. Less important were his professors. Like the theological faculty at the University of Berlin, Union was a central hub of liberal Protestantism, though of the distinctly American variety. Bonhoeffer seemed even less

⁵³ Bonhoeffer left for New York September 5, 1930, and returned to Germany on June 20, 1931, though he managed to travel during his time in America, including trips to Mexico and Cuba.

impressed.⁵⁴ In the simplest of terms, he did not think Union taught much theology at all.⁵⁵ Still, his papers and lectures from New York remain enlightening to his ecclesiological development, as well as his predominantly negative commentary on the experience. This year has been exaggerated at times,⁵⁶ but Bonhoeffer's time in America certainly marked an important part of his formation.

Similar to his experience in Rome, his reflections during the time and even the worship services he attended remained in his thoughts for the rest of his life. In America, these ideas concerned largely the ethical and social responsibilities of the church, the place of the church in the modern world and looking at the Christian faith in the context of the life of committed disciples. Like his prior thoughts, these reflections display Bonhoeffer's conviction that Christianity is not merely a cultural, institutional, historical, academic, or spiritual thing. America helped him see his own church and European theology in general in a new light, even as he describes Union as having "forgotten what Christian theology in its very essence stands for."⁵⁷

In the report of his time at Union, Bonhoeffer does not hold back his criticisms: "It is in part radically and passionately open, and in part a slow but steady process of decline,

⁵⁴ Two of his professors while at Union, Reinhold Niebuhr and John Baillie, thought that Bonhoeffer believed political questions inconsequential to Christian life when he arrived in New York, and that he remained so during his stay, but that upon his return to Germany this changed into a very political focus. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 165. Certainly, Bonhoeffer did change, but this was not something he liked to be reminded about and he largely dismissed the notion. See Letter to Helmut Rössler, December 25, 1932, *DBW* 12:84-85; Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 22, 1944, *DBW* 8:357-58.

⁵⁵ Bethge describes Bonhoeffer as being "irritated daily by the American lack of concern for what to him were the genuine problems of theology." Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 157.

⁵⁶ See Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 79.

⁵⁷ "Report on My Year of Study at Union Theological Seminary in New York, 1930/31," *DBW* 10:310. The entire report is found in *DBW* 10:305-22.

which leads to the seeping of pragmatic philosophy into Christian theology.”⁵⁸ He disagreed with liberal Protestantism in Europe, but still respected that the ideas expressed had at least some grounding theologically. At Union specifically, the lack of concern for serious theology surprised him: “The theological training of this group is practically zero, and the self-confidence with which they gently smile at every specifically theological query is both unjustified and naïve.”⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer took as positive that American theological students knew more about daily life,⁶⁰ but their lack of proper theological training and disinterest in changing the situation were highly problematic for him. He found course offerings in exegesis and dogmatics to be scarce, to which Bethge comments: “To compensate, there was a great deal of ethics, and an abundance of courses devoted to the analysis and explanation of contemporary American philosophy, literature, and society. Future ministers were expected to master these things, not the loci of the creeds or the history of dogmatics.”⁶¹ Bonhoeffer reflects on the results of such teachings: “Because American students view the question of truth largely in the light of the practical community, their sermons become edifying narrations of examples, willing proclamations of their own religious experiences to which, of course, they assign no substantively binding character.”⁶² The lack of a “substantively binding character” he saw as directly related to the lack of Christ he found,

⁵⁸ DBW 10:305.

⁵⁹ DBW 10:308.

⁶⁰ DBW 10:306-7. When the issues of birth control arose between Catholics and Protestants while he was in America in 1930, Bonhoeffer remarked that “It is interesting to see, that the issue of conflict between Protestants and Catholics turns out to be an ethical one, since the dogmatics is no longer understood by Protestants.” “The Report of the Federal Council of Churches on Birth Control,” DBW 10:437.

⁶¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 159.

⁶² DBW 10:307.

America's greatest problem according to Bonhoeffer, along with an even greater amount of the human-centred religiosity he abhorred. Jesus was considered a great exemplar and guidelines, morality, and religious experiences governed much of American Christianity in his view. Christ's real presence was ignored and a simplistic faith dominated over upholding the mysterious work of God *pro nobis*.

Before arriving in New York, Bonhoeffer already considered his lifelong concern to be centred on the compatibility of ethics with Christianity. While in New York, the vast majority of Christianity he encountered he accounted as mere ethics. The cross was entirely missing among constant chatter of morality, social justice, and political concerns. Doctrinal matters were altogether ignored while personal experience and practicality governed the church in America. Later on, after his second trip to America in 1939, Bonhoeffer described the religiosity he found in the United States as "Protestantism without Reformation."⁶³ Union itself failed to escape his criticisms, as he considered the teachings from the seminary to be destroying the church in reaction to other flawed elements of American Christianity.⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer's experience was limited, but he saw a need for more Lutheran and Pauline theology in the United States.⁶⁵ In short, Bonhoeffer's experience in America had him deeply dissatisfied with the theological climate nearly everywhere he looked and, soon after this

⁶³ See Bonhoeffer's essay about Protestantism in the United States of America, August 1939, titled: "Protestantism without Reformation," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937-40*, vol. 15 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick and Scott A. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; hereafter *DBW* 15), 438-62. We discuss this paper at the beginning of chapter five.

⁶⁴ See *DBW* 10:309.

⁶⁵ See *DBW* 10:311.

experience, he suggested that only a few people in Germany of all places truly understood the gospel.⁶⁶

Beyond the positive aspect, however misguided, of a greater focus on daily life he experienced in American Christianity, Bonhoeffer also made a few significant friends at Union and took valuable insights from these figures.⁶⁷ For our purposes, most notably, he learned from among these friends to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously in conversation with French pacifist Jean Lasserre. With this newfound emphasis, Bethge suggests: “Bonhoeffer’s academic knowledge of Lutheran ethics transformed into a committed identification with Christ’s teachings of peace. The biblical-ecumenical belief in the one body of Christ became his foundation.”⁶⁸ The centrality of the Sermon on the Mount followed in his years as pastor and professor in Berlin and while facing the early threat of the Nazis before culminating in his teaching at the Confessing Church Seminary in Finkenwalde. These teachings were then compiled and edited for publication as *Nachfolge*, a Christian classic of the twentieth century originally published by English translators as *The Cost of Discipleship*.⁶⁹

With his greater awareness and appreciation of the Sermon on the Mount as a commandment in *this* life, Bonhoeffer left New York and returned to Germany more

⁶⁶ Letter to Helmut Rössler, October 18, 1931, *DBW* 11:54. Bonhoeffer was also exposed briefly to the theological climate in England just before this letter while attending the ecumenical conference of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches in Cambridge in September 1931. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 189-91, 199-202.

⁶⁷ These figures were Swiss Erwin Sutz, Frenchman Jean Lasserre, and Americans Paul Lehmann and Albert Franklin (Frank) Fisher. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 152-56.

⁶⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 154.

⁶⁹ In the recently completed set of volumes of Bonhoeffer’s works translated into English the editors made the decision to title the work simply *Discipleship* (*DBW* 4). See chapter four below.

committed to discipleship and church participation. In doing so, he also began to put his foundational understanding of Christ's presence in, with, and through the church-community into practice in his own life.⁷⁰ Two letters of his give insights into the changes that resulted from his New York experience. The first Bonhoeffer sent his brother, Karl-Friedrich, in 1935:

Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical and mad about a number of things. I myself am sometimes afraid of that. But I know that the day I became more "reasonable," to be honest, I should have to chuck my entire theology. When I first started in theology, my idea of it was quite different—rather more academic, probably. Now it has turned into something else altogether. But I do believe that at last I am on the right track, for the first time in my life. . . . I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus sky-high—like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt-out shells behind.⁷¹

The second of these letters he sent to his friend Elisabeth Zinn:

I threw myself into my work in an extremely un-Christian and not at all humble fashion. . . . But then something different came, something that has changed and transformed my life to this very day. For the first time, I came to the Bible. That, too, is an awful thing to say. I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it—and yet I was not yet a Christian but rather in an utterly wild and uncontrolled fashion my own master. I do know that at the time I turned the cause of Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, for my crazy vanity. I pray to God that will never happen again. Nor had I ever prayed, or had done so only very rarely. Despite this isolation, I was quite happy with myself. The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly and so have other people around me. That was a great liberation. It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church, and step-by-step it became clearer to me how far it must go. Then came the crisis of 1933. This strengthened me in it. I also met others who shared the same goal. For me everything now depended on a renewal of the church and of the pastoral station.⁷²

⁷⁰ Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 203-04. For a discussion on the transformative aspects of Bonhoeffer's time in America, see Clifford J. Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, DBW 10:17-43.

⁷¹ Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, January 14, 1935, DBW 13:284-85.

⁷² Letter to Elisabeth Zinn, January 27, 1936, DBW 14:134.

In considering such evidence, Stephen R. Haynes is certainly correct in his cautions towards those who overemphasize Bonhoeffer's transition after New York in order to project their own views onto the theologian:

Similarly, if conservatives are determined to give a pietistic cast to Bonhoeffer's "conversion" they should remember Bonhoeffer's negative reaction to Finkenwalde visitors whom he believed substituted "the testimony of personal change" for the testimony of Scripture. They should also keep in mind that the "momentous" experience of 1931 was accompanied not only by increased church attendance, an interest in oral confession, systematic meditation on the Bible, and a community life of obedience and prayer, but also by the beginning of Bonhoeffer's involvement in the ecumenical movement and his enduring interest in Gandhian pacifism.⁷³

Before moving to the next chapter, on Bonhoeffer's years as a pastor and professor in Berlin, it is worth closing this chapter with his English works from his time in New York.⁷⁴ The first to discuss is his essay: "Concerning the Christian Idea of God."⁷⁵ In this paper, he counters what he perceived to be a particularly American issue of making Jesus into the great exemplar of religious and moral life, or the teacher of timeless truths to humanity, instead of "the personal revelation, the personal presence of God in the world."⁷⁶ It can even be problematic to view Jesus as simply revealing who God is to humanity:

It is God who reveals himself in absolute self-revelation to man. Since God is accessible only in his self-revelation, man can find God only in Christ. That does not exclude God's being elsewhere too, but he cannot and should not be grasped and

⁷³ Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 96.

⁷⁴ These English works of Bonhoeffer's retain spelling mistakes and awkward language intact in their publication.

⁷⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Concerning the Christian Idea of God," *DBW* 10:451-61. This was originally published in *The Journal of Religion* 12 (1932): 177-85.

⁷⁶ *DBW* 10:456.

understood except in Christ. God entered history and no human attempt can grasp him beyond this history. This is the greatest stumbling-block for all general religious thinking, God revealed himself in “once-ness” from the year one to the year thirty in Palestine in Jesus. . . . That is the reason why God reveals himself in history: only so is the freedom of his personality guarded. The revelation in history means revelation in hiddenness.⁷⁷

Bonhoeffer believes humanity cannot be successful in attempting to know and understanding God by its own means, it is only through God’s self-revelation that sinful humans can receive faith.⁷⁸ For him, “faith is nothing but the act of receiving this word of God. God remains always and entirely subject, and even the answer of man can never be more than ‘I believe, help thou mine unbelief.’”⁷⁹

In closing the essay, Bonhoeffer’s statement pulls together many of the central ideas to his entire theological legacy:

Here the paradoxical essence of God becomes visible to the faith of the Christian believer. Justification is pure self-revelation, pure way of God to man. No religion, no ethics, no metaphysical knowledge may serve man to approach God. . . . There, at the very limits of man, stands God, and when man can do nothing more, then God does all.⁸⁰

In this context, Bonhoeffer was not referring to notions of God only being useful at the “limits of man,” which he frequently criticized, but of how God achieves for humanity what it cannot in accomplishing salvation through Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

⁷⁷ DBW 10:456-57.

⁷⁸ See Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 201.

⁷⁹ DBW 10:459. Quote from Mark 9:24.

⁸⁰ DBW 10:461.

Bonhoeffer also wrote a seminar paper related to Barth's theological movement entitled "The Theology of Crisis and Its Attitude toward Philosophy and Science."⁸¹ In the writing, he states how the "revelation of God is executed not in the area of ideas, but in the area of reality."⁸² Elaborating on this belief of revelation, he continues:

The *fact* that God himself comes into the world convicts the world of impossibility to come to God by itself; the fact, that God's way in the world leads to the cross, that Christ must die condemned as a sinner on the cross, convicts the world that this impossibility to come to God is its condemnation, its sin and its guilt. The fact of Christ's resurrection proves to the world that only God is right and powerfull, that the last word is his, that by an act of his will alone the world can be renewed.⁸³

Once again, God's revelation is no mere principle or idea, but a concrete reality in Christ Jesus, revealed in history, and yet as such in hiddenness.⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer closes the paper stating: "But now the christian message: entirely from outside of the world of sin God himself came in Jesus Christ, he breaks as the holy Ghost into the circle of man, not as a new idea, a new value by virtue of which man could save himself, but in concreteness as judgment and forgiveness of sin, as the promise of eschatological salvation."⁸⁵ Throughout his life, he speaks in much the same way.

In these student years, Bonhoeffer already outlined the theological understandings which largely remained the same as he continued to proclaim these in different contexts and

⁸¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Theology of Crisis and Its Attitude toward Philosophy and Science," *DBW* 10:462-76.

⁸² *DBW* 10:464.

⁸³ *DBW* 10:464, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

⁸⁴ *DBW* 10:464-65.

⁸⁵ *DBW* 10:473.

with slightly different emphases for the rest of his life. Concerning his ecclesiology, his thoughts persistently centred on Christ's real presence in, with, and through the church-community. In discussing this view of ecclesiology, once again there is a special emphasis on the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, private confession and absolution, vicarious representation, God *for* humanity not *from* it in Christ's incarnation, religionless Christianity in how Christ properly does *everything* and humanity *nothing* concerning salvation, the proper life of the church-community, and costly discipleship.

CHAPTER 3

THE FORM OF CHRIST IN THE CHURCH:

PASTOR AND PROFESSOR IN BERLIN

During Bonhoeffer's years as pastor and professor in Berlin, from approximately June, 1931 until July, 1933, his understanding of the church was pushed further towards the concrete forms Christ's presence can take within the world. Relatedly, the church became much more than just something he thought about and studied as he participated more fully in the life of the church. He also had the chance to meet Barth in person in Bonn and was ordained. At the time, meeting Barth was more significant for Bonhoeffer than his ordination, which he treated largely as a formality.¹ Bethge helpfully describes the context of this period in Bonhoeffer's life: "The period of learning and roaming had come to an end. He now began to teach on a faculty whose theology he did not share, and to preach in a church whose self-confidence he regarded as unfounded. More aware than before, he now became part of a society that was moving toward political, social, and economic chaos."² Certainly, the development of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology during these years was in response to the rapidly changing context in Germany.

¹ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 222. Bonhoeffer's ordination took place on November 15, 1931 in central Berlin at Matthias Church.

² *Ibid.*, 173.

Rightly Remembering and Honouring Luther's Legacy

The first work among Bonhoeffer's lectures to discuss is "The History of Twentieth-Century Systematic Theology."³ In these lectures, he clearly articulates one of his primary concerns: "*Who will show us Luther!*"⁴ An early statement in this presentation could serve to partially summarize Bonhoeffer's own theological contribution, and consequently his ecclesiology as well: "Faith is not something supernatural but rather [takes place] in the forms of the physical."⁵ Importantly, Bonhoeffer was not referring to materialism but the mystery of God's bodily presence in world, particularly in word and sacrament ministry, where it pleases God to dwell; therefore, the life of faith is one of daily repentance and forgiveness where going to worship and receiving the sacraments are the most important aspects of faith to hold onto in participating in life of Christ in, with, and through the church-community as baptised believers. He contrasts this belief with those who base the Christian faith on principles, ideals, and experiences which end up pushing against what Christ is accomplishing on behalf of humanity.

In an address he gave in 1932 at The International Youth Conference of the Universal Christian Council on Life and Work and the World Alliance for Promoting International

³ Lectures delivered between November 2, 1931 and February 29, 1932, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The History of Twentieth-Century Systematic Theology," *DBW* 11:177-244. According to Bethge: "The course undertook a solid sketch of his own position on the theological map. Bonhoeffer's assessment that he had arrived at a significant turning point in theological history was the central point of the entire course." Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 211.

⁴ *DBW* 11:244, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

⁵ *DBW* 11:230-31.

Friendship through the Churches, Bonhoeffer picks up on his concern that an understanding of God's presence *pro nobis* was missing in the church:

How the New Testament proclaims life to the dying man and how in the cross of Christ death and life collide, and how life swallows up death—only where one sees this does one believe in the church beneath the cross. Only with clear eyes on reality, without any illusion about our morality or our culture, can one believe. Otherwise, our faith becomes illusion. The believer can be neither a pessimist nor an optimist. Both are illusory. The believer does not see reality in a particular light but rather sees it as it is and believes against everything and beyond everything that he sees *solely in God* and God's power. He does not believe in the world, not even in a world capable of development and improvement. He does not believe in his world-improving power and his goodwill. He does not believe in humanity or in the human good that must finally triumph. He does not believe in the church in its human power, but rather the believer believes solely in God, the God who creates and does the impossible, the God who creates life out of death, the God who has called the dying church into life against and despite us and through us, the God who alone does this.⁶

More pointedly, he proclaims: “Christ must again become present among us in preaching and sacrament, just as Christ as the crucified one made peace with God and humanity. The crucified Christ is our peace. Christ alone adjures the false gods and the demons. Only before the cross does the world tremble, not before us.”⁷

In this speech, Bonhoeffer brings what he learned from his friend Lasserre while at Union in proclaiming peace based on taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously:

And now the cross places us in the midst of a world that has gone haywire. Christ is not distant from the world or in an otherworldly dimension of our existence. Christ went into the deepest depths of the world; his cross is in the midst of the world. And

⁶ *DBW* 11:376, emphasis Bonhoeffer's. The conference took place in Gland, Switzerland. The speech was delivered August 29, 1932. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Address in Gland,” *DBW* 11:375-81.

⁷ *DBW* 11:379.

now this cross of Christ calls forth wrath and judgment upon the world and proclaims peace.⁸

Bonhoeffer already understood faith in Christ to be a concrete belief anchored in the here and now. What changed is he began to comprehend more about the forms this faith could take. In a continent full of bitterness and a church splintered and hurting, he viewed *peace* as one of the concrete forms the Christian faith could take; however, he was not referring to a mere worldly peace, but the peace of Christ. This peace to which Bonhoeffer proclaimed, offered through the cross of Christ, was not peace “at all costs,” or merely “peacekeeping,” but *real* peace based on the world shaken by Christ’s gospel events and for the contemporary situation as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Relatedly, Bonhoeffer saw in the Sermon on the Mount much more than ethical guidelines. This is reflected in a letter he sent to Sutz: “The concrete form of the proclamation of grace is, after all, the sacrament. But what is the *sacrament* of the ethical, of the commandment?”⁹ Bonhoeffer’s works continually makes clear that, while upholding the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments, he was against any notion that separates the work of the church from Christ, and therefore sees sacramentality in such things as vicarious representation, since he believes commandments come only in, with, and through Christ.

While lecturing on “The Nature of the Church,” Bonhoeffer repeated his theme of the “this-worldliness” of Christianity: “[The] church has become quite worldly for our benefit. It denies itself everything except Christ’s word. The church existing in the world knows that

⁸ *DBW* 11:379-80.

⁹ Letter to Erwin Sutz, Written in Berlin, at the beginning of August 1932, *DBW* 11:137, emphasis added.

it must renounce everything else.”¹⁰ For him, this call to costly discipleship could very well result in the church selling off its property. In doing so, Bonhoeffer delineates on thoughts similar those of his trip to Rome as a young student concerning Protestantism in Germany: “[The] desire of our church to be everywhere results in its being nowhere.”¹¹ He complains about the acculturation of the church and its desire for stature in society, which resulted in the exact opposite effect long before Hitler came to power. In fighting for survival, and trying to cling to its own relevance, the church largely forgot its proper self-understanding. To counter this trend, Bonhoeffer encourages the church to recover its proper place in the world:

[This] cannot be stated concretely. [It is the] place of the present Christ in the world. It is God’s own will that chooses his place. [That is] the *place of God himself*; therefore it can never be [a] place assumed by a human being. It must be qualified through God’s gracious presence. God must reveal himself to it. The place that could be the proper place as such cannot be the locus of the church. The church cannot appeal to the particular place. The church is really and truly without a place! No human being can dispose over this; even the church cannot. . . . There where God allows the church to find its own place, is the place of the church! Then the church [will be] loved or hated only because of its own cause (the gospel). The church’s proper place is [the] “*critical center of the world*.”¹²

Bonhoeffer witnessed within the church attitudes which relegated Christianity to the periphery of life, as a mere distraction. For him, such treatments properly reflect neither God nor the church: “God’s reality must not be seen as [a] kind of exception, also not *as a holiday in an ethical or religious sense*!”¹³ Instead: “God is not [an] aspect of reality! [The] *entire*

¹⁰ Lectures on “The Nature of the Church,” delivered during the summer of 1932, *DBW* 11:328. The lectures are found in *DBW* 11:269-332.

¹¹ *DBW* 11:276. See section on Bonhoeffer’s trip to Rome discussed above in chapter one.

¹² *DBW* 11:278-79, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

¹³ *DBW* 11:281, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

reality, including the everyday, must be seen! . . . One does not celebrate with thoughts [alone] of God. God penetrates the entire everyday reality and must be felt in everything!”¹⁴

In answering the question of where the church is and how it is in the centre, Bonhoeffer’s answer is two-fold. First, where the word is believed and obeyed we find the church-community, and can say: “*there is the center!*”¹⁵ Secondly, this does not mean “that the church-community can refer to itself as the center,” which Bonhoeffer identifies as the mistake of Rome; instead, the church is the centre only when it points to God, the true centre, who is present *in* and, in fact, *is* the church itself in Christ Jesus.¹⁶

Bonhoeffer predictably spoke of the role of Luther in the church in his Reformation Sunday sermon of 1932, where he channels Luther by asserting that the church is in its final hour:

In celebrating the Reformation, the church can’t leave old Luther in peace. He has to suffer for all the terrible things that are going on in the church today. Though he is dead, we prop him up in our church and make him hold out his hand, gesture toward the church, and keep saying over and over those same self-confident words with all their pathos, “Here I stand—I can do no other.” We fail to see that this is no longer Luther’s church.¹⁷

Bonhoeffer’s strong words continue: “lay the dead Luther to rest at long last, and instead listen to the gospel, reading his Bible, hearing God’s own word in it. At the last judgment God is certainly going to ask us not, ‘Have you celebrated Reformation Day properly?’ but

¹⁴ DBW 11:281, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

¹⁵ DBW 11:281, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

¹⁶ See DBW 11:281.

¹⁷ From Sermon for Reformation Sunday (based on Rev. 2:4-5, 7), November 6, 1932, at Dreifaltigkeitskirche in Berlin, DBW 12:440; see DBW 12:439. The entire sermon is found in DBW 12:439-46.

rather, ‘Have you heard my word and kept it?’”¹⁸ He reminds the congregation of the emphasis of the Reformation: “our church stands on God’s Word alone, and it is that Word alone that makes us those who stand facing the right direction. The church that stands in repentance, the church that lets God be God, is the church of the apostles and of Luther.”¹⁹

In another sermon during this period, with Exodus 32 as his text, Bonhoeffer contrasts two kind of churches: “The priest against the prophet, the church of the world against the church of faith, the church of Aaron against the church of Moses—this eternal conflict in the church of Christ, and its resolution, is what we are going to hear about today.”²⁰ Describing the circumstances of Aaron trying to lead God’s people in the wilderness while Moses was with the YHWH on Mount Sinai, Bonhoeffer provides a creative paraphrase for the voice of the Israelites: “God has left us alone here, but we need gods! We need religion! If you can’t prevail with the living God, then make us gods yourself!”²¹ For him, Exodus is no unrelated story of the past, but “repeated in our church, day by day, Sunday by Sunday. As the worldly church, which doesn’t want to wait, which doesn’t want to live by something unseen; as a church that makes its own gods, that wants to have a god that pleases it rather than asking whether it is itself pleasing to God.”²²

While a pastor and professor in Berlin, Bonhoeffer focused once again on the real presence of Christ in, with, and through the church-community while developing a greater

¹⁸ *DBW* 12:442.

¹⁹ *DBW* 12:444. See also Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, “Editors’ Introduction to the English Edition,” *Discipleship*, *DBW* 4:9–10.

²⁰ Sermon on Exodus 32: 1-8, 15-16, 18-20, 30-35, May 28, 1933, *DBW* 12:473.

²¹ *DBW* 12:474.

²² *DBW* 12:476.

understanding of the forms this presence might be found in the concrete world. While he certainly looked at this process positively in his teachings on peace and his emphasis on returning to the foundation of the word, his critical lens expanded as well. In figuring out the practical forms Christ's presence might take, Bonhoeffer encountered and spoke against the places that were ignorant or abusive towards this reality of the church-community. Fundamentally, he saw a lack of orthodox teaching and practice in the church, which for him involved a failure to acknowledge the Christ-centred reality of the church-community—a failure to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. In considering this predicament, and in the face of another figure rising in Germany vying for the lordship of the citizens, Bonhoeffer turned to lecture on the subject of Christology.

“Christology Lectures”: The Proximity of Christ in the Sacraments and the Church-Community

Bonhoeffer's “Christology Lectures” of 1933 mark two occasions. On the one hand, they signal the end of his formal academic career. On the other hand, they display the very best of his academic abilities. In a way, these lectures exhibit a final stepping stone from which Bonhoeffer entered into the fray of the situation at hand for the church in Germany, and left academia behind even while he remained a student and teacher.²³

²³ What we have are not Bonhoeffer's complete or original lectures, but compiled from the notes taken by his student Gerhard Reimer. See *DBW* 12:299, n1. These materials were originally published in English as *Christ the Center* in 1966. In the critical edition of Bonhoeffer's works in English translation, these lectures are found in *DBW* 12:299-360. The prevailing belief is that the lectures were held from May 3, 1933, to July 22, 1933. In the first part of these lectures, Bonhoeffer talks about “The Form of Christ,” and this is split in three sections: “Christ as Word,” “Christ as Sacrament,” and “Christ as Church-Community.” For my discussion on these lectures, I discuss this first part primarily.

Bonhoeffer's context certainly motivated his decision to lecture on Christology. Teaching on this subject was not the norm in the Berlin faculty, but he was no stranger to moving in different directions than his colleagues. In response to the emerging struggles in both the church and society in Germany, Bonhoeffer proclaimed a proper grasp of Christology as the answer.

He contrasts two concerns of Christology in discussing the subject: the “how” question, and the “that” question. In much the same way as in *Act and Being*, he outlines a third way as the correct or, more pointedly, the orthodox way of approaching Christology. For Bonhoeffer, orthodoxy asks the “who” question,²⁴ which relates directly to his understanding of Christ's bodily presence on earth:

To be present means to be in the same place at the same time (presence). We are talking about Christ's ability to be simultaneously present to us all. Even as the Risen One, Jesus remains the human Jesus. Only because he is human can he be present to us. But that he is eternally with us here, eternally with us in the now—that is his presence as God. Only because Jesus is God can he be present to us.²⁵

The mysterious reality of the fully human and fully divine nature of Jesus Christ directs Bonhoeffer's comprehension of the true personal presence of Jesus Christ, as outlined in the paradoxical Chalcedonian Christological formula of the two distinct natures of Christ, fully God and fully human, subsisting in one person. He proclaims:

The presence of Jesus Christ compels the statement that Jesus is wholly human, as well as the other statement that Jesus is wholly God—otherwise he would not be present. Thus, from the presence of Christ arises the twofold certainty that he is both human being and God. Therefore it is impossible to ask how the human Jesus can be simultaneously with each of us—as if this Jesus could exist in isolation! It is just as

²⁴ For Bonhoeffer's full discussion on christological questioning, see *DBW* 12:303-4.

²⁵ *DBW* 12:312.

impossible to ask how God can enter into time—as if such an isolated God could exist! The only question that makes sense is: who is present, who is with us here and now? The answer is: the human-God Jesus. I cannot know who the human Christ is if I do not simultaneously think of the God-Christ and vice versa. God in his timeless eternity is not God. Jesus Christ in his humanity, limited in time, is not Jesus Christ. Instead, in the human being Jesus Christ, God is God. Only in Jesus Christ is God present. The starting point for Christology has to be the God-human.²⁶

Central to comprehending this presence is the fact that God remains hidden; the God-human fully present in the flesh is always “the form that is a stumbling block.”²⁷

Bonhoeffer applies his understanding of the hidden but real presence of Christ to the topic of preaching:

The hidden form in which Christ is present is, *for us*, the church’s proclamation. Jesus Christ as the already existing God-human is present to the church alone in the scandalous form of its preaching. Christ proclaimed is the real Christ. It is not the hiddenness of God that is the stumbling block but rather the hiddenness of the God-human.²⁸

Continuing, he tries to bring greater clarity to what he means by the hidden presence of Christ:

As *presence* in the threefold form of Word, sacrament, and church-community, the basic question of the presence of Christ is not answered. . . . The being of Christ’s person is essentially relatedness to me. His being-Christ is his being-for-me. This *pro-me* is not to be understood as an effect that issues from Christ or as a form that he assumes incidentally, but is to be understood as the being of his very person. . . . I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me.

²⁶ DBW 12:312-13.

²⁷ DBW 12:313.

²⁸ DBW 12:313-14, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

This in turn means that I can think of Christ only in existential relationship to him and, at the same time, only within the church-community.²⁹

A crucial theme of both *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* concerning the bodily presence of Christ are brought together in his explanations: “Christ is not in-himself and also in the church-community, but the Christ who is the only Christ is the one present in the church-community *pro-me*.”³⁰ Bonhoeffer even states: “All theology and all Christology condemn themselves if they do not say right from the beginning that God and Christ can only be Christ *pro-me*.”³¹

That God’s revelation is *pro-me* was central for Bonhoeffer because Christ is not just the gateway to new humanity, he “*is* the new humanity.”³² Jesus Christ did not outline the path for humankind to take, for this would not truly be “good news.” Instructions to follow cannot cleanse the *cor curvum in se* or bring humanity to God. Christ does an entirely different thing through his gospel events:

There where the new humanity should stand, he himself stands, by virtue of his *pro-me* structure. That means he *is* the church-community. He is no longer acting *for* it, on its behalf, but rather *as* it, in his going to the cross, dying, and taking the sins of the church-community upon himself. Thus in him the new humanity is crucified and dies.³³

²⁹ DBW 12:314, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

³⁰ DBW 12:314.

³¹ DBW 12:314. Referencing Luther, Bonhoeffer mentions: “Because it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present in you.” Ibid.

³² DBW 12:315, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

³³ DBW 12:315, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

For Bonhoeffer, the presence of Christ is no abstract comfort but a concrete reality of the God-human Jesus Christ who is bodily present *pro nobis* “in his person to the church as Word, sacrament, and church-community.”³⁴

Bonhoeffer further discusses these three elements in which Christ is present *pro nobis*. First, he speaks of the proclamation of the word: “His presence is, by nature, his existence as preaching. His presence is not power or the objective spirit of the church-community out of which it preaches, but rather his presence is preaching.”³⁵ He forcefully remarks: “If Christ is not wholly present in the sermon, the church breaks down.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer explains that this is because “I cannot point to the human being unless I am pointing to this Jesus. Christ is in the church as the spoken Word in the form of both sermon and sacrament.”³⁷

When discussing “Christ as sacrament,” Bonhoeffer begins with two things: “First: Christ is wholly Word, and the sacrament is wholly Word. Second: The sacrament is different from the Word in that it has its own right to exist in the church as sacrament.”³⁸ He further describes the sacrament: “The sacrament is Word of God, for it proclaims the gospel, not as a wordless action, but as action that is made holy and given its meaning by the Word. The promise of ‘forgiveness of sins’ makes the sacrament what it is. Whoever believes in the

³⁴ *DBW* 12:315.

³⁵ *DBW* 12:317, emphasis added.

³⁶ *DBW* 12:318.

³⁷ *DBW* 12:318.

³⁸ *DBW* 12:318.

Word in the sacrament has received the sacrament wholly.”³⁹ Along with this promise of the forgiveness of sins, the sacrament is Christ’s bodily presence *for* the church-community through the Holy Spirit in, with, and under the elements, and the bodily elements of the sacrament moves the Christian faith out of abstractness:

The Word in the sacrament is the Word in bodily form. The sacrament does not represent “the Word,” for only that which is not present can be represented. The sacrament is the form of the Word that, because God speaks it, becomes sacrament. The bodily form of the sacrament exists only through the Word, but only as Word, as Word in bodily form. The sacrament, in the form of nature, engages human beings in their nature.⁴⁰

He moves on to deliberate on the reality of the sacraments, and the hidden presence associated with them, in the context of fallen creation:

The *people* is no longer *people*; *history* is no longer *history*, *church* is no longer *church*. With that the continuity between Word and creature has been lost. That is why the natural world is no longer a transparent world. That is why the whole creation is no longer sacrament. Sacrament exists only where God, in the midst of the world of creatures, names an element, speaks to it, and hallows it with the particular word God has for it by giving it its name. Through God’s speaking to it, this element becomes what it is.⁴¹

As such, Bonhoeffer affirms: “Christ’s presence is limited to preaching and sacrament.”⁴²

Bonhoeffer’s entire ecclesiological understanding always maintained a general thrust that Christ-centredness is not merely an ideal or principle to seek after or uphold; instead: “The church’s answer to [the understanding] of Christ as *doctrina*, as generalized truth, is to

³⁹ DBW 12:318.

⁴⁰ DBW 12:318.

⁴¹ DBW 12:318, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

⁴² DBW 12:318.

maintain that Christ is sacrament, which means that in his essence, he is not *doctrina*. This refutes the error that Christ is only an idea and does not exist in both history and nature.”⁴³ Preaching and the sacrament “do not *mean* something—they *are* something,” they are where Christ’s bodily presence is made known.⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer mentions the centrality of the concrete personal presence of Jesus Christ in the church-community as the reason why “for Luther the entire gospel depended on Christ’s words of institution.”⁴⁵

With this discussion of where Christ’s presence is found concretely, it is important to realise that Bonhoeffer does not mean that Christ’s presence is in any way limited in actuality, for “the resurrected body of Christ is everywhere.”⁴⁶ He then echoes Luther another time to outline “three different ways of being in a place”:⁴⁷ “(a) Something can be in a place *localiter*, *circumscriptive* [‘Spatially, circumscribed’], . . . (b) *diffinitive* [‘Without limitations’], . . . [and] (c) *repletive* [‘All-embracing’], that is, there where something is everywhere and yet not measurable in any place.”⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer describes the third way as “the way in which Christ is present.”⁴⁹ Christ’s presence is all-embracing: “He is everywhere, and yet we cannot get hold of him,” and humanity cannot get hold of him because “Christ is only there when he wants to be there *for you*.”⁵⁰

⁴³ DBW 12:319, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

⁴⁴ DBW 12:319, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s; see DBW 12:319-20.

⁴⁵ DBW 12:320.

⁴⁶ DBW 12:320.

⁴⁷ DBW 12:320.

⁴⁸ DBW 12:321, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

⁴⁹ DBW 12:321.

⁵⁰ DBW 12:321, emphasis added.

In Bonhoeffer's teachings on the form of Christ, he reserves a third short section for "Christ as Church-Community." Here, he moves more into the implications of the statement: "As Word and sacrament, Christ is present as church-community."⁵¹ He then poses the question: "What does it mean that Word and sacrament are the church-community?"⁵² In answering this question of the Word, Bonhoeffer explains:

Word exists as the word of God's church-community, that is, it exists in time and space. It is not just the poor words of human doctrine, but the mighty Word of the Creator. By speaking, it creates the form of the church-community. Church-community is Word of God, insofar as Word of God is God's revelation. Only because the church-community is itself Word of God can it understand the Word of God alone. Revelation can be understood only because it has been revealed. Word is in the church-community insofar as the church-community is that which receives the Word.⁵³

For our purposes, his explanation of the sacrament of the church-community is more intriguing:

The sacrament, too, is in the church-community and is present as church-community. It does have, beyond the Word, a bodily form. This form in which it becomes bodily present is the body of Christ himself, and as such it is at the same time the form of the church-community. It is not a mere *image*; the church-community *is* the body of Christ. It is so in reality. The concept of the body as applied to the church-community is not a functional concept referring to the members but is instead a concept of the way in which the Christ exists who is present, exalted, and humiliated.⁵⁴

This statement is perhaps the clearest Bonhoeffer provides in all his works concerning the sacramentality of his ecclesiology. He is not referring to the individual members of the

⁵¹ DBW 12:323.

⁵² DBW 12:323.

⁵³ DBW 12:323.

⁵⁴ DBW 12:323, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

church as the “body” but seems to be referring to the church-community as being transformed into the physical body of Christ in a mysterious way. He does not spend much time delineating this direct association with the church-community as sacrament, but he does allude to such a directly sacramental understanding of the church elsewhere. Maybe Bonhoeffer was nervous about speaking in such a way, and preferred the emphasis to rest on Christ and not on “sacramentality.” Such motivations would certainly be acceptable if in fact true. We cannot know for sure, but the real bodily presence of Christ in, with, and through the church-community is an undeniable theme to Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology and crucial to his comprehension of Christ *pro nobis*. Perhaps he had no interest in trying to divulge this dynamic any further with the belief that such attempts were more likely to confuse than disclose greater clarity.

Bonhoeffer again picks up on Christ’s presence in humiliated form near the end of these lectures. He believes the hidden reality of Christ presence in the church is crucial to apostolic Christian faith:

The God-human who is humiliated is the stumbling block to the pious human being and to the human being, period. What is scandalous is the lack of historical clarity of this God-human. The most incomprehensible thing for the pious is this human being’s claim to be not only a believer in God but the Son of God. Hence the authority with which Jesus says “But I say to you” [Matt. 5:22], and, “Your sins are forgiven” [Matt. 9:2]. If Jesus’s human nature had been deified, people would have accepted this claim. If he had done signs and wonders on demand, people would have believed him. But when it comes down to cases, he withdraws. That creates a stumbling block. But everything depends on the fact that he did so. If he had replied to the question, are you the Christ? by doing a miracle, then the statement that he became a human being like us would no longer be true, since at the decisive moment an exception would have been made. That is why Christ’s incognito had to become even more impenetrable, the more urgently people asked whether he were the Christ.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ DBW 12:358.

The fact that Christ makes himself graspable to the church-community in the sacraments does not mean that humanity can, in turn, grasp him of their own accord. Christ makes himself graspable for the church-community and only in this way does humanity grasp him—as those who *receive*. In the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the right hand of Father and the continued presence of Christ in the church-community Jesus Christ is always in the form of a stumbling block to fallen humanity revealed only through the Holy Spirit, and in this hidden form only as the redeemer of humankind:

This means that the form of the stumbling block is the form that makes possible all our faith in Christ. That is, Christ in the form of stumbling block is in the form of *Christus pro nobis*. Because Jesus wants to be our freedom, he must first become a stumbling block for us before he can be our salvation. Only by being humiliated can Christ become *pro nobis*. If he had documented himself by performing miracles, we would indeed believe, but then Christ would not be our salvation, because that would not be faith in God become human but only recognition [of a supposedly supernatural event]. But that is not faith. Faith exists when I yield myself to God, [to the extent that] I will wager my life on God's Word, even and especially there where it goes against all visible appearances. Only when I give up having visible confirmation do I believe in God. The only guarantee that faith can bear is the Word of God itself.⁵⁶

With the sacramentality of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, there is an obvious paradox. The visible church is the very body of Christ, yet this is a hidden reality, known only by faith through the proclamation of the Word and work of the Holy Spirit.

Bonhoeffer's language began to display a greater severity to the situation at hand near the end of his lectures, enlarged by the situation that presented itself to the people of Germany: to choose Hitler or Christ. The threat of the Nazis certainly lingers in the background of Bonhoeffer's teachings, although his clearest response to such threats is a

⁵⁶ DBW 12:358.

stronger confession of faith in Jesus Christ, not a direct critique or assessment of the political reality.

CHAPTER 4

STRENGTHENING AND SENDING OUT:

SEMINARY DIRECTORSHIP, *DISCIPLESHIP* AND *LIFE TOGETHER*

Between the years of 1933 and 1935, the circumstances for the church in Germany changed rapidly as the country transformed unto the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer began this period as an active supporter and contributor to the Confessing Church movement and in constructing responses to his quickly morphing surroundings. However, he soon found himself on the radical end of the Confessing Church and became disappointed with many of the results of its efforts.¹ The ecumenical movement similarly dissatisfied Bonhoeffer, and these two circumstances placed him in a peculiar position which Bethge brings out:

Despite his wholehearted involvement, his colleagues in the Confessing Church viewed him as an outsider because of his constant concern with the Sermon on the Mount. Yet among his ecumenical friends, to whom the Sermon on the Mount was of prime importance, he was isolated because of his insistence on the confession and the repudiation of heresy. He believed that the confessionally based opposition could be saved from sterility by the Sermon on the Mount, while that segment of the opposition with its roots in the Sermon could be rescued from mere enthusiasm by the confession.²

Bonhoeffer continued to participate in both but decided to do so from a distance, leaving Germany to pastor two German speaking congregations in London for eighteen months.³

¹ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 300-3, 371-72.

² *Ibid.*, 372.

³ Bonhoeffer served both St. Paul's German Reformed Church in Whitechapel and the German Lutheran Church in Dacres Road, Sydenham. Barth was particularly unhappy with Bonhoeffer's decision to leave, and urged him to return at once. See letter from Karl Barth, *DBW* 13:40. In any case, I do not delve into that period in any thorough way, as Bonhoeffer's participation in the Church Struggle and the ecumenical movement are highly contextual, and ought to be viewed more specifically in conversation with the setting of

Bonhoeffer Seminary Directions: A New Monasticism

Bonhoeffer struggled at many points of his life with figuring out the right or best course of action for him to take in a given situation. While pastoring in London, he wondered about what path to take next. He knew the call of Christians to speak out in times like his own, but it took some time for him to figure out what this might mean for his life. Bonhoeffer expresses the direction his thoughts were headed at the time in a letter to Sutz:

I no longer believe in the university; in fact I never really have believed in it—to your chagrin! The next generation of pastors, these days, ought to be trained entirely in church-monastic schools, where the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship are taken seriously—which for all three of these things is simply not the case at the university and under the present circumstances is impossible. It is also time for a final break with our theologically grounded reserve about whatever is being done by the state—which really only comes down to fear. “Speak out for those who cannot speak”—who in the church today still remembers that this is the very least the Bible asks of us in such times as these?⁴

While in London, the need for a new monasticism in the church became a pressing area of interest for Bonhoeffer. He wrote to his brother, Karl-Friedrich: “The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people together and do this.”⁵

that time. With the materials discussed in this chapter, the context is certainly still imperative and informs much of it, yet in a way that much more advances Bonhoeffer’s own ecclesiological understanding than his time in London. This is not to say that Bonhoeffer did not produce relevant works during his London period, as his sermons especially provide a good window into his thought at the time. See Keith Clements, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 13:1-10.

⁴ Letter to Erwin Sutz, September 11, 1934, *DBW* 13:217.

⁵ Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, January 14, 1935, *DBW* 13:285.

Initially, his strong language in both the Confessing Church and ecumenical circles caused many to question the possible appointment of Bonhoeffer to one of the new preacher's seminaries of the Confessing Church. These individuals wondered if he was capable of toning down his rhetoric, especially in order to teach Reformed students alongside Lutherans. Bonhoeffer's supporters eventually managed to win over the objectors.⁶ Still, plans for his directorship morphed many times before the seminary began in the spring of 1935 at a temporary location in Zingst.⁷

Overall, this time is where Bonhoeffer honed his thoughts on the church-community and discipleship which continue to influence many aspects of Christian communities to this day.⁸ Obviously, he had been thinking about the church-community for quite some time, but Bonhoeffer's seminary directorship was the period in which he thoroughly put his ideas into practice. Not surprisingly, he considered this role the most fulfilling of his life.⁹

⁶ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 409-11; Letter from the diary of Julius Rieger, June 9, 1934, *DBW* 13:155-56. See also *DBW* 13:156, n4. These seminaries were in direct response to new laws put in place by Hitler which heightened the Confessing Church into being directly in conflict with the state. The new laws made it necessary for the Confessing Church to figure out a way to ordain its own candidates for pastoral ministry. The preacher's seminaries like the one Bonhoeffer directed were their response to this challenge, even though their existence was technically illegal. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 419-24. For background on this conflict and its impact on Finkenwalde, see H. Gaylon Barker, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," *DBW* 14:3-17.

⁷ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 411-17.

⁸ See, for example, Paul R. House, *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

⁹ Letter to the Brothers of the First Session, newsletter of November 15, 1935, *DBW* 14:119; see also Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 450. Among many other developments, one of Bonhoeffer's students became his best friend and brother-in-law, and later biographer and instrumental preserver of his life's work, Eberhard Bethge. For a biographical look at Eberhard Bethge and his friendship with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see John W. D. Gruchy, *Daring, Trusting Spirit: Bonhoeffer's Friend Eberhard Bethge* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). In all, there were twenty-three students who were enrolled for the start of the seminary at the Zingst location.

Importantly, Bonhoeffer did not seek to develop his “church-monastic school” as a community cut-off from the rest of the world. In his words: “The goal is not monastic isolation but rather the most intensive concentration for ministry to the world.”¹⁰ Contrary to a peaceful religious existence removed from the chaos of the world, Bonhoeffer believed that the situation, if not in general, called for this kind of intense communal experience and training for the ministers of Christ’s church to be able to stand firm on the word of God in the midst of the fallen world.¹¹ Here, the Church Struggle altered Bonhoeffer’s prior thinking that seminaries which provide practical theological training are “a waste of time.”¹²

Candidates who came to these preacher’s seminaries already had theological training, and so Bonhoeffer thought it best to focus on a life of prayer and worship in his school while maintaining rigorous academic expectations.¹³ To gain a better grasp of and inspiration towards what this might look like, he spent time before beginning his role as seminary director touring different seminaries and Christian communities.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer’s comprehension of church-community in general is brought out in his book *Life Together*: “It is essential for Christian community that two things become clear right from the beginning. *First, Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; second, Christian community*

¹⁰ Letter to the Council of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union, September 6, 1935, *DBW* 14:96.

¹¹ Cf. Barker, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 14:35.

¹² See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 420-21.

¹³ “For the newcomers the first classes in Zingst were a breathtaking surprise. They suddenly realized that they were not there simply to learn new techniques of preaching and instruction, but would be initiated into something that would radically change the prerequisites for those activities.” Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 450.

¹⁴ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 411-13.

*is a spiritual [pneumatische] and not a psychic [psychische] reality.*¹⁵ From this belief, at Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer explicitly sought to bring the weight of the cross of Christ into the thought and practice of his students. In one of his teachings, “Practical Exercises in Homiletics,” he asserts: “For [a person should boast] only of the cross of Christ. Here is the only place where God can be found in this glory-addicted world.”¹⁶ Jesus bestows the ultimate glory the world did not expect or deserve: “Thus the ultimate glory is not: world judged and condemned, but rather that Christ through the cross, which is the cross of the church-community, pardons the world and makes peace.”¹⁷

Along with his concern for the cross, Bonhoeffer here continues to reject the kinds of religious ideas dominant at the University of Berlin. For example, he likely thinks of Holl’s teachings in proclaiming:

We [must] finally [get] rid [of the notion] that the gospel is concerned with the care and salvation of the *individual*—or with tracing the path from the despair of sin to blessedness (methodology and psychologism). Luther and Reformation [were] concerned *first* with God’s salvation and not with how we [might become blessed]. How God *alone* [is] righteous.¹⁸

In isolating the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to an individual’s salvation, the cross turns into an escape from the problems of the world instead of being immersed into what God is doing about them. In Germany, this meant not isolationism as such but removing oneself from responsibility towards neighbours and the evil actions of the state. Bonhoeffer finds

¹⁵ *DBW* 5:35, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

¹⁶ “Practical Exercises in Homiletics,” on Galatians 6:14, *DBW* 14:363. Full lecture series in *DBW* 14:341-76.

¹⁷ *DBW* 14:364. On Hebrews 4:15-16.

¹⁸ *DBW* 14:346. On Romans 3:23-26.

such inaction unacceptable and counter to the gospel.¹⁹ He understands the cross of Christ much differently, not as a mere idea or tool for the remission of guilt but where God's redemption of the world unfolded concretely in history. God was wholly present *pro nobis* in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and Christ's presence remains in the church-community post-ascension. According to Bonhoeffer, God continues the work of salvation in, with, and through the church by the Holy Spirit which reveals Christ's bodily presence *pro nobis*: "God is not distant but rather close at hand. What a splendid gospel this is: 'I am your God!' Thus does God, the Holy Spirit, speak!"²⁰

Bonhoeffer firmly believed and demonstrated that being a Christian is not an escape from the world and all its suffering, but of connecting even deeper with the world for the sake of the world. Further, this belief involved no mere concept based on Jesus as exemplar but the very nature of the church being Jesus Christ himself—"Christ existing as church-community." For Bonhoeffer, Christ is present in the world as his church does his work through the Holy Spirit:

A God who is merely a thought or an ideal can never quench this thirst. Our soul thirsts for the living God, for the God and origin of all true life. When will God quench our thirst? When we come to the point that we behold the face of God. The goal of all life, indeed, eternal life itself is to behold God's face. We see it in Jesus Christ, the Crucified.²¹

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer saw in much of the attitudes he encountered a misunderstanding of Luther's theology of two kingdoms, but still worked on an alternative in his *Ethics* (DBW 6) of with four "divine mandates." See chapter five below.

²⁰ DBW 14:636.

²¹ Sermon on Psalm 42, DBW 14:847.

With his understanding of who God is and God's presence and work in the church, Bonhoeffer instructs his students on the preached word of God in contrast to other popular ideas his students likely encountered concerning the preaching task:

*The Sermon derives from the incarnation of Jesus Christ and is determined by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It does not derive from some universal truth or emotional experience. The word of the sermon is the incarnate Christ. The incarnate Christ is God. Hence the sermon is actually Christ. God as human-being. Christ as the word. As the Word, Christ walks through the church-community.*²²

The emphasis on Christ's bodily presence in the sermon is evident. It is not that this presence involves an identifiable formula like the sacraments themselves in the promises of God's Word attached to the physical elements which plainly proclaim the gospel; instead, Bonhoeffer sees this presence as residing where the forgiveness of sins, through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross, is proclaimed for the congregation—it is Christ's bodily presence that is truly *in* the preached word: “*The word of the sermon is in fact this Christ who bears human nature.*”²³

Bonhoeffer discusses the implications of this aspect of preaching further while lecturing on catechises, deliberating on how proper preaching is both law and gospel:

The goal of the sermon is the good news. Yet wherever Christ, the crucified, poor Christ is preached as the one who brings joy, it is precisely the proclamation of forgiveness that will inevitably prompt offense, the offense of the old human being who says, I am, too, religious. No, with all your religiosity, even with all your Christian orientation, you are nothing and live only from forgiveness.—But it would be nonsensical to preach the offense as such. Yet wherever the gospel really is preached as the alien element, the natural human being must take offense, and this offense bears the promise that the natural human being will die from it. The offense

²² “Lecture of Homiletics,” *DBW* 14:509-10, emphasis Bonhoeffer's. Full lecture found in *DBW* 14:487-536. See also Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 443.

²³ See *DBW* 14:509, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

is that the old human being dies in Christ. And if we foster the old human being, the new one cannot come into being.²⁴

These comments relate to his earlier remark: “*Christ is something entirely different from what we by nature have in our hearts. . . .* Human yearning, one must note, is by nature not yearning for Christ as long as a person does not yet know Christ but is instead carnal yearning!”²⁵ Bonhoeffer’s assertion here reflects the Lutheran confessional emphasis on humanity’s incapability to follow the First Commandment apart from the gift of faith. For both theologians, the issue is not a matter of humanity needing to step out and believe but to be brought into belief by the work of the Holy Spirit, as sinners are incapable of believing by their own will.²⁶

This is not the first time we encounter Bonhoeffer emphasizing Christ’s presence in the proclaimed word of God. *Sanctorum Communio*, for instance, contains similar ideas.²⁷ However, we also see this continuing to develop later on, most famously as he further ruminated on religionless Christianity. Also not a new concept for him, as noted earlier, Bonhoeffer’s continued aversion to “religion” was a polemic against anything not explicitly Christ-centred in the church, and by this, he meant no mere *orientation* to Christ. This Christ-centredness must not be maintained within the realm of ideas or even goals, but means proclaiming Christ’s hidden presence: “God and God alone is what is and remains concrete

²⁴ “Lecture on Catechesis,” *DBW* 14:544. Full lecture found in *DBW* 14:536-59.

²⁵ *DBW* 14:544, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

²⁶ See The Augsburg Confession, Article II, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 36-39.

²⁷ See the section on “*The sanctorum communio as the bearer of the ‘office.’*” *DBW* 1:231-36, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

in a sermon.”²⁸ According to Bonhoeffer, the concrete situation cannot be narrowed down to the historical one, but is where the word of God speaks and is present *pro nobis*.²⁹

Bonhoeffer further emphasizes his Christ-centred understanding of God’s presence in the church-community in his lectures on pastoral care: “The task of pastoral care is given to the pastor along with the task of proclamation (ordination vow). Only to the extent that Christ’s word is also spoken through pastoral care are pastoral care and proclamation identical, or does the pastoral conversation bear the promise. Pastoral care is proclamation to the individual.”³⁰ In the struggles of this life, ultimately “God alone can provide comfort and strength and help.”³¹ As such, Bonhoeffer considers pastoral care “not the shaping of a person’s character or the education of that person into a certain type, but the act of revealing a person as a sinner and of teaching that person how to hear the word.”³² From his thoughts on pastoral care, we can see how private confession and absolution became so central for him, both in his seminary community and in the life of the church-community in general; since Christ took on the sins of humanity, so Christians ought to take on the sins of each other as vicarious representatives.

Bonhoeffer further develops his thoughts on bearing the sins of one another in his paper, “The Visible Church in the New Testament.”³³ Here, he writes of this act as

²⁸ *DBW* 14:493.

²⁹ See *DBW* 14:494.

³⁰ Lecture on “Pastoral Care,” *DBW* 14:560. Full lecture found in *DBW* 14:559-94.

³¹ *DBW* 14:560.

³² *DBW* 14:564.

³³ Lecture on “The Visible Church in the New Testament,” November 11, 1935 – February 27, 1936, *DBW* 14:434-76.

participation (*participatio*) and not mere imitation (*imitatio*): “The law of the church-community is the cross of Christ. The life of the church-community means participating in the cross by bearing the cross, which is the visible form of love for one another. Whoever does not genuinely bear the cross is not worthy of it.”³⁴ While the Christian life certainly does not exclude imitation, participation invokes more of Bonhoeffer’s assertion that Christ *himself* does the work of body of Christ and not the church doing Christ’s work in his place.

During this time, as stated above, Bonhoeffer’s focus extended beyond the Finkenwalde community as he remained very much involved in the wider church. His role as seminary director included frequent trips back and forth to Berlin for Confessing Church matters. As he continued to engage in the Church Struggle, his bold tone persisted. For Bonhoeffer, the situation for the German Evangelical Church was clear: “a definitive boundary has been recognized and confirmed between the Reich Church government and the true church of Christ. The Reich Church government is heretical.”³⁵ He called for a strong stance few wished to take:

Extra ecclesiam nulla salus. The question of church communion is the question of the community of salvation. The boundaries of the church are the boundaries of salvation. *Whoever knowingly separates himself from the Confessing Church in Germany separates himself from salvation.* This is the insight that has always forced itself on the true church. This is its humble confession. Those who separate the question of the Confessing Church from the question of their own salvation have not comprehended that the struggle of the Confessing Church is the struggle for their salvation.³⁶

³⁴ DBW 14:475.

³⁵ “Bonhoeffer’s Essay on Church Communion,” DBW 14:668. Full essay found in DBW 14:656-78.

³⁶ DBW 14:675, emphasis added.

For the statements above, many deemed Bonhoeffer “too radical,”³⁷ but he includes further explanation:

Faith is tied to God’s salvific revelation, from the perspective of which it perceives absolutely no other salvation than salvation in the visible church. From this perspective, faith is in fact not free to seek God’s salvation anywhere other than where the promise is given in the first place. Because salvation beyond the church is fundamentally inconceivable for faith, such a notion can also never constitute a doctrinal point. It is in the promise alone that salvation is recognized. In its own turn, however, the promise includes the proclamation of the pure gospel.³⁸

Bonhoeffer saw the German Christians abandoning the proclamation of the gospel and did not take lightly the fact that going into a *status confessionis* meant not a difference of opinion, but required the belief that the Reich Church ceased to be church.³⁹ The boundaries of the church were established long ago by the Apostles and, for him, these boundaries were clearly ignored by the Reich Church. This situation created the need for a clear confession, which brought Bonhoeffer into a related conversation on the presence of God:

One cannot repeat often enough that the church is not performing any sort of compassionate act by denying its own boundaries. The true church will always come up against boundaries. By acknowledging these boundaries, it is performing the work of love toward human beings insofar as it gives priority to the truth. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. If this statement is certain, then the other, which finds its analogy in the doctrine of God, must be added as well. Although God is indeed omnipresent, God does not intend that we perceive God just anywhere. Just because God is present does not mean that God can also be recognized; there is a difference between the two. . . .

³⁷ See Helmut Gollwitzer’s article in response, “On the Question of Church Communion,” *DBW* 14:678–89.

³⁸ *DBW* 14:676.

³⁹ For more information on Bonhoeffer’s understanding and use of the term “*status confessionis*” see DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Reception of Luther*, 205–06, 208–10.

Hence one can now also say that the church can be recognized only where God's promise abides, namely, in the visible church.⁴⁰

Amid the chaos outside his seminary community, Bonhoeffer did not give his students new methodologies but implored them to learn once again the importance of prayer and to pray: "After four hundred years of Protestantism, the spirit of the Reformation is emerging again. The forces threatening the church are enormous. Here we must learn again: It is prayer that accomplishes things, including the prayer of children. That is why the Confessing Church has learned to pray again."⁴¹

The Gestapo closed down the seminary at Finkenwalde on September 29, 1937, but Bonhoeffer continued his work with Confessing Church seminarians until March of 1940 under "The Collective Pastorates," which Victoria J. Barnett describes as "Bonhoeffer's dogged and eloquent attempts to keep his seminarians on the Confessing side."⁴²

Discipleship: "Following After" the Bodily Presence of Christ

Shortly before the Gestapo closed down his Finkenwalde seminary, on August 26, 1937, Bonhoeffer delivered the completed manuscript of his now famous book on Christian spirituality to publishers, *Nachfolge*. As we frequently encounter in many contexts concerning the focal points to his theology, costly discipleship was not a new concern for

⁴⁰ *DBW* 14:677.

⁴¹ "Presentation on the History of the Protestant Hymn," *DBW* 14:716. Full presentation found in *DBW* 14:710-17.

⁴² Victoria J. Barnett, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," *DBW* 15:7; see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 589. For information and context of Bonhoeffer's works while managing the collective pastorates, see *ibid.*, 587-678.

Bonhoeffer upon directing the Confessing Church seminary. Still, Finkenwalde provided an opportunity to bring together some of his thoughts on discipleship into the context of a deep necessity for it in response to Nazism.⁴³ In the editor's introduction to the critical edition of *Nachfolge* in English translation, titled *Discipleship*, Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey describe Bonhoeffer as having "crafted a Christ-centered spirituality that took the insights developed in his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, and his *Habilitationsschrift*, *Act and Being*, into the practical level of church life in the midst of inimical, heathen forces, which in his opinion were corrupting an entire nation."⁴⁴ As such, he did not intend to create a classic piece on discipleship but a particular answer to his context, with the Finkenwalde community and the Church Struggle in Germany both playing an important role in framing this response.

The origins of the book came from a series of lectures on the Sermon on the Mount delivered to his seminarians, and was compiled into its final written form between 1935 and 1936.⁴⁵ Still, for some time Bonhoeffer had been speaking and writing about the Protestant abuses of the gospel in Germany and elsewhere. Bethge provides a summary of Bonhoeffer's theological development up until *Discipleship*:

Bonhoeffer's theological development showed an intrinsic consistency and continuity. Its tendency to concentrate on the issues and narrow them down was determined by a deep inner need, not by the requirement of methodology. In 1927 Bonhoeffer had sought the concrete entity of the body of Christ in the church in the form of a sociological structure (*Sanctorum Communio*). In 1929 he reformulated the question, asking whether the earthly continuity of revelation, in its free contingency, could be conceived in terms of the concrete church (*Act and Being*). In 1932 he

⁴³ For information on the context of Nazi oppression of the Confessing Church, see Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," *DBW* 4:2-3.

⁴⁴ Kelly and Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," *DBW* 4:2.

⁴⁵ See *DBW* 4:24, and Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 451.

examined the relationship of the body of Christ to the world by inquiring into the actual obedience to God's commandments. In 1933 his exposé of the structure of Christology was based upon the implications of all his previous thinking. And now, by interpreting belief in Christ as discipleship, he raised this Christology from its academic deathbed.⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer asks early into this work: "What does Jesus Christ want of us?"⁴⁷ The question may seem clear, but "there are so many dissonant sounds, which still obscure the pure word of Jesus and make a genuine decision more difficult."⁴⁸ While trying to preach "grace alone," he believes that the church forgot about discipleship. As a result: "the word of grace has become frightfully empty."⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer knew Christ did not simply bring a *declaration* of humanity being accepted by God but calls Christians to daily "dying to self" and into new life by following after Christ's bodily presence in, with, and through the church-community. In response to this context, Bonhoeffer boldly responds:

Because we cannot deny that we no longer stand in true discipleship to Christ, while being members of a true-believing church with a pure doctrine of grace, but no longer members of a church which follows Christ, we therefore simply have to try to understand grace and discipleship again in correct relationship to each other. We can no longer avoid this. Our church's predicament is proving more and more clearly to be a question of how we are to live as Christians today.⁵⁰

Always concerned with contemporary issues, Bonhoeffer looked to the past for answers. In doing so, he turned most often to Luther to try to get all Christians, but especially

⁴⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 460.

⁴⁷ *DBW* 4:37.

⁴⁸ *DBW* 4:37.

⁴⁹ *DBW* 4:55.

⁵⁰ *DBW* 4:55.

Lutherans, to see the errors of their ways. Wolf Krötke suggests: “For him, the question was how God—who turned toward the world in Jesus Christ, who emptied himself—is relevant to the world and every person in a concrete, life-changing way, even when the world no longer believes in him.”⁵¹ As Krötke notes, along with Luther, Bonhoeffer found an ally for understanding biblical discipleship in another Lutheran figure of the past:

In his retrieval of Luther, Bonhoeffer found an unexpected ally in the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Despite their differences over what Bonhoeffer believed to be an exaggerated individualism in Kierkegaard, he believed that Kierkegaard alone of nineteenth-century thinkers had correctly perceived the true dialectic of faith and obedience in Luther’s interpretation of the Gospel.⁵²

Perhaps the most noted aspect of Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* is his discussion on “cheap grace.” He responded to the rampant quietism in the church of his day which suggested that Jesus did anything but demand and reckoned that such teachings represent a clear misreading of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith. “Cheap grace” ruled the day, and Bonhoeffer viewed this as playing a key role in what seemed to be the destruction of the German Evangelical Church happening right before his eyes. His concern here was not about morality but a personal response to Christ, specifically in answering the question of whether one serves Hitler or Christ. He believed only a return to the biblical, “costly” grace that the word of God proclaimed would bring about authentic renewal in the church. In this emphasis on the need to return to the call for new obedience in the reality of Christ in, with, and through the church, Bonhoeffer certainly attempted to answer his own question of “who will show us

⁵¹ Wolf Krötke, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther,” in *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 57.

⁵² Kelly and Godsey, “Editors’ Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 4:10.

Luther?” Luther was not the issue in Germany, but what the Protestantism had done to Luther’s legacy, as Kelly and Godsey state:

For Bonhoeffer, Luther seemed to have been eclipsed by the reductionism of Protestant liberalism in which Jesus became a mere teacher of moral truths and the Protestant doctrine of faith alone was tamed by humanistic acculturation. For Luther, though, faith and ethical convictions were one reality; the world of Jesus Christ and the world of human struggles were a single world.⁵³

To bring this out, Bonhoeffer invokes his terminology of “cheap grace”: “Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴ He looked to Paul, Luther and the gospels and saw that real grace from Jesus Christ is costly.⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer even addresses his fellow Lutherans directly:

Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us. The doctrine of pure grace experienced an unprecedented deification. The pure doctrine of grace became its own God, grace itself. Luther’s teachings are quoted everywhere, but twisted from their truth into self-delusion. They say if only our church is in possession of a doctrine of justification, then it is surely a justified church! They say Luther’s true legacy should be recognizable in making grace as cheap as possible. Being Lutheran should mean that discipleship is left to the legalists, the Reformed, or the enthusiasts, all for the sake of grace. They say that the world is justified and Christians in discipleship are made out to be heretics. A people became Christian, became Lutheran, but at the cost of discipleship, at an all-too-cheap price. Cheap grace had won.⁵⁶

⁵³ *DBW* 4:8.

⁵⁴ *DBW* 4:44.

⁵⁵ See *DBW* 4:45.

⁵⁶ *DBW* 4:53.

For Bonhoeffer, the prevalence of “cheap grace” in the church stems from ignoring Christ’s actual presence in it, thinking that Christ is not the living being he is who calls people out of sin and death to follow him into new life and obedience to his commands through the Holy Spirit:

Discipleship is commitment to Christ. Because Christ exists, he must be followed. An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship. In truth, it even excludes discipleship; it is inimical to it. One enters into a relationship with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship. Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. It is an idea, a myth. A Christianity in which there is only God the Father, but not Christ as a living Son actually cancels discipleship. In that case there will be trust in God, but not discipleship. God’s Son became human, he is the *mediator*—that is why discipleship is the right relation to him. Discipleship is bound to the mediator, and wherever discipleship is rightly spoken of, there the mediator, Jesus Christ, the Son of God is intended. Only the mediator, the God-human, can call to discipleship.⁵⁷

Bonhoeffer insists that without an understanding of Christ’s presence in, with, and through the church-community, the church is not true Christianity and real discipleship remains illusory and abstract. It is Christ’s presence in the church that pushes Christianity into the world.

On top of cheap grace, Bonhoeffer speaks further on the dynamics of faith and obedience. Once again working with two dynamics of Christian life, he challenges the church not to separate faith and obedience, as if one exists without the other:

Only the believer obeys—we think we can understand that. Of course, obedience follows faith, the way good fruit comes from a good tree, we say. First there is faith,

⁵⁷ *DBW* 4:59, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

then obedience. If this meant only that faith alone justifies us and not deeds of obedience, then it is a firm and necessary precondition for everything else. But if it meant a chronological sequence, that faith would have to come first, to be later followed by obedience, then faith and obedience are torn apart, and the very practical question remains open: when does obedience start?⁵⁸

Bonhoeffer declares that obedience is not detachable from faith, even as the doctrine of justification requires that faith and obedience are distinguished: “Faith exists only in obedience, is never without obedience. Faith is only faith in deeds of obedience.”⁵⁹ According to Bonhoeffer, the fact that these two aspects of Christian life belong together is not difficult for the church to comprehend. The difficulty results from the fact that this reality involves denial of self and taking up one’s own cross. Referencing Peter’s quick denial after his confession of the Messiahship of Jesus (Matt. 16:13-20), Bonhoeffer asserts: “From its very beginning the church has taken offense at the suffering Christ.”⁶⁰ The church then responds by trying to make the cross into something less offensive and demanding; however, “The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death”⁶¹ The original English edition famously translated this last sentence: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁶²

Bonhoeffer understands a life of discipleship as much more than following Christ’s commands or taking from his example. For him, discipleship means being Christ’s vicarious

⁵⁸ *DBW* 4:63-64.

⁵⁹ *DBW* 4:64. See Romans 1:5.

⁶⁰ *DBW* 4:85.

⁶¹ *DBW* 4:87.

⁶² See *DBW* 4:87, n11.

representatives: “A Christian becomes a burden-bearer—bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). As Christ bears our burdens, so we are to bear the burden of our sisters and brothers.”⁶³ Certainly, he himself draws from the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the Scriptures, and implores others to do similarly, but Bonhoeffer does not see an endless list of tasks in the vicarious representation of Christ; instead: “They can be no other works than those Jesus himself created in the disciples when he called them, when he made them the light of the world under his cross—poverty, being strangers, meekness, peacemaking, and finally being persecuted and rejected, and in all of them the *one* work: bearing the cross of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴ He thinks of the vicarious representation of Christ as exactly that: Christ’s work and not truly that of the Christian. Similarly, vicarious representative acts are not done for the sake of one’s own righteousness but in view of the righteousness and work of Christ:

To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ is not an ideal of realizing some kind of similarity with Christ which we are asked to attain. It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19). It is Christ’s own form which seeks to manifest itself in us. Christ does not cease working in us until he has changed us into Christ’s own image. Our goal is to be shaped into the entire *form* of the *incarnate*, the *crucified*, and the *risen one*.⁶⁵

God’s work in Jesus Christ is not a mere *message* of salvation, but God’s real presence in the church through Christ for the redemption of the whole world.

⁶³ DBW 4:88.

⁶⁴ DBW 4:114, emphasis added.

⁶⁵ DBW 4:284-85, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

Specifically referring to the German Christians and others in the face of the Nazis, Bonhoeffer outlines a much different belief in the this-worldliness of Christianity in comparison to many of the alternatives:

Christians are to remain in the world, not because of the God-given goodness of the world, nor even because of their responsibility for the course the world takes. They are to remain in the world solely for the sake of the body of the Christ who became incarnate—for the sake of the church-community. They are to remain in the world in order to engage the world in a frontal assault. . . . But this can take place only through visible membership in the church-community. The world must be contradicted within the world. That is why Christ became a human being and died in the midst of his enemies.⁶⁶

The church is not left alone in this often-harsh reality, as if the responsibility for God's redemptive work has somehow passed onto the church:

The life of Jesus Christ here on earth has not yet concluded. Christ continues to live it in the lives of his followers. To describe this reality we must not speak about our Christian life but about the true life of Jesus in us. "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The incarnate, crucified, and transfigured one has entered into me and lives my life. "Christ is my life" (Phil. 1:21). But together with Christ, the Father also dwells in me; and both Father and Son dwell in me through the Holy Spirit. It is indeed the holy Trinity who dwells within Christians, who permeates them and changes them into the very image of the triune God. The incarnate, the crucified, and the transfigured Christ takes on form in individuals because they are members of his body, the church. The church bears the incarnate, crucified, and risen form of Jesus Christ. The church is, first of all, Christ's image (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), and through the church so too are all its members the image of Christ. Within the body of Christ we have become "like Christ."⁶⁷

At this point, Bonhoeffer further outlines participation in the body of Christ with a proper distinction of imitating Christ. Christians look only to Christ as they follow him and

⁶⁶ *DBW* 4:244.

⁶⁷ *DBW* 4:286-87.

in so doing are transformed into the image of God: “The follower [*Nachfolger*] of Jesus is the imitator [*Nachnahmer*] of God.”⁶⁸ Imitating Christ, from Bonhoeffer’s perspective, is not about trying to act as Christ did but concretely following Christ’s bodily presence, which is an action that requires cost by its very nature. Christ did not call people to merely adhere to new ideas or to cling to a far-off hope, but to new life in, with, and through his body. Bonhoeffer did not proclaim that Christians need to be more moral or do more acts of charity but to follow-after Jesus Christ. Attacking the problems of dormancy in the church in any other way ignores the reality of the *peccatorum communio*, that the church-community is full of sinners. Kelly and Godsey comment that Bonhoeffer’s “countercultural perspective was not a flight from the world, but a struggle to establish a critical church presence in the world. Hence *Discipleship* contains ample exhortations for Christians to engage positively with the world.”⁶⁹

Bonhoeffer recapitulates his grasp on the costly discipleship of the Christian faith in light of the cross of Christ in a letter to his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher:

Now, I know about the God for whom I am searching either out of my own experiences and understanding, from my own interpretation of history or nature, that is, from within myself—or I know about that God on the basis of his revelation of his own word. Either I determine the place where I want to find God, or I let him determine the place where he wants to be found. If it is I who says where God is to be found, then I will always find a God there who in some manner corresponds to me, is pleasing to me, who is commensurate with my own nature. But if it is God who says where he is to be found, then it will probably be a place that is not at all commensurate with my own nature and that does not please me at all. This place, however, is the cross of Jesus. And those who want to find God there must live beneath that cross just as the Sermon on the Mount demands. Doing so, however, is wholly incommensurate with our nature, indeed, is wholly contrary to it. Precisely this, however, is the message of the Bible, not only in the New but also in the Old

⁶⁸ *DBW* 4:288.

⁶⁹ Kelly and Godsey, “Editors’ Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 4:16.

Testament (Isa. 53!). In any event, both Jesus and Paul intended it thus: the cross of Jesus fulfills Scripture, that is, the Old Testament. Hence the entire Bible claims to be this word in which God wants us to find him. It is not at all a place that we find pleasant or that might be clear a priori, but a place alien to us in every way, a place utterly repugnant to us. But that is the very place where God chose to encounter us.⁷⁰

Life Together: The Presence of Christ in the Church-Community

Bonhoeffer initially hesitated to put his Finkenwalde experiment into written text, in part because he knew that the community he led was not for everyone, and he did not want to suggest that others need to follow his experimental model. This concern extended beyond the practices of the illegal seminary he directed into his ideas towards spiritual discipline as well:

The variety of new ecclesial forms of community makes it necessary to enlist the vigilant cooperation of every responsible party. The following remarks are intended to provide only one individual contribution toward answering the extensive questions that have been raised thereby. As much as possible, may these comments help to clarify this experience and put it into practice.⁷¹

Once the Gestapo shut down Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer changed his tone slightly, thinking more strongly that the church needed to look toward the strength of Christian communities like the one he directed to garner new life. He wrote *Life Together* over the course of the four weeks in 1938, beginning in September and spanning into October, and significantly marks Bonhoeffer's last book published during his life. His context likely pushed him to complete the work as quickly as possible, as he was staying with his twin sister

⁷⁰ Letter to Rüdiger Schleicher, April 8, 1936, *DBW* 14:168.

⁷¹ *DBW* 5:25.

Sabine in Göttingen at the time and outside of her home the world was on the verge of war. Bonhoeffer's decision to write the book is reflected at its beginning in his assertion of the simple yet profound belief that Christians need each other, especially in tough times:

Christians need other Christians who speak God's Word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves out of the truth. They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation. They need them solely for the sake of Jesus Christ.⁷²

Without continually taking part in the church-community, which is the very body of Christ, Christians lose both their way and their hope. Further, "the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."⁷³ This companionship is unlike basic human interactions, as Christians "belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ."⁷⁴ With these familiar proclamations, Bonhoeffer then outlines what a Christian community truly is:

The other who comes face to face with me earnestly and devoutly seeking community is not the brother or sister with whom I am to relate in the community. My brother or sister is instead that other person who has been redeemed by Christ, absolved from sin, and called to faith and eternal life. What persons are in themselves as Christians, in their inwardness and piety, cannot constitute the basis of our community, which is determined by what those persons are in terms of Christ. Our community consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.⁷⁵

⁷² *DBW* 5:32.

⁷³ *DBW* 5:29.

⁷⁴ *DBW* 5:31.

⁷⁵ *DBW* 5:34.

Relatedly, the Christian community represents no human ideal the church ought to strive for but is a spiritual reality created by Christ who unites humans into his one body. With Christ as the foundation and head of the church, Christians “enter into [common] life with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive.”⁷⁶ The dynamics discussed in *Discipleship* in regards to proper distinctions of imitation and participation are reemphasized, as the church-community is the place in which humanity participates in the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷ In this “Christ existing as church-community,” it is important to see reality through the eyes of Jesus Christ, and in recognition of how Christ’s presence came to the world incognito in the incarnation, a humiliated and lowly state: “The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door.”⁷⁸

Bonhoeffer sees belonging-to-Christ as bringing a unique calling, which does not result in an isolated life beyond the world and its problems, but entering into them with the strength of the church-community to proclaim the hope and peace of Christ to the world. The church does this ministry even though the world hates the church:

Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. In the end all his disciples abandoned him. On the cross he was all alone, surrounded by criminals and the jeering crowds. He had come for the express purpose of bringing peace to the enemies of God. So Christians, too, belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work. “To rule is to be in the midst of your enemies. And whoever will not suffer this does not want to be part of the rule of Christ; such a person wants to be among friends and sit among the roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the religious people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of

⁷⁶ *DBW* 5:36; see also *DBW* 5:35.

⁷⁷ *DBW* 5:38.

⁷⁸ *DBW* 5:45-46.

Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing, who would ever have been saved?” (Luther).⁷⁹

Elsewhere in the book, Bonhoeffer states: “the Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium.”⁸⁰ As such, the church-community is not only looked to for the strengthening of believers, but also for the gifts needed from Christ’s presence through the Holy Spirit to go out and do Christ’s work. The Christian community should not be an escape but a springboard pushing the church further into the world.⁸¹ This emphasis on the responsibility of Christians to serve in the world comes in big and small ways; however, the excuses are many:

Those who worry about the loss of time entailed by such small, external acts of helpfulness are usually taking their own work too seriously. We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways time and again, even daily, by sending people across our path with their demands and requests. We can, then, pass them by, preoccupied with our more important daily tasks, just as the priest—perhaps reading the Bible—passed by the man who had fallen among robbers. When we do that, we pass by the visible sign of the cross raised in our lives to show us that God’s way, and not our own, is what counts. It is a strange fact that, of all people, Christians and theologians often consider their work so important and urgent that they do not want to let anything interrupt it. They think they are doing God a favor, but actually they are despising God’s “crooked yet straight path” (Gottfried Arnold).⁸²

Bonhoeffer carries the belief that “a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ,”⁸³ and with the reality of Christ’s presence in the church “Christians can live with

⁷⁹ *DBW* 5:27-28.

⁸⁰ *DBW* 5:82.

⁸¹ Bonhoeffer wrote to the Council of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union concerning his seminary community: “The goal is not monastic isolation, but rather the most intensive concentration for ministry to the world.” *DBW* 14:96. See Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, “Editors’ Afterword to the German Edition,” *DBW* 5:120.

⁸² *DBW* 5:99-100.

⁸³ *DBW* 5:32.

each other in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one.”⁸⁴ To realise this peace, the word of God must be heard; the gospel must be proclaimed.⁸⁵ Through such acts, the church-community is brought into the biblical narrative and it and its members find themselves in the events:

We receive a part of that which once took place for our salvation. Forgetting and losing ourselves, we too pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God’s help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie, but holy, divine reality. We are uprooted from our own existence and are taken back to the holy history of God on earth. There God has dealt with us, and there God still deals with us today, with our needs and our sins, by means of the divine wrath and grace.⁸⁶

Christians come together in worship to remember where they have been placed by Christ and that this is a reality not simply *of* the past or *for* the future but alive in the here and now in particular way:

A complete reversal occurs here. It is not that God’s help and presence must still be proved in our life; rather God’s presence and help have been demonstrated for us in the life of Jesus Christ. It is in fact more important for us to know what God did to Israel, in God’s son Jesus Christ, than to discover what God intends for us today. The fact that Jesus Christ died is more important than the fact that I will die. And the fact that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead is the sole ground of my hope that I, too, will be raised on the day of judgment. Our salvation is “from outside ourselves” (*extra nos*). I find salvation not in my life story, but only in the story of Jesus Christ. Only those who allow themselves to be found in Jesus Christ—in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection—are with God and God with them.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ DBW 5:33.

⁸⁵ See DBW 5:61.

⁸⁶ DBW 5:62.

⁸⁷ DBW 5:62.

The gospel, in which God has acted on behalf of humanity, *pro nobis*, presents the reality of God's presence needed to break down hypocritical attitudes in the church. The church-community must recognise that it is the *peccatorum communio* in its own right and the *sanctorum communio* only through God's work and with God's presence in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Clinging to its own supposed piety only leaves the church trapped in sin. Bonhoeffer comments: "Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up among the pious. So we remain alone with our sin, trapped in lies and hypocrisy, for we are in fact sinners."⁸⁸ Thankfully, Christ came for sinners, not the righteous:

The grace of the gospel, which is so hard for the pious to comprehend, confronts us with the truth. It says to us, you are a sinner, a great, unholy sinner. Now come, as the sinner that you are, to your God who loves you. For God wants you as you are, not desiring anything from you—a sacrifice, a good deed—but rather desiring you alone. . . . This message is liberation through truth. You cannot hide from God. The mask you wear in the presence of other people won't get you anywhere in the presence of God. God wants to see you as you are, wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and to other Christians as if you were without sin. You are allowed to be a sinner.⁸⁹

It is because of this reality of sin that the church-community is so important, and brings along with it a proper self-understanding. The church is where Christ's presence is truly encountered and brings freedom to sinners. Bonhoeffer talks here of individual confession and absolution being no less important than the Lord's Supper, as he understood Christ's presence to be profoundly in, with, and under both. Carrying this belief, he sees the assertion of James 5:16 to confess one's sins to fellow Christians in the church-community

⁸⁸ *DBW* 5:62.

⁸⁹ *DBW* 5:62.

as something to be taken seriously.⁹⁰ Confession before another breaks the sinner and sin of the old self in order to “enjoy the grace of God.”⁹¹ Confession is a humiliating experience but in light of the ultimate humiliation Christ took on behalf of humanity on the cross, “who was not ashamed to be crucified for us as an evildoer,” it is the very gift of God:

In confession we break through to the genuine community of the cross of Jesus Christ; in confession we affirm our cross. In the profound spiritual and physical pain of humiliation before another believer, which means before God, we experience the cross of Jesus as our deliverance and salvation. The old humanity dies, but God has triumphed over it. Now we share in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life.⁹²

Bonhoeffer proclaims that through confession “a *breakthrough to new life*” occurs: “The break with the past is made when sin is hated, confessed, and forgiven. . . . But when there is a break with sin, there is conversion. Confession is conversion.”⁹³ He recognises confession as discipleship itself, where everything is left behind to follow Christ and new life begins: “What happened to us in baptism is given to us anew in confession. We are delivered from darkness into the rule of Jesus Christ. That is joyful news. Confession is the renewal of the joy of baptism.”⁹⁴ Confessing one’s sins to another is no easy task, and Bonhoeffer discusses how it is so often easier for humans to confess their sins before God than before other believers. However, the gift of Christ’s presence in the confession of sins comes with

⁹⁰ See *DBW* 5:62.

⁹¹ See *DBW* 5:111.

⁹² *DBW* 5:111-12, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

⁹³ *DBW* 5:112, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

⁹⁴ *DBW* 5:112.

the “breakthrough to assurance” a fellow Christian provides by being bodily there to hear one’s confession and proclaim absolution.⁹⁵

Who can give us the assurance that we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins? God gives us this assurance through one another. The other believer breaks the circle of self-deception. Those who confess their sins in the presence of another Christian know that they are no longer alone with themselves; they experience the presence of God in the reality of the other. . . . The other Christian has been given to me so that I may be assured even here and now of the reality of God in judgment and grace. As the acknowledgment of my sins to another believer frees me from the grip of self-deception, so, too, the promise of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by another believer as God’s command and in God’s name. Confession before one another is given to us by God so that we may be assured of divine forgiveness.⁹⁶

Near the end of *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer echoes Luther once more in quoting from the *Large Catechism*: “Therefore when I urge you to go to confession, I am urging you to be a Christian.”⁹⁷

Bonhoeffer’s years as a seminary director were those in which he had the chance to put his ecclesiological understanding into practice in the church-community in very practical and intensive ways. His various works from the period display little new content; instead, they show adaptation and further intensity in response to his contexts which were often changing in severity and style. In 1933, Bonhoeffer understood the answer to the problems in the church to be a proper comprehension of Christology, which he found greatly lacking. Once circumstances further deteriorated for the church in Germany, he maintained his Christological emphasis but came to believe that more intensive Christian communities

⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer also discusses this in *Discipleship*. See *DBW* 4:287.

⁹⁶ *DBW* 5:113.

⁹⁷ *DBW* 5:114.

which fostered costly discipleship were a much-needed response. With such thinking and practice, he continually focused on the proclamation of the real presence of Christ in, with, and through the church. For the rest of Bonhoeffer's life, his opportunities to declare this reality were minimized and he ended up having to find creative ways to live out and advance his teachings.

CHAPTER 5

THE CHRIST-REALITY IN ALL THE EARTH:

WARTIME WRITINGS, *ETHICS*, AND *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON*

With the situation in Germany quickly deteriorating, friends feared for Bonhoeffer's safety, which resulted in Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Lehmann orchestrating Bonhoeffer's opportunity to leave the country for the safety and security of an academic position back over in New York at Union Theological Seminary. He accepted the position in the spring of 1939, although he did not remain there for long. Still, his short stay reinforced the reality of the many challenges facing the church in general, not just Germany or Europe. Specifically, Bonhoeffer describes American Christianity as "Protestantism Without Reformation," the title of a paper he wrote on his experience of the church in the United States after this brief refuge. His opinion changed little from his first encounter with American theology:

Christendom in American theology is essentially still religion and ethics. Hence, the person and work of Jesus Christ recedes into the background for theology and remains ultimately not understood, because the sole foundation for God's radical judgment and radical grace is at this point not recognized. The decisive task today is the conversation between the Protestantism without Reformation and the churches of the Reformation.¹

Bonhoeffer's perceptions were certainly not unique. Only a couple of years previous H. Richard Niebuhr had commented on the theological situation in the United States in a related way, writing: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without

¹ "Protestantism without Reformation," *DBW* 15:462.

judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”² Ultimately, Bonhoeffer saw the failures of American Christianity in trying to push Jesus Christ out of the centre: “The failure in Christology is characteristic of all current American theology.”³

In any case, he rather promptly made the decision to return to Germany, uneasy with the idea of abandoning his country in a time of such need. Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr: “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”⁴ He returned to Europe on what ended up being the last civilian ship to cross the Atlantic before the start of the war. Upon his return, Bonhoeffer joined the resistance efforts against the Nazis. In the process, he avoided military service on the battlefield by working for the intelligence arm of the German military, the *Abwehr*, with the help of his brother-in-law and important resistance organizer Hans von Dohnanyi. Bonhoeffer then proceeded to live a double life as an undercover agent from the fall of 1940 until his arrest in April of 1943.⁵

Returning to the Centrality of Christ and Serious Theology

Bonhoeffer witnessed the Confessing Church fail in its stand against the Nazis. In response, he transitioned to work largely outside the movement. The Confessing Church was all too

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937), 193.

³ *DBW* 15:460. Barker discusses possible reasons for and limitations of Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the American theological landscape. See Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 348-49.

⁴ Letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, end of June 1939, *DBW* 15:210.

⁵ See Victoria J. Barnett, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” *DBW* 15:13-14.

often content with fighting only for its own place, not unlike the rest of the German Evangelical Church. Energy should have been used against the Nazis and for those persecuted by them. By looking out largely for themselves, the Confessing Church receded further into the background, handcuffed in part by their own infighting, and did not accomplish the things Bonhoeffer hoped for. Still, his illegal seminary directorship provided an example of how receding to the background could be an opportunity for greater strength and resolve for the church. During the war, these thoughts magnified, even as his ability to work directly within the church-community in Germany diminished. Along these same lines, Bonhoeffer began to look more and more to the past to find answers to contemporary issues, back to times when the church lacked the power and privilege it went on to maintain for so long in Western civilization.

He had long spoken of the hidden presence of Christ in the church but Bonhoeffer began to think further about Christ's presence in all the earth as the incognito lord over all reality. He wondered whether the church-community ought to move out into the world with greater regularity as the body of Christ. Long before the war, Bonhoeffer understood how Christ's ministry extended to all nations and that the church, as Christ's body, did not exist for itself. Here, this reality became more pronounced. His new emphasis came along with an abandonment of "two-realms" thinking, developing instead a concept of four "divine mandates" that include work, marriage, government, and church. These divine mandates are defined not as orders of creation, which easily become rigid in a way he believes to be counter to life within the Christ-reality, but fluid tasks directed towards other and given as part of living in the body of Christ. With all of this, he continued to work out of the "this-worldliness" of Christianity.

In his first circular letter written after his short stay in America, the month the war began, Bonhoeffer asks: “We are preachers of justification through grace alone. What [does] this mean today?”⁶ The formulation of this question was not entirely new at the time and continued to adapt more famously during his prison years. In this letter, an answer follows:

Very simply it means that we no longer equate human ways and goals with divine ways and goals. God is beyond all human plans and deeds. Everything must be judged by God. Whoever evades this judgment of God must die, but whoever submits to it will live; for to be judged by God is grace for life. God judges for the sake of mercy; God humbles in order to lift up. Only the humble will succeed. God does not confirm human action, but thwarts it and with that tugs our gaze upward to God’s grace. By thwarting our paths, God comes to us and speaks his merciful Yes to us, but precisely only through the cross of Jesus Christ. He has placed this cross on the earth; if under the cross he gives us back to the earth and its work and toil, so he commits us anew to the earth and the human beings who live, act, struggle, and suffer on it.⁷

The life of the Christian is that of conforming to Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, which overcomes the *cor curvum in se* and places sinful humans into the reality of Christ’s actions *pro nobis* throughout all the earth by humbling them. As with Christ himself, this humility reveals a greater glory, though for the church-community this cannot be attained by itself but only through Christ. The world is then disclosed to the Christian in a new way, freed *from* the burdens of living *for* oneself and for ministry to others in believing that the Holy Trinity is at work. Bonhoeffer’s remarks still reverberate today:

Therefore, our hearts and our gaze are not trapped and captivated by the daily events, as attentively as we follow them. We seek and find through them God the Lord and see his works in awe. We seek and find our Lord Jesus Christ and believe firmly in his victory and in the glory of his church-community. We seek and find God, the Holy

⁶ Letter to the Finkenwalde Brothers, September 1939, *DBW* 15:275.

⁷ *DBW* 15:275.

Spirit, who makes his word win power over us, greater power than the world can ever win over us. And we pray that the work of the Trinitarian God may soon be fulfilled.⁸

In his later years, we see Bonhoeffer increasingly point towards the mysterious, as he continued to profess and ponder the hidden but real presence of the living God-human Jesus Christ. For Christmas in 1939, Bonhoeffer wrote a meditation that directs us to his prison thoughts on going back to an early church concept of *disciplina arcana*. In this meditation, he appeals for the church to get back to serious theology, which for him meant acknowledging the reality of Christ's bodily presence:

No priest, no theologian stood at the cradle of Bethlehem. And yet all Christian theology finds its origin in the miracle of miracles, that God became human. . . . Without that holy night, there is no theology. "God revealed in the flesh," the God-human Jesus Christ, that is the holy mystery, which theology was instituted to preserve and protect. What foolishness, as if it were the task of theology to decode God's mystery, pulling it down to the commonplace, miracle-less words of wisdom based on human experience and reason! Whereas this alone is its charge—to keep the miracle of God a miracle, to comprehend, defend, and exalt the mystery of God, precisely as mystery.⁹

All the compromising and poorly conceived theology he encountered, which often went together, disheartened Bonhoeffer. He encountered so much in the life of the church and in theology seeking to answer the world on the world's terms instead of holding fast, clarifying, and confessing the abundant and timeless faith of the church. In any case, his cutting words certainly maintain hope, especially at Christmas, and do so partially by looking

⁸ *DBW* 15:276.

⁹ "Theological Letter on Christmas," December 1939, *DBW* 15:528-29. Full meditation found in *DBW* 15:528-33. For Bonhoeffer's thoughts on *disciplina arcana*, see Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 30, 1944, *DBW* 8:364-65; Letter to Eberhard Bethge, May 5, 1944, *DBW* 8:373.

to the testimony of the early church: “The early church Christology really originated at the cradle of Bethlehem, and the splendor of Christmas lies on its eroded countenance. . . . The stern concepts from that age are like the flints from which one makes a spark of fire.”¹⁰ Hope comes with a child sent *pro nobis* as the paradoxical fully human and fully divine one person of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who suffered and died on behalf of sinful humanity.

Ultimately, Bonhoeffer held fast to the reality of the real presence of Christ in, with, and through the church-community, who brings reconciliation to all humanity through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection:

The body of Jesus Christ—that is our flesh. He bears our flesh. Therefore, where Jesus Christ is, we are, whether we know it or not. This is so by virtue of God’s becoming human; what happens to Jesus Christ, happens to us. It is truly the “poor flesh and blood” of all of us that lies there in the manger. It is our flesh that he sanctifies and cleanses in obedience and suffering. It is our flesh that dies with him on the cross and is buried with him. He took on human nature so that we can be with him in eternity. Wherever the body of Jesus Christ is, there we are. Indeed, we are his body. Therefore, the testimony of Christmas for all human beings is you have been accepted; God has not despised you but bodily bears the flesh and blood of you all. Look to the manger! In the body of the little child, in the incarnate Son of God is your flesh, all your misery, fear, temptation, even all your sin, borne, forgiven, and sanctified. If you lament: my nature, my entire being is without salvation, and I must be lost forever, then the message of Christmas answers: your nature, your entire being has been accepted; Jesus bears it, so he has become your Savior.¹¹

Bonhoeffer spoke often about the worldliness of Christianity, yet people are often confused at what he meant by this. In a letter of response to Ruth Roberta Stahlberg, the eldest daughter to his future fiancée’s grandmother, Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, some of what he intended is brought out:

¹⁰ *DBW* 15:529-30.

¹¹ *DBW* 15:530-31.

In the church, the good and beautiful is what serves Christ. . . . It appears to me that you wish to know in advance from some other source what is beautiful and true, and only subsequently bring it to be appropriated by the church. Is this the reason you would become “terribly stubborn” if for the sake of Christ you were supposed to deny “the many possibilities given to a person in creation”? Even in the church you want to have and to cling to something else beyond and besides Christ himself, whom you nevertheless name as the personal Son of God. But this will not work.¹²

No abstract ideas of finding the sacred in the secular would suffice for Bonhoeffer. Certainly influenced by what he saw in the accommodations of both conservative and liberal theological circles, his emphasis on the this-worldliness opposes accommodation in favour of a radical reliance on the person of Christ:

There is no room in the church for Christ and human creativity but, strictly speaking, only for Jesus Christ, and in Christ—but truly only in Christ!—for the earth’s full glory insofar as it can serve Christ alone. Only when that aspect of our own creative possibilities that we ourselves consider lovely has in fact been denied for Christ’s sake—that is, when we have let go of all our own measures for the sake of Christ, who is the standard of all standards—can that which is in a Christian sense beautiful, true, etc. emerge. And it will emerge only where Jesus Christ alone truly becomes the driving power of our creative activity. In reality everything beautiful, good, and true that we import into the church from outside hinders the breakthrough of what is beautiful, good, and the true from God.¹³

For Bonhoeffer, Christian discipleship clearly means leaving everything to follow Christ. From this idea, he believes the church to be only what it receives from God into its empty human hands: “The ‘beauty’ denied is the true and only possible beauty in the church

¹² Letter to Ruth Roberta Stahlberg, March 23, 1940, *DBW* 16:38.

¹³ *DBW* 16:38.

of Christ.”¹⁴ Such costly discipleship, he suggests, leads humanity into transformation in this life:

What matters is that we daily orient ourselves to the image of the crucified Christ and allow ourselves to be called to conversion. When our words come directly, as it were, from the cross of Jesus Christ himself, when Christ is so present to us that it is he who is speaking our words, only then can we be released from the terrible danger of empty spiritual verbosity.¹⁵

The life in Christ is not of freedom from sin but the freedom that results from living and participating in the Christ-reality, which is a life of new obedience in the church-community from which the word of God is the very source of true life.

Ethics: Unity in the Christ-Reality

For much of his adult life, Bonhoeffer considered ethics the area of Christian theology to which he had the most to contribute. Unfortunately, his opportunity to complete a study on the subject never came because of his imprisonment and eventual execution. Fortunately, we do have a compilation of what he had written for his *Ethics*, which Bethge put together after Bonhoeffer’s death and published as an unfinished work. Interestingly, Bonhoeffer’s view of Christian ethics centred on abandoning the idea that Christianity has ethics in the way usually ascribed, though certainly not in a way that promoted anarchy or loose morals. Relatedly, he understood new humanity not as potentiality but as living in the freedom God intended for humanity through Jesus Christ’s free gift of reconciliation and forgiveness in his name—to

¹⁴ *DBW* 16:38.

¹⁵ *DBW* 16:41.

truly be human as Christ accomplished on behalf of sinful humanity. As such, new humanity involves no ascent, but is an already present reality in the life of those in the body of Christ. Once again dissatisfied with ideas and concepts, Bonhoeffer promotes the living Christ: “everything finally flows into the reality of the body of Jesus Christ, in whom God and human beings became one.”¹⁶ This relationship, gained only through Christ, marks a return to life before the fall into sin, where God and humanity once lived in harmony.

From this belief, Bonhoeffer thinks ethics only revert Christians back to the situation before Christ’s incarnation:

The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. This attack on the presuppositions of all other ethics is so unique that it is questionable whether it even makes sense to speak of Christian ethics at all. If it is nevertheless done, then this can only mean that Christian ethics claims to articulate the origin of the whole ethical enterprise, and thus to be considered an ethic only as the critique of all ethics.¹⁷

Christ has fulfilled God’s work *pro nobis*, so Christian ethics must be conceived of within this ever-present reality.¹⁸ Certainly, the reality of sin persists but, as those taken into the body of Christ, the question of ethical ascendancy is obsolete. Bonhoeffer’s asserts: “All ethical reflection . . . has the goal that I be good, and that the world—by my action—becomes good.”¹⁹ Through Christ, in contrast, reality has changed:

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005; hereafter *DBW* 6), 74.

¹⁷ *DBW* 6:299-300.

¹⁸ See *DBW* 6:74.

¹⁹ *DBW* 6:48.

Of ultimate importance, then, is not that I become good, or that the condition of the world be improved by my efforts, but that the reality of God shows itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality. . . . That God alone is ultimate reality, is, however, not an idea meant to sublimate the actual world, nor is it a religious perfecting of a profane worldview. It is rather a faithful Yes to God's self-witness, God's revelation.²⁰

For those living in Christ, moral laws geared towards fulfilling one's own righteousness are dangerously abstract. Instead, Christian life concerns union with Christ who has already done God's will and brings the members of the church into his bodily existence here on earth in which they are received by God.²¹ Therefore, Bonhoeffer's ethics are about partaking in the ministry of reconciliation already fulfilled by Christ Jesus, with the forgiveness of sins making ethics possible.

With his persistent emphasis on the presence of Christ in the church, Bonhoeffer further outlines his grasp of ethics. Reality itself changed through the incarnation, and while Christ's presence is revealed in particular forms in the church, Bonhoeffer came to reject the idea that there remains a division in truth between the reality of the gospel and that of the world. The incarnation marks a shift in the world, which in truth points back to origins:

The reality of God is not just another idea. Christian faith perceives this in the fact that the reality of God has revealed itself and witnessed to itself in the middle of the real world. *In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world.* The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name. In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17). From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions.²²

²⁰ DBW 6:48.

²¹ DBW 6:74.

²² DBW 6:54, emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

Through Christ, there are not two realities but one. Thinking and acting as if there are still two separate realities is an abstraction. God entered into this world by means of the incarnation and changed reality, overtaking this realm through his body. For now, this one reality stays hidden but is made known to the church in particular ways. The role of the church-community is to participate in disclosing this Christ-reality to the world:

It is not, therefore, as if some “principle” must first be applied to our circumstances and our time. Rather, the question is how the reality in Christ—which has long embraced us and our world within itself—works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it. What matters is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.²³

Bonhoeffer finds two-realms thinking legalistic in that attempts to guard the autonomy of both most significantly results in the world being “denied the community that God has formed with it in Christ.”²⁴ Contrarily, he believes the church ought to fight for others and not its own space:

[The church] desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ and to the world’s reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. The church can only defend its own space by fighting, not for space, but for the salvation of the world. Otherwise the church becomes a “religious society” that fights in its own interest and thus has ceased to be the church of God in the world.²⁵

He acknowledges the difficulty with getting beyond such two-realms thinking, but admonishes the church to look only to the reality of Christ:

²³ DBW 6:55.

²⁴ DBW 6:60.

²⁵ DBW 6:63-64.

Above all we must turn our eyes to the image of Jesus Christ's own body—the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen. In the body of Jesus Christ, God is united with humankind, all humanity is accepted by God, and the world is reconciled to God. In the body of Jesus Christ, God took on the sin of all the world and bore it. There is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God. Whoever perceives the body of Jesus Christ in faith can no longer speak of the world as if it were lost, as if it were separated from God; they can no longer separate themselves in clerical pride from the world. The world belongs to Christ, and only in Christ is the world what it is. It needs, therefore, nothing less than Christ himself. Everything would be spoiled if we were to reserve Christ for the church while granting the world only some law, Christian though it may be. Christ has died for the world, and Christ is Christ only in the midst of the world. It is nothing but unbelief to give the world—for well-intended pedagogical reasons to be sure, which nonetheless leave an aftertaste of clericalism—less than Christ. It means not taking seriously the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the bodily resurrection. It means denying the body of Christ.²⁶

Bonhoeffer's writings on ethics certainly show a transition of emphasis away from the church-community to the reality of Christ's presence in all the earth, but Barker counters that this relates more to the failures of the church Bonhoeffer experienced than a change in fundamental beliefs.²⁷ The importance of the church-community did not disappear: "The body of Jesus Christ, especially as it is presented to us on the cross, makes visible to faith both the world in its sin and in its being loved by God, and the church-community as the company of those who recognize their sin and gratefully submit to the love of God."²⁸

Bonhoeffer proposes an alternative to two-realms thinking in his concept of four "divine mandates." With each of these, the sacramentality in his theology comes across in a new way, not only in the divine mandate of the church:

The scripture names four such mandates: *work, marriage, government, and church*. We speak of divine mandates rather than divine orders, because thereby their

²⁶ *DBW* 6:66-67.

²⁷ See Barker, *The Cross of Reality*, 378.

²⁸ *DBW* 6:68.

character as divinely imposed tasks [*Auftrag*], as opposed to determinate forms of being, becomes clearer. In the world God wills work, marriage, government, and church, and God wills all these, each in its own way, through Christ, toward Christ, and in Christ. God has placed human beings under all these mandates, not only each individual under one or the other, but all people under all four. There can be no retreat, therefore, from a “worldly” into a “spiritual” “realm.” The practice of the Christian life can be learned only under these four mandates of God. It will not do to depreciate the first three mandates as “worldly,” over against the last. It is a matter of “*divine*” mandates in the midst of the world, whether they concern work, marriage, government, or church. These mandates are divine, however, only because of their original and final relation to Christ. Detached from this relation, “in themselves,” they are not divine, just as the world “in itself” is not divine.²⁹

It can be tempting to propose that Bonhoeffer moves away from his prior thinking here, specifically captured in his terminology of “Christ existing as church-community”; however, these divine mandates are given only to Christians, who have been placed into the Christ-reality on earth. The task of the Christian, Bonhoeffer suggests, is to live out this reality in all areas of life, never leaving Christ at the door. His divine mandates are not about turning two-realms into four but having a wider, more Christ-centred understanding of vocation:

It is not Christ who has to justify himself before the world by acknowledging the values of justice, truth, and freedom. Instead, it is these values that find themselves in need of justification, and their justification is Jesus Christ alone. It is not a “Christian culture” that still has to make the name of Jesus Christ acceptable to the world; instead, the crucified Christ has become the refuge, justification, protection, and claim for these higher values and their defenders who have been made to suffer. It is with the Christ, persecuted and suffering together with his church-community, that justice, truth, humanity, and freedom seek refuge. It is the Christ who is unable to find shelter in the world, the Christ of the manger and the cross who is cast out of the world, who is the shelter to whom one flees for protection; only thus is the full breadth of Christ’s power revealed.³⁰

²⁹ *DBW* 6:68-69, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

³⁰ *DBW* 6:345-46. See *DBW* 6:262-63.

At the heart of all this ethical thinking of Bonhoeffer's is for the church to carry out Christ's mission for humanity, *pro nobis*. Doing so ultimately involves vicarious representation in the midst of the fallen world of human-beings. Christians live for others through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, who calls the church-community not to mere principles to enact in an ethical situation but to action on behalf of the concrete neighbour set before them by God: "The choice is made no longer between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil; instead, it is risked in faith while being aware that good and evil are hidden in the concrete historical situation."³¹

For Bonhoeffer, proclaiming the reality of the bodily presence of Christ through his death on the cross is key to understanding how Christ engages with and for the world in a sacramental sense:

The proclamation of the cross of reconciliation frees us to abandon futile attempts to deify the world, because it has overcome the divisions, tensions, and conflicts between the "Christian" and the "worldly," and calls us to single-minded action and life in faith in the already accomplished reconciliation of the world with God. A life of genuine worldliness is possible only through the proclamation of the crucified Christ. This is not possible in contradiction to the proclamation, and also not beside it in some kind of autonomy of the worldly; but it is precisely "in, with, and under" the proclamation of Christ that a genuinely worldly life is possible and real.³²

Though incomplete, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* still provide interesting contributions from the theologian and in seeing where his thoughts went during the Second World War. Clearly, his ecclesiology did not change, even if he began speaking more towards the whole of reality

³¹ *DBW* 6:221. See *DBW* 6:232, 241, 254.

³² *DBW* 6:400-01.

and not just the church. This move did not involve taking Christ out of the church but getting the church-community out into the world. While in prison, this trend continued.

Letters and Papers from Prison: “Who is Christ for us Today?”

Bonhoeffer was arrested on the 5th of April 5, 1943, and taken to Tegel military prison, where he spent the majority of his days before his execution in Flossenbürg on the 9th April, 1945. Once imprisoned, he remained fixated on the church, again in a different context, though this time not a setting of his choice. The consistent themes throughout his life endure, here largely related to critiquing popular notions of religion and ruminating on the this-worldliness of Christianity. Taken on their own, Bonhoeffer’s prison reflections have inspired all kinds of notions he certainly did not intend and would not endorse. Taken in the context of the entirety of his works, his theology in *Letter and Papers from Prison* is no less interesting but much less radical and new than often perceived.³³

Centrally, Bonhoeffer’s frustrations intensified towards the inaction of the church in response to the Nazis, particularly for those whom they oppressed and murdered, and therefore predominantly the Jews. He consistently witnessed the church acting out of self-interest in Germany; however, he believes: “The church is church only when it is there for others.”³⁴ Bonhoeffer understands the life of those in the church-community to be a life of servitude in response to and with the living Christ. Looking to the future role of the church

³³ The reception of Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* has inspired its own biography. See Martin E. Marty, “*Letters and Papers from Prison*”: *A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

³⁴ “Outline for a Book,” *DBW* 8:503. Full document found in *DBW* 8:499-504.

in the modern world, he suggests: “[The church] will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment.”³⁵

Bonhoeffer’s prison thoughts, like many of those prior, are not easily narrowed down. He was much more open to hearing the ideas of liberal Protestantism than many of his conservative colleagues, and he took these beliefs seriously. However, he did so in the name of intellectual honesty and appropriately in responding to the various realities within the church and Christian theology, often hidden, that were reflected within liberal Protestantism. Bonhoeffer wanted these thoughts out in the open.³⁶ He criticised liberal Protestantism for its lack of serious theological content, but found throughout the church failures to act in response to Christ’s call to follow him in discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, this meant a fundamental misunderstanding of the very person and work of Christ:

What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there *for* this world—not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁷

In response to this situation, he pens his well-known query: “What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today.”³⁸ Bonhoeffer’s further reflections suggest his thoughts were focused towards a day in which

³⁵ *DBW* 8:503.

³⁶ See Letter to Eberhard Bethge, June 8, 1944, *DBW* 8:430-31.

³⁷ Letter to Eberhard Bethge, May 5, 1944, *DBW* 8:373, emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

³⁸ Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 30, 1944, *DBW* 8:362.

the church receded into the background of society not by choice but because of its focus on maintaining stature and privilege while compromising the proclamation of Christ's gospel, with his contemporary church already functioning largely as if there were no God.³⁹ The attempts of the church to have power and prestige repeatedly resulted in the exact opposite effect. Yet Bonhoeffer seems hopeful in this future situation the church would be forced to find its proper self-understanding and mission again:

This is the crucial distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. To this extent, one may say that the previously described development toward the world's coming of age, which has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God, frees us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless. This will probably be the starting point for our "worldly interpretation."⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer sees in popular notions of religion views that pushed God to the periphery of life, useful only when human faculties fail. Thus, religion ends up reflecting only the needs and desires of humanity, and not God and the body and work of Christ:

The Christian is not a *homo religiosus* but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being—in contrast, perhaps, to John the Baptist. I do not mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived in this kind of this-worldliness.⁴¹

³⁹ See Letter to Eberhard Bethge, July 16, 1944, *DBW* 8:478-79.

⁴⁰ *DBW* 8:479-80.

⁴¹ Letter to Eberhard Bethge, July 21, 1944, *DBW* 8:485. See Letter to Eberhard Bethge, May 29, 1944, *DBW* 8:406-07; Letter to Eberhard Bethge, August 21, 1944, *DBW* 8:514-515.

Bonhoeffer's notion of "religionless Christianity" was not about abandoning the Christian faith, especially not proper doctrine and corporate worship, but went along with what he had been saying his entire life about getting the church to turn to Christ and follow him. The sacramentality of his ecclesiology is clear here. The real presence of Christ creates, sustains, and orients the church. In prison, Bonhoeffer's emphasis moves to point the church directly to Christ, and in so doing, into the world:

Who is God? Not primarily a general belief in God's omnipotence, and so on. That is not a genuine experience of God but just a prolongation of a piece of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ. Experience that here there is a reversal of all human existence, in the very fact that Jesus only "is there for others." Jesus's "being-for-others" is the experience of transcendence! Only through this liberation from self, through this "being-for-others" unto death, do omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence come into being. Faith is participating in this being of Jesus. (Becoming human [*Menschwerdung*], cross, resurrection.) Our relationship to God is no "religious" relationship to some highest, most powerful, and best being imaginable—that is no genuine transcendence. Instead, our relationship to God is a new life in "being there for others," through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbor within reach in any given situation. God in human form!⁴²

Bonhoeffer's late ecclesiology from prison centres on how engrained his belief in the reality of Christ's living presence formed his thinking on the church and the this-worldliness of Christianity. Certainly, he began to speak more than he had before of the ethical components of the Christian life and of how the fact the Christ makes himself known only in, with, and through the church-community does not mean Christ's presence is restricted to the church in truth. Still, these ideas were not new but reflect his context and perhaps an augmented comprehension of Christ's real presence. On top of these possibilities, Bonhoeffer's thoughts come to us fragmented and incomplete, giving a unique window into

⁴² "Outline for a Book," *DBW* 8:501.

his thinking but a difficult one from which to derive fair conclusions. In any case, we can see that in large part the same emphases are found throughout his works, even if in different ways, as Bonhoeffer believed Christ *pro nobis* to be no mere comforting religious idea or principle but an ever-present reality in, with, and through the body of Christ, which is his church-community.

CONCLUSION

When surveying Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology throughout his life and works, we have found that his view of the church extends well beyond formulas and concepts, as important as such considerations were for the Lutheran theologian. In its place, Bonhoeffer believes that the only way to get the church out of its stagnation, an evident problem in his day perhaps more than others, is to be reminded of the *cor curvum in se* which has Christians at all levels struggle to follow Christ. The answer to the problems of the church in this context of the *peccatorum communio*, for him, is to live a life of repentance and forgiveness while participating in the new life of obedience to Jesus Christ by following after his bodily presence in, with, and through the church-community. The issue at hand does not change the response, whether towards the church focusing more on its own survival than the mission and ministry it is called into, Christians abandoning true discipleship for a moralistic sentimentality, failures to defend those abused and forgotten by the world, or any other matter that may arise. Bonhoeffer develops his ecclesiology in many but similar ways, linked by the sacramental notions of his understanding of the church being the real presence of Christ on earth and never mere symbolism or functionality. The church-community, Bonhoeffer insists, contains the infinite Son of God in the flesh. Throughout the course of his life, this comprehension also had him keep an eye on the demands of the contemporary situation in order to respond to them as the body of Christ.

Bonhoeffer studies frequently explore his Christology and mention how central Christ is to his thoughts on the church, yet the relationship of his ecclesiology to his Christology must be more than a passing reference. All through the trajectory of Bonhoeffer's theology,

in general, he advances the God-human Christ most; however, if the study of his Christology leaves out the church it easily falls victim to the kind of abstractions he worked against. From his early years, we see Bonhoeffer interested in both areas, naming the church “Christ existing as church-community.” He sees Christ not as a figure to simply reflect on, uphold doctrines of, mimic, or even worship; instead, Bonhoeffer views Christ as an ever-present reality in, with and through the church-community which brings a concrete conception to what God is doing *pro nobis* here on earth. His terminology in this regard morphed at different points and in different circumstances as he considered the present reality of the unknowable God made-known through the incarnation of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. By referring to the importance of receiving the sacraments, hearing the proclamation of the word, participating in the Christ-reality through vicarious representation, encouraging Christians to draw from the strength and assurances of the presence of Christ in the church-community, and to follow after Christ into his ministry and mission for all the world by the work of the Holy Spirit, we have deemed Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the church to be thoroughly *sacramental*. Those familiar with the popular notions of the modern theologian likely find the prevalence of these ideas surprising, whether considering Bonhoeffer primarily as a liberal and socially driven Christian, a conservative Evangelical devoted to a personal relationship with Jesus, or many of the other prevalent depictions of him. In truth, his life and works are not as easily transferrable as many suggest. Another, often missed, reality to Bonhoeffer is how isolated he was during his life. A man who generally did not fit-in is now seems to fit into most areas of the church, and even outside it. This is remarkable, but betrays a lack of knowledge towards Bonhoeffer himself.

A simplistic view of Bonhoeffer’s Christology might suggest that his theology is as easily transferrable as many interpreters depict it; yet, studying the deeply Christological

reality of his ecclesiology portrays a much different Bonhoeffer than many are familiar with, and one which is hard to ignore. His understanding of the church certainly exhibits a more catholic and traditional thrust to his theological contribution than is often acknowledged and upheld. Bonhoeffer's contribution to Christian theology is as a sacramentally driven pastor and theologian proclaiming the real bodily presence of Christ as the reality to which the church adheres and the foundation of its ministry *to* and *for* the world as the Holy Spirit bestows the gospel of Jesus Christ's incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension on lost and weary sinners. For him, salvation comes from outside of fallen human-beings, and the assurances of faith are likewise external; therefore, they are tangible and reliable yet hidden unless one believes in the Risen One, the Savior and Lord Immanuel. Particularly, he promotes a Lutheran understanding of the church and the Christian faith that brings into a whole the often-perplexing aspects to his theology, settling issues of the continuity to his theology. God remains perplexing because God is perplexing, though not in a simple matter of getting lost in one's thoughts but in the very concrete forms God appears: a crying baby in a manger, a suffering man hanging on a cross, the waters of baptisms attached with promises God's word bringing sinners into the church, bread the body and wine the blood nourishing the church-community with Christ's gracious presence, the proclamation of the gospel heard by the congregation, audible absolution pronounced by a brother or sister in Christ at confession. The unity with Christ in such realities is not easily conceived of but, as they remain mysterious and gracious works of God, a greater comprehension of divine revelation from God is combined with the kind of sovereignty Reformed theologians seek to protect. The two natures of Christ remain in one person concretely through the incarnation.

Bonhoeffer engages with many others forms of Christianity but does not simply then “pick and choose” the aspects he finds most desirable; he remains a confessional Lutheran. In this thesis, there was purposefully little assessment of his Lutheranism, as we do not hold to this as the basis of his positive contribution to Christianity, but we do believe the Lutheran thrust to Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology is an interesting and important one to Christianity in general. Possibly, in the future, the content of this work will be returned to in order to fully set out his ecclesiology in conversation with Luther and Lutheran theology. For now, our desire is to show those interested in Bonhoeffer, whether his life, theology, or both, more of what he advanced throughout his life and the kind of faith he had in the hope that this information will create greater interest in him and promote and the kind of mutual understanding, openness, cooperation, and criticism he adhered to in his own life and theology. Crucially, this means to have an ecumenical stance more like the one Bonhoeffer did.

Additionally, many note of how Bonhoeffer promoted and lived an ethically-driven Christian faith. In actuality, his moral leadership is frequently exaggerated in terms of the kind of resistance and responsible action observers assume. Hopefully, this study has made clear that throughout his life and works Bonhoeffer is not telling Christians to *do* more. Instead, he does the opposite in many respects. He sees “religion” as telling humanity to do more while Christianity calls individuals *into* what Christ has *already accomplished* and what the work he persists to do on behalf of humanity. The church, Bonhoeffer claims, participates in what Christ is already doing through what Christ has already done. The new life of faith and obedience is not to further abstract pharisaical laws one needs to uphold to be saved. Instead, the new life in Christ frees humanity to true love and service to God and neighbours in the freedom God has granted through Christ which is *for* something *today*. Bonhoeffer

believes new humanity is not a goal but an ever-present reality in Christ to which sinful humans are conformed through the Holy Spirit into a living body by grace through faith. Salvation, for Bonhoeffer, is no mere declaration that one does not need to worry about their sins and that their future is decided already. Salvation brings about transformation and new obedience in *this* life—the gospel relates to the here and now and in concrete ways based on Christ’s bodily presence in, with, and through the church-community.

Across this study, we attempted to bring clarity to a particular, crucial area of Bonhoeffer’s theology. Our goal was not to be divisive but to foster more open and honest conversation of who he was and the kind of theology he proclaimed. We believe that the plethora of individuals and communities interested in the twentieth-century Christian pastor and theologian is a good thing, yet not for its own sake. Bonhoeffer once challenged the church in many ways and in many places, and if his theology is not still challenging the church something must have been missed. Often he is treated as an authority confirming one’s own practices and beliefs, whether individually or collectively. During his life, Bonhoeffer had little affirmation of this sort to offer, and we can have little doubt that his voice would be directed in any other way than pushing the church out of its various forms of inaction and acculturation and towards the living Christ and the cross. Further stated, Bonhoeffer provoked a radical yet altogether biblically and historically based proclamation of the centrality of Christ as the mysterious and paradoxical, fully human and fully divine, single person, God’s Son, who has acted *pro nobis* and continues to act for the benefit of humanity in the flesh through the Holy Spirit.

To conclude, Bonhoeffer’s constant emphasis on Christ’s bodily presence in, with, and through the church-community depicts the church as a much greater reality than a mere community for Christians or an emblematic organization tasked with continuing the work

Christ until he returns. Instead, he sees the body of Christ as a living reality whose mission and ministry involves being united with him through hearing the proclamation of the gospel and in receiving the sacraments.

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