

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's
Spatially Structured Ecclesiology

Reconfiguring the Confession
of Christ's Presence

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I would make the same wager that Bonhoeffer, for whom things were so discontinuous and chopped up and whose theological life extended through the unbelievably quick changes in Germany between 1906 and 1945, ‘from idealism to the democracy of the masses,’ as Karl Kupisch has put it, had only one concern: to hold onto the world around him, since God is found in the concrete.

André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 16

We have come to know that building up the church of Jesus Christ is the only task which has significance. In it we can find ultimate meaning. We are not looking for that thing which may happen next week, next month, or next year. We believe ourselves to be engaged this very moment in that which is the hope of the world. Our commitment is to the Lord of that redemptive community which has the task of pushing back the boundaries until it holds the world. There will be no peace or healing in our day unless little islands of *koinonia* can spring up everywhere – islands where Christ is, and because he is we can learn to live in a new way.

Elizabeth O’Connor, *Call to Commitment. The Story of the Church of the Saviour*, Washington DC, 40

Abstract

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From the beginning of his career Dietrich Bonhoeffer was invested in describing and then crafting a form of religious community that provided a way of being human, and a form of corporate sociality that was grounded in and grew out of the presence of the person of Jesus Christ. The *sanctorum communio* was that form of sociality. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology was the outcome of his relentless searching for a form of the church that could meet the challenges of National Socialism's Third Reich and contribute meaningfully to the life of the German nation.

A reading of Bonhoeffer reveals the widespread use of spatial metaphors or descriptors in the development of his ecclesiology. Bonhoeffer was always interested in the empirical church and a careful reading shows how his spatially structured ecclesiology underlies and supports the church's Christological core and its communal nature, giving a concrete form to the ministry of the church in the culture in which it is embedded. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology serves to shape the way in which the church structures its confession of Christ's presence in the world, while at the same time keeping a steady eye on the church as a creation and gift of God. The quest for a vibrant articulation of Christ's presence becomes a persistent hermeneutic throughout Bonhoeffer's writing. His robust doctrine of the church based on the images of place and space leads eventually to the form of the suffering servant, Jesus Christ. Collectively, the images build a compelling case for a form of sociality that brings the motifs of self-giving love and of dying and rising in Christ together to shape discipleship in Christ and the theological reflection on that discipleship.

Bonhoeffer's use of spatial imagery places the church's central acts of announcing and bearing witness to the word of God, and its celebration of the sacramental enactments of that word of promise and hope within a particular space in which the church is highly visible. Bonhoeffer called this 'the living space [*Lebensraum*] of the visible church-community'. It is from within this living-space that the church is committed to pushing back the boundaries of life until the world is held by Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Spatially Structured Ecclesiology

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Introduction

A firm place on which to stand

On Saturday September 04 2010, at 4.35am, just before dawn, the earth moved beneath our feet. The 7.1 magnitude earthquake seriously damaged Christchurch city and the province of Canterbury. Wonderfully, no one died. Reluctantly, we learned to live with the numerous after-shocks that follow such a large earthquake; almost 5000 of them over the next 5 months.

Almost six months later on Tuesday February 22 2011, at 12.51pm during the busy lunch-hour, the earth moved again. A previously unknown shallow fault, close to the city, lay pointed at it like a loaded gun. The 6.3 magnitude quake did enormous damage; large inner-city buildings crumbled and collapsed; nearly 200 people died. In my inner-city office where I was working, I was thrown from my chair and when the extraordinary noise and violent shaking of the building stopped was able to escape along with my client from a building disintegrating around us, into a city street that had been ripped open and where parked cars were now swallowed into the ruptured earth.

The city's cathedral churches suffered serious damage. More than a third of the buildings in the CBD were levelled then or later by bulldozers or huge diggers because they were now unsafe. In the suburbs tens of thousands of homes were destroyed and damaged. The basic services taken for granted in a first world city - power, water and sewerage were non-existent for many weeks. The psychological impact of uncontrollable, unstable earth beneath one's feet became apparent as thousands of people left the city in search of more stable, predictable places on which they might stand. For when the ground beneath one's feet moves, as it has done here in Christchurch, one cannot stand upright, and anxiety, if not fear, lurks around the corner of every moment, lest the destroyer comes to us again. Is there anything one can do to manage, if not control, this fearsome energy? The answer is "Nothing. Absolutely nothing". So, is there any safe place to be? The answer is "It doesn't

seem so, yet there must be, somewhere". Which, of course, begs the question "Where might that place be"?

I had noticed this theme of the ground moving under one's feet as I have read Bonhoeffer over these last three years or so. It is a theme he drew on, not repeatedly, but often enough to make a point.

Bonhoeffer first used the "ground under one's feet" imagery and began his theological reflection on the motif in Barcelona at the time he was Lutheran pastor to the expatriate German community. In a September 1928 sermon on Romans 12: 11 preaching on the apostle's exhortation "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord", he concluded with a reference to the ancient Greek legend of the giant Antaeus, son of Poseidon and Gaia, "who was so strong that no one could conquer him. Many tried and were defeated until one opponent lifted the giant up off the ground during the battle. Suddenly, the battle was over because the giant's strength abandoned him, since it flowed into him only when he was standing firmly on the ground ... Only those standing with both feet on the ground ... have the full strength of human existence ..."¹

Lose your footing and you lose your ability to stand tall and remain wholly a child of the earth. Here the reference is to Bonhoeffer's belief that a connection with the earth grounds and strengthens a person; it is in connection with the earth that the "full strength of human existence" is established,² a point he made again immediately prior to his return to Berlin in February 1929. This time in a lecture entitled "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic"³, delivered, we are told, in a "riveting presentation...carried by the warmth of personal conviction",⁴ he refers again to the story of Antaeus, this time with a slightly different spin: "those who would abandon the earth, who would flee the crisis of the present, will lose all the power still sustaining them ...".⁵ A good solid contact with the earth on which we stand sustains us in our humanity and encourages us to stand firm.

¹ Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, eds., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, 16 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931, 10:531.

² Bonhoeffer will draw on this point in the prison letters as he develops his understandings of 'worldliness' and participation in the sufferings of God in this world.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 10 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 359-78.

⁴ Ibid., 360 f.1.

⁵ Ibid., 377.

Bonhoeffer next uses the image in the context of unexpected and unwelcome change. In his Inaugural Lecture at the University of Berlin, on July 31, 1930 entitled "The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology"⁶ he speaks about the collapse of old ideologies that have, up until then, provided a certain stability and predictability for people on which they could depend and craft their lives. Now these old ideologies are collapsing and

the human being is being buried along with them. One sees a new intellectual and cultural reality emerging in which the human being is assaulted by powers and demons and yet is intent on not surrendering. One finds oneself imprisoned and yet wants to be free. One feels the ground pulled out from under one's feet and yet does not want to fall. Here the person must preserve himself in the most passionate search for himself, in positing himself anew, in finding himself in the question about himself, the question about what could ground his existence anew.⁷

Bonhoeffer is making a bold statement here; unless one can remain upright, it is difficult if not impossible, to engage in the search for oneself. Both feet firmly on the ground, grounds existence.

Bonhoeffer continued the use of the motif in answer to Eberhard Bethge's question about the "surrender(ing) of "ground" [Raum] from generation to generation." Bonhoeffer replied "Now to answer your question of whether the church has any "ground" left to stand on, or whether it is losing it altogether ..."⁸

Perhaps the most recognized use of the 'ground under one's feet' motif appears in his "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943" subtitled "After Ten Years".⁹ Here, Bonhoeffer uses the idea again, yet this time a little differently. In a section entitled "Without Ground under One's Feet"¹⁰ he asks, "Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life? Have there been those who like us looked for the source of their strength beyond all

⁶ Ibid., 389-408

⁷ Ibid., 392.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 431.

⁹ Ibid., 37-52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

those available alternatives? ... who stands firm?"¹¹ With all the conventional guides and pointers to wholesome living crumbling around them, who can live "upright in the unsteady space between lost certainties and unknown futures?"¹² "Are we still of any use?" Bonhoeffer asks, concluding that "we will not need geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, but simple, uncomplicated, and honest human beings."¹³ The person who will stand firm is the one "whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith, and in relationship to God alone is called to obedient and responsible action."¹⁴ To do this we will need "ground under our feet" that will provide firm footing.

Bonhoeffer's theological reflections upon the nature of the church which occupied him for so much of his life, lie at the heart of his search for the place and space where stable ground might be found from which "the human spirit (might) rebuild the waste places and heal the broken hearted".¹⁵ New Zealand Maori refer to this place as "*turangawaewae*"¹⁶ which translates literally as "standing on one's feet" and more colloquially as "a place to stand" or "a place to stand tall". This is the place where we know empowerment and connection to the earth and others around us. It is a foundational place, a home in the world.

For the Christian, *turangawaewae* is the stable place in a shifting world where we find ground that does not move, the church community with a Christological core and a communal structure, the first-fruits of a new order, inaugurated by Jesus Christ where we might engage in the ministry of rebuilding the waste places and healing the broken-hearted, a definition of the church's ministry and witness that would have appealed to Bonhoeffer.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Larry Rasmussen, "The Ethics of Responsible Action," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 206.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵ The words of Canon Dr Paul Oestreicher, Director of the Centre of International Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral, in an article entitled "Cathedrals have been Rebuilt" printed in the *Christchurch Press*, Thursday 10 March 2011 with acknowledgement, no doubt, to the Israelite prophets!

¹⁶ The marae as *turangawaewae*. A person's marae (tribal forum for social life) is often seen as their *turangawaewae*. For each person, the marae is the place where their ancestors are present, where they spend their formative years and learn important lessons. They gain the right to stand upon their marae and proclaim their views about the world and life. (Taken from Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand) <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/5> (Accessed 31.03.2011)

The Thesis

This thesis is about Bonhoeffer's developing understanding and sense of this place called church in Germany from the 1920s to the mid-1940s; developing as it did in an environment, ruptured and fractured by destructive forces that could barely be contained, which in the end removed the ground from under his feet. Unlike the giant Antaeus, however, who lost his power at this very point, Bonhoeffer's theological and lived life became a powerful challenge, so that in his dying as in his living, he continued his call to reform the manner in which the church lives out of the life of Jesus Christ.

The original thesis proposal advanced in September 2007 was that the thesis would be a study in *“Christian identity formation with particular reference to the relationship between boundary, Christian identity and Christian witness. Special attention will be paid to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of boundary, identity, and witness articulated in particular in Sanctorum Communio, Life Together and in his later, Letters and Papers from Prison.”* Looking back at it now this proposal appears raw and unrefined!!

The thesis topic underwent modification and in March 2009 I settled with this statement *“The research project will review Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology paying attention to the way he uses spatial metaphors as he develops his ecclesiology in his search for a re-formed ecclesial community and a re-formed ecclesial identity.”*

What I have come to realise as the work on the thesis progressed, is that Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church is predicated entirely on the need to understand the church and its 'shape' in all dimensions as an answer to the question “How will the church structure itself in order to confess the presence of Jesus Christ?”

My interest in the question of the boundaries of the church arose out of my 2007 Master's research project¹⁷ which examined the launch, management and demise, within less than a decade, of the Catechumenate Project within the Anglican Diocese of Christchurch, New Zealand during the Lambeth Conference's Decade of Evangelism in the

¹⁷ Donald M. Fergus, "The Modern Catechumenate in the Diocese of Christchurch 1993-2002" (University of Otago, 2007), <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/1794>.

1990s. As my Master's research proceeded, it became clear that the project had been poorly managed and that there had been no understanding or appreciation about the consequences arising from the erosion of difference between church and state that had its origins in the 313 Edict of Milan, when the emperor Constantine had legalised Christianity. As a result of the Edict, which effectively collapsed the boundary between church and state, by the second half of the fourth century Christianity had become a "religion by royal appointment. Christendom...was dawning."¹⁸ For almost two millennia following Constantine, church and empire in the west have been wedded in a way that was set up to dissolve and eliminate the boundary between church and empire. What, I wondered, would Dietrich Bonhoeffer contribute to this debate in his use of the word "boundary" as a spatial descriptor and what would a church, described as it was by Bonhoeffer using an extensive spatial vocabulary look like? Did this church develop or change shape throughout the course of his life? A second question that appealed directly to my professional interests as a psychologist and clinical pastoral educator, emerged directly out of these issues: how does the shape or form of the church impact on the identity of those who 'belong' to this church.

These questions were given added impetus by Clifford Green's efforts to understand why Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a theologian in the first place. Green gives little weight to the suggestion that Bonhoeffer's visit to Rome in 1924 was a particularly significant event in itself, since even "...the strong impression of St Peter's leads to no necessary and programmatic commitment to develop the complex and sophisticated theology of sociality which begins in *Sanctorum Communio*."¹⁹

Casting about for a more compelling logic, Green wonders if the life of the Bonhoeffer family itself might have been "the experiential matrix" or the environment in which his knowledge of and concern for sociality was born. After noting that the family embodied and cultivated what he calls "qualities of individual independence in common solidarity", and that relationships within the family were like "those described in Bonhoeffer's

¹⁸ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 24.

¹⁹ Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids. MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 143. f.81.

theological concept of the person existing in socio-ethical relations”, Green proposes that “the family was... both a laboratory and a model of sociality as Bonhoeffer presents it.”²⁰

This suggestion is totally consistent with theoretical thinking in family systems theory in which the family is often described as the matrix of identity. The highly respected Argentinian Family Therapist Salvador Minuchin has written, “In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood. Human experience of identity has two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. The laboratory in which these ingredients are mixed and dispensed is the family, the matrix of identity.”²¹

Put these two ideas together and Green’s proposal lends itself to the extended proposal that Christian personhood is formed and structured in the matrix of Christian identity that is the church-community, where the same two dimensions of individual and corporate life are balanced; ‘belonging’ in the sense that we do not exist alone, and ‘separate’ in the sense that we differ from one another. As I would discover, these parallel concepts are not dissimilar to those developed by Bonhoeffer in his use of “*Church-community and church member being structurally ‘with-each-other’ [Miteinander] as appointed by God, and the members’ active ‘being-for-each-other’ [Füreinander] and the principle of vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]*”,²² ideas that describe and “constitute the community of love and that disclose in more detail the structure and nature of the Christian church”.²³

There is much in Bonhoeffer’s life and writings that begs the psychologist in me to consider almost everything from that point of view. Returning to serious theological reflection for the first time in almost forty years by way of a Master of Ministry degree, I struggled to stay focussed on the theology of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology. To the extent that I have stayed on task this research project has proven to be a rewarding and energising experience.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Salvador Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 143.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 178.

²³ Ibid., 178.

In this review of the spatial metaphors or descriptors that give theological substance to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, I have proceeded in what might be thought of as a rather conservative manner.

1. Chapter One reviews Bonhoeffer's allegiance to the formalist school of sociology. From *Sanctorum Communio* I review Bonhoeffer's use of the spatial metaphors of barrier and boundary, along with his already well-constructed understanding of personhood and ecclesial community. The chapter also considers 'church' in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the heart turned in upon itself, along with the spatial prepositions "in Adam" and "in Christ". Bonhoeffer's formal explication of his understandings of church begins with these two texts.
2. Chapter Two reviews *Creation and Fall* and the Christology Lectures of 1933 (better known as *Christ the Center*). Bonhoeffer's interest in the shape and nature of the primal community of God's intention lays a narrative foundation for the church of Christ. Spatial metaphors abound: e.g., boundary, centre, Christ's pro-me structure, all of them shaped not only by the struggle between the man and the woman as representative persons, but also now by the emerging struggle between church and state in Germany.
3. Chapter Three moves into the years before the outbreak of war and looks at *Discipleship* and *Life Together*. These were the Finkenwalde years where boundaries, and perimeters, communities for formation, and the mediation of Jesus between and amongst the people of faith, and above all the search for a Christian *Lebensraum* were priority concerns. Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church now reflects the urgency of the moment.
4. In Chapter Four, consideration is given to the shape of the church in the *Ethics* and the *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Now the church is taking on new shape and meaning as the form of the suffering Christ comes to predominate. Bonhoeffer's continuing commitment to the church becomes clear. But does the church occupy space as it once did? And what of the "secret discipline"? And what is the shape of the church now?
5. Chapter Five pays attention to Bonhoeffer's significant spatial reference "*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*" and considers how the spatial referents promote an understanding of the church that sets it apart from all other social forms.

6. Chapter Six concludes with the assertion that the spatial metaphors provided Bonhoeffer with the room he needed to portray the church as the space and place within which a commendable mode of human existence in the face of tyranny is to be lived and that within the social form of the church, complete personhood is expressed by those who are fully human which is what it means to be a Christian.

Gary Badcock wrote *The House Where God Lives*²⁴ to “hold forth the possibility of a rerooting of the church itself - and our thinking about it – in its true sources.”²⁵ Today, looking around he sees that “much of what calls itself the church has been so evacuated of theological substance”²⁶ that it has nothing to offer the secular world in which it is embedded. The church, he goes on to say, is “fundamentally a mystery of Christian faith: before all else, it is something biblical and creedal, something that “we believe”, and only as such is the empirical or sociological or even pastoral existence and function of the church also something of theological interest.”²⁷

It is very likely that Bonhoeffer would have agreed with these observations. For he could see that the German church in the years leading up to the inauguration of the Third Reich had little if anything to offer the nation. This is why he was determined to “liberate a genuinely theological concept of the church”,²⁸ believing that this was the only starting point from which the church could ever add value to the life of the nation. The use of the spatial metaphors actually allowed Bonhoeffer to draw a dynamic and expansive picture of a church in sharp contrast to the Reich Church of the Nazi state.

As far as I am aware, this may be the first attempt to place the spatial metaphors end to end in an attempt to paint a picture of Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of the church and to get a sense of the robustness of the Church based on the images of place and space that leads eventually to the suffering Christ. Collectively, the images build a compelling case for a form of sociality that brings the motifs of self-giving love and of dying and rising in Christ to the front of our thinking and discipleship.

²⁴ Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009).

²⁵ Ibid., 334.

²⁶ Ibid., 335.

²⁷ Ibid., 336.

²⁸ John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology* (London: Collins, 1967), 38.

Chapter One

An ecclesiology “with which he began his theological career so passionately...”¹

I first encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer more than 40 years ago when, as a young theological student, I picked my way through parts of *Letters and Papers from Prison*. I was intrigued by Bonhoeffer’s benign puzzlement as he wondered; “My observation is that extended deprivation of freedom has a demoralizing effect in *every* respect on most people...Why are there actually no deprivations of freedom in the O.T. *law*?”²

How, I wondered, could a man deprived of his freedom as he had been during the prison years, maintain an inner freedom and purpose as he appeared to have done. His constant search to structure and articulate his faith in a way that would make sense to him in his confinement left a deep impression on me. It seemed to me that his rock solid grip on hope and his optimistic outlook grounded in his awareness of God’s acts in history, allowed him to move far beyond his small cell. “As much as I long to be released from here, I nevertheless believe that not one single day is lost. What effect this time will eventually have is impossible to say. But it will have an effect.”³

At the time, I completely failed to comprehend any hint of Bonhoeffer’s anguish over the church with which he had had such a passionate relationship. I had no understanding or appreciation of this man whose spacious thinking had shaped an ecclesiology for a church that had faced the extraordinary demands of the National Socialist government of the day. But his anguish is there, laced with a bitter sweetness. So too is his commitment to the church which never wavered even at the end. And, of course, I knew nothing about his

¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Revised ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 887.

² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 187. (Letter to Eberhard Bethge, November 20 1943).

³ Ibid., 161-62. (Letter to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer, September 25 1943).

close friend Eberhard Bethge⁴ who had written, “Bonhoeffer failed...in his theological treatise on the doctrine of the church, with which he began his theological career so passionately and which ended with unsettled questions.”⁵

As work on the thesis progressed I wondered what Bethge’s comment might have meant since I was becoming increasingly aware of the exceedingly rich and comprehensive doctrine of the church that Bonhoeffer was articulating. How could this dynamic treatment of the people of God in Christ, forged on the anvil of the church’s relationship with the National Socialists, be said to represent “failure”?

In September 1925, Dietrich Bonhoeffer aged 19 and soon to begin work on his doctoral dissertation, wrote from the family home in Berlin to his parents who were on holiday at the time, to let them know that he had been speaking with Reinhold Seeberg⁶ who would become his dissertation supervisor.

I proposed a subject to him that is half-historical and half-systematic. He readily agreed with it. It relates to the subject of religious community. I told you that I was interested in this subject one evening a while ago. I have to do all sorts of historical work now, which won’t do me any harm. At any rate, the thesis seems to interest Seeberg quite a bit. He said he had waited a long time for someone to work on this subject.⁷

Bonhoeffer’s interest in the subject of religious community eventually became his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*⁸ which he submitted to the theological faculty of the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin in July 1927 and for which he was awarded the degree *summa cum laude*.

⁴ Eberhard Bethge (1909-2000) was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's close friend, colleague, confidant, biographer and interpreter. In May 1943, Bethge married Bonhoeffer's niece, Renate, who was the daughter of Ursula (1902-1983), Bonhoeffer's older sister and Rüdiger Schleicher. The civil ceremony had been held on March 23 1943.

⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887.

⁶ Reinhold Seeberg held the position of Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Berlin from 1898 until 1927.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 9 (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 2003), 148-49.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. *Sanctorum Communio* was completed in 1927 and published in 1930. It was published in English in 1963.

In an unpublished portion of the Preface to the 1930 German edition, Bonhoeffer expressed the wish that *Sanctorum Communio* would be received as “a modest contribution to a ‘philosophy of the church’”, a church which Bonhoeffer judged to be “profoundly impoverished and helpless”. He hoped that his essay might clarify “the nature of the church and of religious community”. He also commented that there had “rarely...been as much talk about community and church as in the last few years.”⁹ Eberhard Bethge notes that at the same time, Paul Althaus¹⁰ was working on his "*Communio Sanctorum: The Community in Luther's Idea of the Church*" and asks "Was the subject in the air"? He reports that when Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Pastor Richard Widmann to explain what he was doing, Widmann had replied "...everything is crying out for ‘association’, ‘fellowship’, ‘community’..."¹¹

In his book *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* John Godsey places Bonhoeffer alongside three of his contemporaries Karl Barth,¹² Rudolf Bultmann¹³ and Reinhold Niebuhr,¹⁴ pointing out that Bonhoeffer's thought was “as Christocentric as that of Karl Barth”; that he was as concerned as Rudolf Bultmann was about communicating the gospel; and that he was as “pragmatic” as Reinhold Niebuhr when it came to problem solving in a technological world. But Bonhoeffer, he says “more than any of these men,

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Paul Althaus (1888-1966) - German Lutheran theologian and pastor between 1914 and 1925 when he was appointed Associate Professor of Practical and Systematic Theology at the University of Göttingen. In 1927 he became a full professor.

¹¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 82.

¹² Karl Barth (1886-1968) - Swiss Reformed theologian and Professor of theology at in the German universities of Göttingen, Münster and Bonn, and then at Basel in Switzerland from 1935 until 1962. It should be pointed out, even at this early stage, just how significant Barth's 'new' approach to theology was and would become for the young Bonhoeffer. Barth's challenge to Hegel's Universal Reason and to German Idealism's ability to strip absolute value out of any discourse about life and spirit gave to those who needed and wanted something far more substantial in their faith, a hope and direction that encouraged Bonhoeffer away from most of his teachers towards Barth who wanted to "make the message of the Holy God revealed in Jesus Christ the sole centre of Christian proclamation, in contrast to contemporary historical relativistic, conservative-orthodox and pietistic-romantic understandings of the Bible." (John de Gruchy, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 62). For detailed considerations of Barth's influence on Bonhoeffer; see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999); Martin Rumscheidt, "The formation of Bonhoeffer's theology" in John W. de Gruchy, *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 50-70; Eberhard Bethge in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography. Revised Edition*, 175-186; and André Dumas in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Theologian of Reality*, 1-37, who provides a spirited history of the context of Bonhoeffer's developing theology and his relationship with Karl Barth.

¹³ Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) - German Lutheran theologian and Professor of New Testament studies at the University of Marburg from 1921 until 1951.

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) - American theologian and professor of Ethics and Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City from 1928 to 1960.

thought from the perspective of the concrete church...Bonhoeffer somehow more consistently (than these men) made the body of Christ the centre of his concern and the *terminus a quo* of his thinking.”¹⁵ The concrete church was the point at which his thinking started and to which it always pointed and while André Dumas is ambivalent about this statement, saying that Godsey's statement might be taken with a grain of salt, he does concede that "Bonhoeffer never fails to begin and end with the church."¹⁶

But John Godsey goes further, and suggests that, “although Bonhoeffer shared with the dialectical theologians their desire to recapture the Reformation understanding of revelation”, he was concerned that their method would prove in the end to be “individualistic and abstract.” Bonhoeffer advocated a theology that recognised that “revelation is bound to the church...[since] God’s revelation has a spatial component as well as a temporal one, and so, while the dialectical theologians were concentrating on the problem of faith and history, Bonhoeffer was concerned with the problem of faith and community.”¹⁷

In his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer identifies the essential church as the form of the church in the Spirit, or the Rule of God which exists from eternity to eternity. To the empirical church, which has its beginning in history, he attributes concreteness, visibility, and a shape that is to be embodied and exemplified in behaviour and practice. A seemingly uncomplicated question might then be asked: if the empirical church includes “only those who are elected in Christ as church-community”,¹⁸ did Bonhoeffer attribute boundary to the church? An answer to this question is one of the interests of this thesis. For by the time of the *Letters and Papers*, written from prison, Bonhoeffer’s concrete and decidedly corporate concept of the identity of the Christian community was beginning to change. What had happened?

¹⁵ John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 17.

¹⁶ André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (London: SCM Press, 1971), 94.

¹⁷ Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 15.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 217-18

Had the effect of seeing the *Deutsche Christen*¹⁹ sweep almost all before them in the rigged church elections of 1933, a decade earlier, and the subsequent energy-sapping struggle of the Confessing Church to prize and value the local congregation in the face of what seemed to be the ecclesiastical triumphalism of the Protestant establishment, finally exhausted Bonhoeffer? Even Karl Barth, as early as 1930, had responded to the extravagant claims of the (German) evangelical church. In his 1930 polemic entitled "Quousque Tandem", fired at the evangelical church, Barth had proposed that it was time the church stopped lauding itself and its self-claimed "virtuoso performance" in the way it had managed its affairs. "If this language is listened to and given credence, then in its inmost being the church has already ceased to live..."²⁰ Barth had written. After having spent the last ten years refuting the myth of the triumphalist church, was Bonhoeffer now wondering what more there could be to say?

Or is Bonhoeffer's reforming vision now reflecting his increasing unwillingness to allow God to be pushed to the edges of life – a process he believed the churches had been implicated in – and his deepening belief about the place of a secret faith in the market place?²¹ Or has his growing disillusionment with and sadness about the Confessing Church, where the "air has become stale" and the church exhausted because it has made no effort to interpret "the great concepts of Christian theology"²², brought him to his knees in despair? For he could see that the church, fighting for self-preservation as though that was an end in itself, had now almost forfeited its right and opportunity to speak "the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world"?²³ Has the definition of church as a bounded and recognisable space with a certain shape and form contracted or perhaps even disappeared altogether as a result?

Eberhard Bethge regarded Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology as "unfinished". More significantly it seems, Bethge was prepared to say that Bonhoeffer had failed to provide any "practical ecclesiology with regard to the structure of the church after 1945" and failed in his

¹⁹ The German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) originated in 1931 and became a significant political group within German Protestantism, aligned in large part with the ideological programme of the National Socialist party.

²⁰ Peter Matheson, *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids. MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 2-4.

²¹ Jonathan Malesic, *Secret Faith in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids MI.: Brazos Press, 2009).

²² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 429 (Letter to Eberhard Bethge, June 8 1944).

²³ *Ibid.*, 389.

“theological treatise on the doctrine of the church, with which he began his theological career so passionately...”, leaving so many unanswered questions.²⁴ Has Godsey’s observation that Bonhoeffer “made the body of Christ the centre of his concern and the *terminus a quo* of his thinking” proved incorrect at the end?

An early role definition?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer “had a distinguished, privileged and scholarly family heritage” within a family related to “circles of lower nobility and to the intellectual elite”.²⁵ It was taken for granted that Dietrich, like his predecessors and his parents, would contribute in some significant manner to German society.

Bonhoeffer’s mother, Paula von Hase, steeped as she was in the culture of the Moravian Brethren, was almost certainly the first to bring Christian influence to the young Dietrich. And while she “encouraged a formative religious climate for the family”, the Bonhoeffers did not attend weekly worship. It was not until the formation of the Confessing Church in 1934 that “Dietrich’s mother resumed her participation in church worship, and the Berlin-Dahlem parish of Martin Niemöller became the ‘church home’”.²⁶ The young Bonhoeffer however, who had no formal church connections as a young boy, was clear from an early age that he would study theology. In a succinct, understated and wry comment prepared for his fraternity year book at the University of Tübingen in 1924 he commented:

In Breslau on February 4, 1906, I, with my twin sister, saw the light of day as the son of the university professor the Venerable Mr. Karl Bonhoeffer and my mother, née von Hase. I left Silesia when I was six years old, and we moved to Berlin where I entered the Friedrich-Werder Gymnasium. Due to our move to Grünewald, I entered the school there, where I passed my Abitur²⁷ at Easter 1923.

From the time I was thirteen years old it was clear to me that I would study theology. Only music caused me to waver during the past two years. I am now studying here in Tübingen for my first semester, where I took the customary

²⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 3.

²⁶ F. Burton Nelson, “The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24-25.

²⁷ The Abitur is the school leaving exam normally taken at age 17.

step for every dutiful son and became a Hedgehog.²⁸ I have chosen Fritz Schmid to be my personal bodyguard. I have nothing else to share about myself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer.²⁹

Eberhard Bethge records that in spite of the attempts by his siblings to dissuade him from becoming a theologian,

...[Bonhoeffer] never seems to have wavered in this decision. At home he made no bones about it. Even when his brothers and sisters refused to take him seriously, he did not let it disconcert him. When he was about fourteen for instance, they tried to convince him that he was taking the path of least resistance, and that the church to which he proposed to devote himself was a poor, feeble, boring, petty and bourgeois institution, but he confidently replied: "In that case I shall reform it!"³⁰

Was this simply a riposte made by an adolescent boy trying to hold his own in what must have seemed like a one-sided sibling argument, or a wise person's life-shaping and role-forming prediction? It is impossible to know whether the young Dietrich could have known what he was committing himself to nor to know whether he appreciated the implications of what he is reported to have said to his siblings; common sense suggests that he probably could not have known - at least, not at the time. But always one to rise to a challenge, it is probably fair to suggest that at the very least, Bonhoeffer was announcing that if the church was as his brothers and sisters would have had him believe, then he would do his best to improve things. In replying to his siblings as he did, Bonhoeffer had deftly defined himself in anticipation as a 'theologian - re-former'.³¹ It can safely be said that this commitment to re-forming the church became his consuming passion.

²⁸ The Hedgehogs (Igel) were a student fraternity, founded in 1871 and pledged to the patriotic ideals of the new German Reich. Bonhoeffer's father Karl, had been a member of this Schwabian fraternity that existed only in Tübingen. (See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 48-49)

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 60.

³⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 36.

³¹ In addition to the interpretive concepts of theologian and martyr, the following words are used to interpret Bonhoeffer: 'Exile', 'Christian', 'Contemporary', 'Protestant Saint', 'Patriot', and 'faithful companion'. Strangely, I have not yet found any references in book titles or journal article titles to Bonhoeffer as 'reformer'.

Why Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a student of theology still remains a mystery and it may be one of those issues about which a certain degree of historical agnosticism is required.

Clifford Green, quoting Bethge with approval, notes that Bethge has shown "convincingly that the established church, the local congregation and his confirmation class did not significantly contribute to Bonhoeffer's boyhood decision to become a theologian."³² Green agrees with Bethge that the essential driver of the young Bonhoeffer's decision to become a theologian was "an elemental drive to independence...". He quotes Bethge who notes that "his isolation in the grouping of brothers and sisters is far more likely to have nourished *the desire to accomplish something himself which all of them had not achieved.*"³³

All of which is, in my opinion, rather fanciful. To my mind a much more interesting and compelling proposal is made by Martin Rumscheidt, who claims that Bonhoeffer's "study of theology was motivated by his existential concern to meet the scepticism of the 'cultured despisers of Christianity'".³⁴ The question of epistemology absorbed his energy; theology was to be studied as a science, for therein lay its meaning for the young student in 1924."³⁵

Rumscheidt then makes an intriguing suggestion:

no other discipline in the humanities explored the source of its existence as radically as did theology. It was there that *the decisive engagements of the spirit* took place. The unity of religion³⁶ and culture, built on the foundation of Christianity that German Idealism and Liberal Protestantism had made their goal *broke apart at every crucial point under the weight of the historical crises of the time.*³⁷ [My emphasis]

³² Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 143.

³³ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁴ *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* was the title of Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1768-1834) book published in 1799.

³⁵ Martin Rumscheidt, "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52. How Rumscheidt knows this is not disclosed.

³⁶ "Religion" is used here in the 'technical' sense to refer to humanity's sense of reaching out to and after the 'beyond' that requires for its legitimacy the existence of a religious *a priori*, something that Bonhoeffer would later argue passionately against.

³⁷ Rumscheidt, *The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology*, 63.

Then, after having secured a place in the academy and succeeding as an outstanding scholar and teacher, Bonhoeffer became “anxious to leave the lecturer’s desk for the pulpit, trying to separate the questions about religion from the task and life of the Church. He committed himself to the Church, this group of people, their actions, their guilt and their vision. He became one of their ministers.”³⁸ Even though Bonhoeffer is regarded primarily as a theologian, it is this sense of ministry to the people that becomes an equally strong, defining motif of Bonhoeffer’s life as it unfolds.

The theologian to be has now committed himself to doing something intentional with his theology, and his life would be shaped, at least in part, by this apparently unpretentious yet totally unqualified commitment to “re-form” the church.

In this regard I suggest that Bonhoeffer's adult life was lived out in four phases. The first phase coincided with his student years, and then each of the subsequent three phases commenced with his return to Germany from abroad: in July 1931 he returned from Union Theological Seminary in New York to the University of Berlin where the second phase of his life took place as a young lecturer intent on challenging and re-forming theological thinking in the face of the growing Nazi challenge; in April 1935 he returned from London to the Preachers’ Seminary in Zingst and then in Finkenwalde, where the third phase unfolded as the passionate teacher-pastor with a re-forming agenda as to how the church might live its life in obedience to its Lord; and in July 1939 he returned from New York with intent, to the task of re-formation of the church in a nation now at war. It has been suggested that to make this claim is to press the evidence too far in suggesting a reform priority. However, when considering exactly what it was that Bonhoeffer actually did after returning each time, it is clear that his contribution to the church in Germany was energetic and intentional. He challenged the status quo and he clearly expected those who listened and heard what he was saying to live lives that were given over to a form of obedient discipleship in and to Jesus Christ that would set them apart from the German Christians, remain true to the Word of God in Jesus Christ, and contribute out of that discipleship to the life of the German nation.

³⁸ Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr* (London: Collins, 1975), 61.

In spite of the view of the church offered by his siblings, Bonhoeffer was not about to be deterred from his desire and determination to make a contribution. For as gloomy as their portrayal of the Lutheran Church in Germany may have been at the start of the 1920's, worse was to come. Those who would eventually call for and then form the Confessing Church, including Bonhoeffer, would be dismayed as large numbers of German church ministers and members capitulated to National Socialist ideology, and as "German Christians", involved themselves in the formation of the Reich Church as a creation of the State.

The emergence of a *status confessionis*³⁹ in 1933 would bring home the reality of a church divided over the essential question "Who are we and what do we stand for"? The reforming theologian would have much to do.

An enriched background for study

In his book, *God of the Oppressed*,⁴⁰ James H. Cone wryly observes that "theologians do not normally reveal the true source of their theological reflection...More often than not it is a theologian's *personal* history, in a particular socio-political setting, that serves as the most important factor in shaping the methodology and content of his or her theological perspective."⁴¹ Bonhoeffer's niece, Renate Bethge,⁴² a member of the extended Bonhoeffer

³⁹ "The declaration of a *status confessionis* becomes necessary when the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake. It points to a specific aspect of the gospel, and declares that, in this particular situation and for this particular time, that aspect of the gospel can under no circumstances be neglected or denied, without calling into question altogether the proclamation of the gospel. It also points to the fact that, on this particular issue, all churches - even those which are not directly affected by the challenge - must join in this act of confessing...To declare a *status confessionis* is to say that time has run out, that toleration has reached its limits, that a line must be drawn. It is to say that the time is 'an evil time', but one in which we may no longer keep a prudent silence." (From the website of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches <http://warc.ch/where/22gc/study/13.html>. Accessed 05 July 2010.)

⁴⁰ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (London: SPCK, 1975), Preface vi.

⁴¹ While this is true, it is not the whole truth! But it did lead one commentator to make the connection between Bonhoeffer's own family of origin and his views on the church: "The picture he (Bonhoeffer) draws in his doctoral dissertation of the structure of the church is a functional description of his own family." (T.I. Day, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian Community and Common Sense*. Toronto Studies in Theology, Vol 11 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press 1982), 2) quoted in John W. de Gruchy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 26. Day, no doubt, was encouraged in this direction by the unapologetic link Bonhoeffer draws attention to in *Sanctorum Communio* when he writes: "As far as I can see, only the original patriarchal structure of the family is a sociologically comparable form (with the church community) even if only approximately" 263.

family, points to a “spirit of empiricism, rationality, and liberalism” that dominated the way the Bonhoeffers managed their enquiries and assessments of everything that was important to them. There was “a demand for clarity, and truthfulness and (the rejection) of any embellishment.” She argues that Dietrich drank deeply of his father’s insistence that a judgement should be given only “after (it) had been investigated most thoroughly” and points to a passage in the *Ethics* in which Bonhoeffer interpreted the French Revolution and the Enlightenment that followed: “Contempt for the age of rationalism”, Bonhoeffer wrote, “is a suspicious sign of a deficient desire for truthfulness. Just because intellectual honesty does not have the last word on things and rational clarity often comes at the cost of the depth of reality, we are not absolved from our inner duty to make honest and clean use of reason (*ratio*).”⁴³

This gifted student whose investigations were funded by this “honest and clean use of reason” brought an enquiring mind to his studies. In June 1924, at the age of eighteen, Bonhoeffer began the third semester of his undergraduate studies in Berlin with reminders of his family’s heritage surrounding him.

Bonhoeffer had begun his university studies at Tübingen in April 1923. The first two terms coincided with “ominous political and economic events: the French occupation of the Ruhr, unrest in Bavaria and Saxony, the declaration of a state of emergency throughout the Reich, and rampant inflation.”⁴⁴ But inside the university, as Martin Rumscheidt notes, the issue of epistemology had become the centrepiece of the young Bonhoeffer’s philosophical enquiry. Systematic theologian Karl Heim had provided Bonhoeffer with the vision of the need for a “Christian epistemology...that could meet the challenges of the sceptic and the dejection of the fainthearted”,⁴⁵ while Adolf Schlatter, Professor of New Testament studies, professed a “firm sense that in all decisions in matters of faith and

⁴² Renate Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Family and Its Significance for His Theology,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer; His Significance for North Americans*, ed. L. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 16-18. Renate Bethge was Bonhoeffer’s niece, the second of four children born to Bonhoeffer’s older sister Ursula and her husband Rüdiger Schleicher in 1927. Rüdiger Schleicher was shot by the Germans on 23 April 1945 as a result of being implicated in the 20 July plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. In May 1943 Renate married Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s close friend, with whom much of the correspondence in Letters and Papers from Prison is transacted.

⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 115-16.

⁴⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 47.

⁴⁵ Rumscheidt, ed. *The Formation of Bonhoeffer’s Theology*, 52-53.

church he was accountable to the Bible alone.”⁴⁶ Rumscheidt points out that in Bonhoeffer’s later writings, especially *Discipleship* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, this grounding certainty appears “at the heart of the faith that results from having been captivated and convinced by the word of Jesus...to the extent that it became an essential part of Bonhoeffer’s epistemology and finally, of his whole theological existence.”⁴⁷

Most importantly, his recent trip to Rome, made in the company of his brother Karl Friedrich, had provoked significant reflection about the church.⁴⁸ There can be no question but that this trip had an enormous impact on him.

Paul Metheny writes,

Family history connected Bonhoeffer to Rome. His great-grandfather Karl August von Hase had made many trips to Rome in an effort at conciliation with the Roman Catholic Church and had received his hereditary peerage as a result. But there may have been an even more compelling reason to take this journey. Italy was believed by many to have an almost mystical power to awaken the mind for spiritual and emotional enrichment. This trip was intended by his family to be for the young Bonhoeffer a moment of spiritual and intellectual awakening, both opening him to the majesty of the Renaissance and, like Goethe, stripping him of the bourgeois simplicity of his upbringing. And it did both. As he gazed on the architectural and artistic beauty of this amazing culture, the young man gained his first vision of the church's glory. In Rome he discovered the church at the heart of the world - an impression that was to transform his life and send him searching for a concept of the church consistent with this experience. Here lie the roots of Bonhoeffer's later preoccupation with the idea of the church. Indeed, it can be argued that much more than his time at university, his journey to Italy was to have a profound effect on his commitment to the church, its integrity and life. It lent colour and passion to his understanding of the Christian life.⁴⁹

The universality of the church, he noted had “truly seemed ideal”, while the “concretization of the idea of the church...is fulfilled in confession and absolution.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁸ For Bonhoeffer's diary and his letters written during the period 03 April - 04 June 1924 when he was in Italy (including a short 10 day trip to Tripoli, Libya) see DBWE 9 (1/57) 82-109 and (1/58-79) 109-128. This travel to Italy and North Africa by the time he was 18, established Bonhoeffer as an articulate and increasingly urbane traveller. By the time he was 21 he had travelled to the USA, Spain and Mexico. He travelled extensively throughout Europe and Scandinavia as he started to build his ecumenical connections in the early 1930's and lived in London between 1933 and 1935. He returned to the USA briefly in 1939 and then travelled for the *Abwehr* to Italy, Switzerland and Sweden and extensively within Germany prior to his imprisonment in April 1943.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition" 7-8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 89.

Here, two major ideas jostle for attention: the universality of the church on the one hand and the “concretization of the idea of the church” on the other, signalling the tension that would shape Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology: the eschatological church that lies outside time and history and the concrete church that is captured ideally in the local congregation. Both, it seemed to the young Bonhoeffer, were to be found in Rome and in the same place at the same time. Clifford Green points out that this would have been Bonhoeffer’s “first taste of the human and temporal catholicity of the church, in contrast to its rather parochial and homogeneous appearance in Germany.”⁵¹

In a long diary note on Ascension Day (1924), Bonhoeffer wonders if “Protestantism should not have tried to become an established church; perhaps it should have remained a large sect...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.”⁵² This would turn out to be an inspired observation and in *Sanctorum Communio* would provide significant direction to his thinking about the church, though it must be pointed out that Bonhoeffer subsequently took a very dim view of the sects, seeming to adopt and continue Luther’s antagonism towards the Radical Reformers.

Bonhoeffer would address the issue of the *collegium pietatis* or “associations of piety” in *Life Together*⁵³ but makes his first comments about sects in *Sanctorum Communio* where he writes:

Genuine love for the church will bear and love its impurity and imperfection too; for it is in fact this empirical church in whose womb grows God’s sacred treasure, God’s own church-community. Many presumptuous attempts have been undertaken to purify the church, starting with the formation of the perfectionist sects in the ancient church, continuing with the Anabaptists, Pietism, the Enlightenment, and Kant’s secularised concept of the Kingdom of God...In all these movements we find the attempt to have the Realm of God finally present not only by faith but by sight, no longer veiled within the strange forms of a Christian church, but clearly manifested in the morality and holiness of human beings, and in a perfect solution to all historical and social problems...No matter how seriously the despisers of the historical nature of our church may act, they are merely playing games if they do not stay with the realities that God intends us to take seriously. The church ought to let the

⁵¹ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 143. f.81.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 106.

⁵³ *Life Together* 45. f.21; and 137, 139.

weeds grow in its field, for where should it find the criterion for recognizing them?...Love coupled with a profound theological insight into the significance of the historical nature of the church made it difficult for Luther to break away from the Church of Rome. We should not allow our historical Protestant church to be easily stolen away from us by resentment and theological thoughtlessness.⁵⁴

Bonhoeffer was influenced by the ideas of Ernst Troeltsch, who became Professor of Philosophy at Berlin in 1915 and died in 1923, just before Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in 1924. His ideas about sociology remained influential. Troeltsch drew distinctions between church and sect and attempted to show how sects emerge out of the church as a result of disagreement and conflict over the use and management of beliefs, practices and traditions. Sects, he said, required and expected voluntary commitment from their members, and were often unwilling to support existing social conditions and arrangements; these are points to which Bonhoeffer would not have taken great exception. However, a third tendency of sects to seek a form of perfection within the group drew concerned comment from Bonhoeffer, if not scorn, since he believed that the church, being both a community of saints and a community of sinners, was never in a position to know who to include and who to exclude.

On Easter Saturday 1924, in the Basilica of St John Lateran, he saw “a delightfully lively joyous mood...present among the clerics, a joyous expectation of the grand “Gloria” in the Mass, i.e. of the announcement of the resurrection. This anticipatory mood seems strange to us who celebrate Holy Saturday under the impression of Good Friday”⁵⁵ which elicited the thought that Christian living should be shaped by the day that is still to come, not by the day that is passed and gone.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 222-23.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 92.

⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). Bonhoeffer will return to this idea at the very end of *Act and Being* (157-161) when he picks up the theme of 'The Child'. In a theological proposal he suggests that the child portrays "The Definition of Being in Christ by Means of the Future."

But the most profound experience occurred while attending Evensong in the Trinita dei Monti on Palm Sunday. He wrote

...it was almost indescribable...on Sunday afternoon 40 young girls who wanted to become nuns entered in a solemn procession wearing nun's habits with blue or green sashes...with unbelievable simplicity, grace and great seriousness they sang Evensong...every trace of routine was missing. The ritual was truly no longer merely ritual. Instead, it was worship in the true sense. The whole thing gave one an unparalleled impression of profound, guileless piety...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'.⁵⁷

Simplicity, grace, great seriousness, profound guileless piety...with every trace of routine missing, this was worship in the true sense. This experience lodged somewhere deep inside his being and later provided the energy and wonder that powered his quest to understand the "religious community" called church.

It was in Rome that Bonhoeffer discovered the church at the heart of the world and it made "an impression that was to transform his life and send him searching for a concept of the church consistent with this experience. Here lie the roots of Bonhoeffer's later pre-occupation with the idea of the church"⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 88-89.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7-8. "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spatial images – the descriptors of a developing ecclesiology

An introduction to the spatial structuring of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology

The Bonhoeffer corpus can be read with an eye to the way in which the spatial references throughout contribute to the development of his ecclesiology. Bonhoeffer began his search for an understanding of Christian community by asserting his belief that “community can be interpreted as a collective person with the same structure as the individual person.”⁵⁹ This underlay his insistence that equal weight should be given to personal being as well as to personal being in community. Neither should be allowed to gain at the expense of the other. The individual participates in the *Kollektivperson*, a reality “that transcends all individuals, but [a reality that] would be incomprehensible without the correlate of personal, individual being.”⁶⁰ It is this cohesive idea, imbued with profound theological significance that supports his comment in *Sanctorum Communio* when he writes, “In discussing the sociological community-type we found its ultimate unity to be its existence as a collective person. This insight must be applied to the Christian religious community as well as to the concept of the church. In the first case the presentation would proceed from below upwards, whereas in the case of the concept of the church it moves from above downwards.”⁶¹ Clifford Green notes that “Bonhoeffer regularly uses spatial metaphors for theological ideas. Here ‘below’ refers to human agency, ‘above’ to God’s revelation and action. They are not institutional or organizational terms.”⁶²

This is a reasonable observation with respect to the passage in question and others like it where Bonhoeffer uses the spatial images with theological intent. But it must be kept in mind that Bonhoeffer uses spatial imagery throughout his corpus and not all usage is

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 77.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 198-99.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 199. f.221. Elsewhere, Green refers to Bonhoeffer's use of spatial terms as metaphors for socio-theological concepts. Clifford J. Green. *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*. 194. f.21.

metaphorical or used in the service of theological statement. Spatial images are used, for example, when referring to the 'time and space' character of the empirical church and these clearly have institutional or organizational intent.

"Below" and "above" are not the only spatial images that Bonhoeffer uses dependably and consistently to give theological shape to his ecclesiology. Other words that evoke a sense of space and place are: 'barrier', 'beginning', 'boundary', 'centre', 'circle', 'closed system', 'core dividedness', 'end', 'ground(ed)', 'in', 'isolation' (strictly speaking "isolation" is not a spatial image though it does hint at it since its counterpoint is "closest community"), 'limit', 'over against', 'separation', 'solitude', 'space', 'structural openness', 'structural closedness', 'within', *Lebensraum*, the concept of promeity, and the phrase "[*Die Kirche ist*] *Christus als Gemeinde existierend*" or "[The church is] Christ existing as church-community."

Bonhoeffer's preference for the use of spatial forms and images throughout his corpus can be attributed to his choice of "sociological mentors"⁶³, men who identified with the so-called formalistic school, which in the 1920s "was the predominant school of German sociology."⁶⁴ Georg Simmel, (1858-1917) was the most important figure in this movement; a Jew, Simmel pursued his academic calling on the margins of the academy and had great influence both in Germany and the United States.⁶⁵ Ferdinand Toennies, Alfred Vierkandt, and Theodor Litt, his sociological mentors, acknowledged by Bonhoeffer in *Sanctorum Communio*, were of the same school. Although Simmel later achieved recognition for his writings on macro issues, he was initially known for his work on the actions and interactions of and between units of society as small as two people. From amongst the almost endless possibilities of interpersonal transactions he and his fellow formalists engaged in a form of reductionism and focussed on the forms of transactions in a way that made these observations manageable and describable.

⁶³ Peter L. Berger, "Sociology and Ecclesiology," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer. Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963), 64.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 29 f.5.

⁶⁵ George Ritzer, *Modern Sociological Theory*. , Seventh ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008). See "Georg Simmel, A Biographical Sketch". 38-39. Simmel was a contemporary of Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Edmund Husserl. Karl Marx (1818-1883) predated Simmel.

Peter Berger, sociologist and Lutheran scholar, maintains that Bonhoeffer's understanding of science was flawed in that he lacked a fundamental "appreciation of the force of the empirical",⁶⁶ something that he says was understandable due to the young man's background in German idealism. This was not helped by the formalists who maintained a concept of sociology as an empirical discipline but in fact operated at levels of abstraction that "became constantly blurred with the level of abstraction of philosophy", meaning that "their contention that they were engaged in something empirical was precarious at most times."⁶⁷ Berger proposes that while a scholar of Simmel's ability could make the fine distinctions necessary to preserve the levels of abstraction without totally abandoning the empirical, "lesser lights", which presumably included the young Bonhoeffer, could not do so. By rejecting historical data as the stuff of sociological analysis they were "led very easily to speculative systemizing that had little to do with empirical data of any kind."⁶⁸ In spite of Bonhoeffer's definitions, Berger maintains, "his dialogue is actually one between social philosophy and dogmatic theology, both operating on levels of abstraction safely removed from the harshness of empirical data."⁶⁹ Consequently the questions taken up by Bonhoeffer lacked the sharpness and clarity of the ones he would have been forced to address had he dealt with explicit empirical data.

Berger is critical of Bonhoeffer's choice of sociological conversation partners: "Bonhoeffer's choice of sociological schools carries within it the seeds of most that is unacceptable in his argument. The latter would have gained greatly (and been changed fundamentally) if in addition to the formalists it had taken into consideration the sociological approaches of Weber, Durkheim, and even Marx. In saying this, we would leave open the question whether a better understanding of Simmel would not also lead to different results."⁷⁰ And it is André Dumas who notes that Bonhoeffer never "enters into dialogue with the sociologists of history, who are the most interesting, such as Marx, but with the logicians of social existence, who are necessarily conservative."⁷¹

⁶⁶ Berger, "Sociology and Ecclesiology," 77.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁷¹ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 218. f.6.

In a lengthy introduction to the dissertation typescript (SC-A) of *Sanctorum Communio*,⁷² Bonhoeffer draws attention to what he believed was a great confusion surrounding the purpose and point of the emerging discipline of sociology. This had found particular focus in the early 1900s when the German universities were creating professorships in sociology. He claimed that “the primary interest of most sociologists is in political, economic, and possibly historical questions...(and that) a word (sociology) was found for an idea that was still quite unclear conceptually.” Bonhoeffer concludes by insisting on a “limitation of the subject matter of sociology to social formation”, at the same time disagreeing with formal sociology that “posits only relations [Beziehungen] and interactions [Wechselwirkungen] as its content” and disagreeing also with its apparent foundations “of a social philosophy that I do not share, namely, those of the atomist theory of society.”⁷³

Nevertheless, in casting his lot with the formalists who were interested in “the structural principles of social forms”⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer was pointed in the direction of a sociology that was embedded within a “social geometry”⁷⁵ that recognised the complexities of the interactions between people and then set about reducing that complexity by classifying the shape or forms of social transactions.⁷⁶ This was a sociology that was more interested in space and the importance of boundaries in space, closeness and distance, hiddenness and disclosure, and the shape and nature of groups, a glossary of spatial references that bears an uncanny resemblance to the aforementioned concepts that Bonhoeffer would use to describe and structure many of his own proposals; these were descriptive words ideally suited to describing a community that took its shape and mission from Jesus Christ in whom the fullness and subtlety of life dwelt. His choice of the formalists as mentors in sociology provided him with a rich seedbed of ideas out of which grew his own spatially structured ecclesiology.

⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 24-28. f.1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 27. f.1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 29. f.5.

⁷⁵ George Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots. The Basics*, Second ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2007), 52.

⁷⁶ The 'formal' sociologists were regarded with some suspicion by more traditional practitioners for detaching content in favour of form. In fact, by distancing themselves from the content of social transactions and developing an understanding of the context of interactions that lead or give birth to interactional content, the formalists demonstrated their ability to work with macro issues in the developing field of sociology.

Bonhoeffer's starting position was, of course, quite clear.

From the contents of the Christian faith it is possible to deduce certain impulses toward community that become visible in the empirical formation of community; but this still does not lead to the concept of the church (Schleiermacher even thought he could deduce the concept of the church from the general concept of religion). The concept of the church can, however, be reached only where the Christian revelation is believed, that is, taken seriously.⁷⁷

This position lay behind Bonhoeffer's fifth Graduation Thesis: "There is no sociological concept of the church that is not theologically based"⁷⁸ and John Phillips' observation is accurate. In describing Bonhoeffer's approach to sociological presuppositions, he writes,

The strategy was to take sociology out of the hands of those who had used it to describe the church, by means of an outside standard, as a 'religious community'. Arguing that the church cannot be understood from any viewpoint other than that of Christian revelation, Bonhoeffer then used sociological concepts for his purpose of describing the visible and unique form which the revelation assumes among the secular structures of society.⁷⁹

The following example of Bonhoeffer's commitment to spatiality demonstrates how he was able to use the language in order to gain a sense of place as well as a sense of urgency and passion about the church.

In the summer of 1932, while teaching at the university in Berlin, Bonhoeffer presented a lecture series on "The Nature of the Church" (*Das Wesen der Kirche*). Political tension in Germany was increasing and the lectures betray Bonhoeffer's growing impatience with the church of the day.

The new situation is marked on the one hand by our church's lack of a place. It wants to be everywhere and is, therefore, nowhere. It cannot be grasped and, therefore, cannot be attacked...Being without a place is the "being of Cain," the fugitive. On the run from itself, the church has fallen today into a deep contempt...A thing can be depicted only within a particular place. In this way the nature and claims of a specific reality achieve some sort of clarity. While the specific place is occupied no other reality can lay claim to it. Like the church itself, so the church's concept of God is without concrete demand and place, everywhere and nowhere.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 133. f.23.

⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 440. Refer *Sanctorum Communio*, 31-33.

⁷⁹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 49.

⁸⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Das Wesen Der Kirche. The Nature of the Church.," in *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 83.

The church is on the run and its 'place' in the world is now assigned "as a gracious gift" by the "autonomous culture"; worse than that, it is absorbed into that very culture. However, the church's rightful place in the world "is the place of Christ present in the world" and God alone will determine this place. Sadly the church "has settled down in places of privilege."⁸¹

Then Bonhoeffer vigorously makes the counterclaim that

All this time we have been speaking about our concrete church. It is the real church. We don't wait for it to become a reality, but rather it is already there. We live with a view to church, not in a kind of Advent but in the fulfilment that has dawned...It is a denial of the real humanity of Jesus and also heretical to take the concrete church as only a phantom church or an illusion.⁸²

It is precisely this point that encouraged Bonhoeffer's use of a spatial vocabulary; it was, in André Dumas' words, to overcome the suspicion that the "real church" may not have arrived yet and that we are still living in a time of "advent" waiting for it to show up.⁸³

This reality, who is Christ, will become central to Bonhoeffer's forthright claims in his opposition to traditional two-realm thinking which will be expressed in *Ethics*.

Hence there are not two realms, but only the *one realm of the Christ-reality [Christuswirklichkeit]*, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united...There are not two competing realms standing side by side and battling over the borderline, as if this question of boundaries was always the decisive one. Rather, the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ. History moves only from this centre and towards this centre.⁸⁴

The vocabulary of spatiality makes it clear that when Bonhoeffer is looking at the church he is looking at a reality already existing in time and space and that this is the space in which Jesus is to be encountered "concretely, spatially and temporally, not as immanent energy, not as an inspiring personality, but as a person who continually questions us about himself."⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid., 84.

⁸² Ibid., 86-87.

⁸³ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 218.

⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 58. "Christ, Reality, and Good".

⁸⁵ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 220.

André Dumas puts it like this,

Christ as structure finds his place in reality. He who is the founding Word, the present sacrament and the ongoing community, becomes (to refer again to Levi-Strauss) the 'property of reality.' Here, indeed, the two most central words in Bonhoeffer's vocabulary take shape: the deputyship (*Stellvertretung*)⁸⁶ of Christ becomes the structuring (*Gestaltung*) of reality. *What he is becomes the place where we are.*⁸⁷ [My emphasis]

Dumas observes that "Bonhoeffer speaks of Jesus Christ both as a place and as a structure of the world around us, and almost never refers to him as an event in history..." and that this "vocabulary based on spatial imagery seems to me fundamental to a correct interpretation of Bonhoeffer."⁸⁸ In choosing to use a spatial vocabulary which he had earlier described as "a vocabulary based on structural imagery [which] aims at revealing what in reality is determinative, already present and discoverable in the here-and-now, logical and providing a foundation both in abstraction and concreteness", Bonhoeffer is working hard to overcome the "suspicion that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ might only be tangentially related to the ongoingness of the world, without being understood for what it truly is, the central structure of all reality."⁸⁹

A question now presents itself. With what intent were the spatial images used and what did they make possible? The thesis will demonstrate that the spatial metaphors were used with functional and pastoral intent to describe and define a distinctive people and to ensure that their corporate gathering, their *Gemeinde*, was well structured theologically and occupied a well-shaped and bounded space, their *Lebensraum*, in the world.

⁸⁶ *Stellvertretung*, a fundamental theological concept for Bonhoeffer that is used throughout his writings. "Literally the word means to represent in place of another - to act, advocate, intercede on behalf of another; we translate this as 'vicarious representative action.' Bonhoeffer recognised this as a theological concept emerging from Christology, and relating in the first instance to 'the free initiative and responsibility that Christ takes for the sake of humanity in his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection...' and then extended it by way of 'anthropological analogy' to mean 'acting responsibly on behalf of others and on behalf of communities to which one belongs'." (*Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 120. f.29).

⁸⁷ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 221.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 217-18.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 218-19. Here, Bonhoeffer is contrasting the spatial vocabulary with a "vocabulary based on events and vertical imagery: such words as event, advent...leap and decision." Dumas notes that a doubt "soon arises about whether an outside event can ever fully make its way into reality, and whether it does not remain tangential to reality and finally insignificant." (218)

Although André Dumas is, I believe, unduly generous in his praise for the way Bonhoeffer moves with apparent ease between sociology and theology, he is probably correct in his observation that sociology required theology to think through the meanings of its own affirmations in terms of its collective categories of “dialogue, covenant and deputyship” and in so doing, forced the church, in its self-reflection, to stop talking about itself in abstractions. Bonhoeffer would willingly have associated himself with this position.⁹⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spatially structured ecclesiology

Sanctorum Communio

Bonhoeffer began work on his doctoral thesis towards the end of 1925 at the age of nineteen. From the beginning he insisted that *Sanctorum Communio* belonged, not to the “sociology of religion, but to theology”.⁹¹ He ‘knows’ that

...the nature of the church can only be understood from within, *cum ira et studio* [with passionate zeal], never by nonparticipants. Only those who take the claim of the church seriously - not relativising it in relation to other similar claims or their own rationality, but viewing it from the standpoint of the gospel - can possibly glimpse something of its true nature.⁹²

Something very interesting is happening here, for as Jonathan Sorum points out, in claiming that the nature of the church can only be understood from within, Bonhoeffer had already “deeply explored the nature of Christian existence as existence in community, (even though) he had not really experienced it”.⁹³ By his own acknowledgement Bonhoeffer’s “conversion”⁹⁴, which he talked about years later from his Tegel prison cell

⁹⁰ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 89.

⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 32.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹³ Jonathan D. Sorum, "Review Essay. Another Look at Bonhoeffer," *Lutheran Quarterly* XVIII(2004): 475.

⁹⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, Discussed under the head "The Transition from Theologian to Christian." 202-06.

as “a turning away from the phraseological to the real”, did not occur until sometime during the summer of 1932, seven years later.⁹⁵

Two things can be noted here: first, in making the claim that the church can only be understood from “within”, Bonhoeffer was putting himself into the enterprise he wanted to understand, the community called the church. To this task he brought considerable intellectual ability and learning, and his recent experiences in Rome where questions had been raised and an awareness of the church heightened. His own change of heart would come later.

Secondly, he had to do it this way in order to substantiate the decisive claim that *Sanctorum Communio* belonged to theology and not to the sociology of religion. While he was to address the issue of religion, its meaning and its worth, at a later stage of his life, the young Bonhoeffer already had a keen sense that it was not religion that he had observed and been won over by at Holy Trinity on Pincio Hill. Rather, it was worship of the true God in the truest sense, ritual from which every trace of the routine was absent. This profound experience of worship and devotion would shape his later efforts to call the church to a discipleship shaped by the guileless piety of the cross.

Unsettled by the now clearly specious claims made less than a decade earlier that “a ‘new civilization’ based upon ‘restraint’ and ‘the autonomy of man’ represented the future of Germany”⁹⁶ and disillusioned by the tragedy of the First War, Bonhoeffer’s starting point, as with Barth, was God’s radical revelatory self-disclosure. Neither man proceeded from the *possibility* of revelation, but from its reality. His claim was uncompromising; only the “*concept of revelation can lead to the Christian concept of the church.*”⁹⁷ The church

⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 358. For an extended discussion on “From the Phraseological to the Real” refer to Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 105-184. The reflections of Bonhoeffer’s cousin Hans Christoph von Hase about this time in Bonhoeffer’s life can be found in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*. 591-604

⁹⁶ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer’s Christology*, 38. It was Ernst Troeltsch, who, as Phillips points out, “had found the doctrine of original sin a relic of the past...and colleagues who had been greatly influenced by him found themselves defenceless” in the face of the tragedy that was Hitler.

⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 134. Martin Rumscheidt’s observation in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* is that “Bonhoeffer’s critique of Barth was that he appeared to make God’s revelation the point of departure rather than the community to which God’s revelation is addressed, the church...if revelation is to be spoken of Christologically, then the

cannot be deduced: it can only be conceived in the sphere of reality established by God. “*The reality of the church is a reality of revelation, a reality that must be either believed or denied*”.⁹⁸ The reality of the church, he insisted, was simultaneously a historical community and one established by God. John Phillips has pointed out that Bonhoeffer chose “for himself an exceedingly difficult task: to produce an understanding of the church which rejected the possibility of grasping her sociological analysis from outside...(he) now wished to reassert the *vertical* dimension of the church to ‘liberate a genuinely theological concept of the church’...”⁹⁹

It would be possible, Bonhoeffer agreed, to analyse the church as “a ‘public corporation’ and to develop a *sociological morphology* of it.” But then all theological reflection would become superfluous since the religious community called the ‘Church’ would be regarded as any other organisation. He was not averse to describing the ‘Church’ in such sociological fashion; however, if this was all that was to happen, no one could “ever take the claim of the church as being grounded in the reality of God and God’s revelation seriously.” So, he argued, “the church can be understood fully only from within, on the basis of its own claim” and only on this basis “can we develop appropriately critical criteria for judging it.”¹⁰⁰

But there was another acute problem. From the beginning and especially in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer wanted to approach his study of the church as a temporal community “from the perspective of social philosophy and sociology”¹⁰¹ without giving up its key eschatological character. But how, he wondered, does one establish the church in space and time when it is essentially a creation of God?

Bonhoeffer began by establishing the reality of God’s self-disclosure in Christ in community and, emerging from that community’s own self-awareness and self-consciousness, to understand the way such revelation takes up space within the world; in Bonhoeffer’s words, “to understand the structure of the given reality of a church of Christ,

aspect of Christ existing as community needs to be the point of departure and proceed with the concreteness of that factor.” 64-5.

⁹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 127.

⁹⁹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 38.

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 126.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 33. Bonhoeffer would argue later (130-131 and in a long footnote 131-133 f.23) that “there is in fact only one religion in which the idea of community is an integral element of its nature and that is Christianity.”

as revealed in Christ, from the perspective of social philosophy and sociology.”¹⁰² The problem was that this church occupies two territories; the first is the heart and mind of God out of which it is conceived and speaks. This is eschatological territory. The second is the world in which the church finds itself and in which it serves and suffers by day and night. The church interprets what happens in the land we occupy by night and day with the lens of the eschaton and it was the tension between the church as an eschatological event and the church as a serving and suffering community that would energise Bonhoeffer until he died in 1945.

He would engage numerous conversation partners but his first concern was to establish the relationship of his project vis-a-vis the disciplines of social philosophy¹⁰³ and sociology.¹⁰⁴ It is in this context that Bonhoeffer makes it clear that his project “belongs to theology” and, as André Dumas points out,¹⁰⁵ sociology’s concreteness would keep theology from talking abstractly about the church, while theological reflection about the church would provide sociology with a theological perspective it otherwise lacks, though as we have already noted, Peter Berger was very dubious, if not cynical, about this outcome.

Bonhoeffer’s theological approach to the church would provide an alternative to those on offer at the time. He made no attempt to argue a case for the existence of the church but started instead by regarding the ‘church’ as given and defining it theologically and confessionally as “that space where the world is formed in Christ and where Christ is formed in the world.”¹⁰⁶ Structured according to Christ who is its true centre, the church is the way the world is meant to be. “Overflowing from the heart of God, the church is reality

¹⁰² Ibid., 33.

¹⁰³ "Social philosophy deals with fundamental social relationships that are presupposed by all knowledge of, and will for, empirical community. It deals with the 'origins' of sociality in the human spirit and the intrinsic connection of sociality and spirit. Social philosophy is the study of the primordial mode-of-being of sociality *per se*. It is a normative discipline insofar as its theoretical constructs are the necessary guidelines for the accurate interpretation of empirical sociological data." (*Sanctorum Communio*, 28-30) Peter Berger interprets this as "the analysis of the ultimate nature of social relations, their origin and essence in terms of the human spirit. Social philosophy thus precedes any empirical findings about society and must always serve as a corrective for sociology." ("Sociology and Ecclesiology." In *The Place of Bonhoeffer. Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, 57)

¹⁰⁴ "Sociology is the study of the structures of empirical communities...the concern of sociology is to trace the many complex interactions (of a community) back to certain constitutive acts of spirit that comprise the distinctive characteristic of the structure." (*Sanctorum Communio*, 30) Peter Berger interprets this as "the science of the structure of empirical collectivities." ("Sociology and Ecclesiology." In *The Place of Bonhoeffer. Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, 57)

¹⁰⁵ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 94.

as restructured in Jesus Christ...(who) *is himself* the church at the heart of reality, broken on the Cross where the reality of every human disruption is objectively present, and then rebuilt at Easter where the universe is reconstituted.”¹⁰⁷

Dumas points towards an answer to the question “Why the church?” It is no religious society nor is it a group for people in search of religious need satisfaction as if the church was a retail outlet of some sort in the consumer society. It is far more than this. The church is restructured reality, that community of reconstructed humanity into the heart of which is absorbed all human distress and disruption and where a reconstruction of torn-apart humanity takes place in the new life shaped by Christ within the church-community. And while this is theological narrative, it must be seen to be enacted in the empirical church, in the local congregation; otherwise it will make no sense.

The shape of the church defined by the notion of ‘barrier’

Responsible living and ethicality in all things

In spite of his apparent commitment to sociology, Bonhoeffer began with a bold assertion, namely that in the first instance the church was to be understood theologically; he is convinced it could be understood in no other way. At the same time he believed that the conceptual tools at hand were quite unsuitable for the task. He was unwilling to attempt to derive any social meaning from the category of epistemology, rejecting that as a *metabasis eis allo genos*, a fallacious transition from one subject to another. He argues that it is impossible to move from providing an account of how knowledge about a given subject (or person) may or is to be obtained (the epistemological category) to saying that we know the other and what it is that we actually know about them (the social category). To do this is to attempt to effect a change to a different category.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 45.

Ernst Feil comments that because of the way in which Idealism absorbed individuals into a form of generality, Bonhoeffer believed that the first step in starting to comprehend sociality “was to overcome the prevalence of epistemology and its necessary concomitant individualism.”¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer was also convinced that there had to be a transformation in thinking about the disruptive way the concern about epistemology constantly intruded into “the primacy of ethics” and a similar revolution in understanding that neither epistemology or metaphysics would ever take us to and into the reality of another person. So, Bonhoeffer invites a consideration of the way in which the social sphere is entered. “I enter the social sphere *only when my intellect is confronted by some fundamental barrier*”.¹¹⁰ This happens when a person “in concrete, living individuality...addressed as a whole person...[and] existing...in a state of responsibility in the midst of time” takes the claim of the other seriously and makes him or herself ethically responsible.¹¹¹

This is the moment in which a person stands over against another, and in his or her individuality recognises his obligation to the other, and it is a Christian insight, Bonhoeffer claims, that a person is created in a moment of time arising out of an ethical struggle of epic proportions.

...The real person is created in the moment of being moved – in the situation of responsibility, passionate ethical struggle, confrontation by an overwhelming claim; thus the real person grows out of the concrete situation...[and] only in experiencing the barrier does the awareness of oneself as ethical person arise. The more clearly the barrier is perceived, the more deeply the person enters into the situation of responsibility.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 6.

¹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 45.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 49. In a footnote (*Sanctorum Communio*, 56-57. f.12), Bonhoeffer draws attention to the difference between his position and that of Søren Kierkegaard regarding the origin of the ethical person. Kierkegaard's ethically aware person exists also and only in a concrete moment but there is no necessary 'other' involved. Thus, Kierkegaard's ethical person is a self-establishing ethical person. This could not happen for Bonhoeffer. For him, the ethically aware person was always established by the other whose presence he had to acknowledge and to whose situation he had to respond. "In the last analysis, then" Bonhoeffer concludes, "Kierkegaard remained bound to the idealist position. Thus he lays the foundation for an extreme sort of individualism in which the significance of the other for the individual is no longer absolute but only relative." Contrary to this position however, it should be noted that Bonhoeffer appears to have misunderstood Kierkegaard at this point which may indicate that Bonhoeffer had not read Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, in which 'the other' is shown to be essential to Kierkegaard's conception of ethics.

Knowing the other and knowing something about the other is a social transaction that has its origins in recognising another's deepest needs and responding to those needs in a self-giving responsible way.

In recognizing the impossibility of moving from epistemology to genuine knowledge of the other, Bonhoeffer has shifted the focus from epistemology to an interpretive principle - a hermeneutic - that is to guide the church community towards a meaning that it can attach to what it does. The church- community is to be guided by framing everything it does by the hermeneutic of 'responsible living' and 'ethicality in all things'. It constitutes the new social basic-relation and it is this essential ethical transaction that introduces reality into the world.

For Bonhoeffer the highest value was to be attributed to God, for people are after all God's creatures. He believed that idealism was deeply flawed in that it left people in a world of unreality.¹¹³ Nor did it have any "understanding of the moment in which the person feels the threat of absolute demand. The idealist ethicist knows what he ought to do, and what is more, he can always do it precisely because he ought. Where is there room, then, for distress of conscience, for infinite anxiety [Angst] in the face of decisions?"¹¹⁴ Idealist philosophy he said, had no voluntaristic concept of God, where the will rather than the intellect is esteemed, nor did it have a profound concept of sin.¹¹⁵ Essentially, persons are "static" since they exist as objects of knowledge or timelessly as "mind or reason" in "time's continuous flow". Persons empower their own entry into the ethical sphere. Even when it acknowledges "the person as the highest value", idealism still undercuts the value of people and "closes itself off from the possibility of understanding personal-social-basic-relations."¹¹⁶ So interested was Bonhoeffer in "the person in concrete, living

¹¹³ Ibid., 36-43. Bonhoeffer considers four philosophical models of social basic-relations: (1) Aristotle, where the "collectivity... is set over the individual person"; (2) the Stoic school, where "that which defines the essential person reaches beyond the individual person...and at the same time negates the person as an individual"; (3) Epicureanism, where connections to others "are only utilitarian...(and) one person is fundamentally alien to the other"; and (4) Descartes, where the individual person is subsumed "under the universal" and where there is no difference between "a subject-object-relation and an I - You relation; rather, the latter being subsumed under the former." Bonhoeffer argues that these communities "of like beings never leads to the concept of community...only to the concept of sameness, of unity." 43.

¹¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 49.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 48-49. The notion of 'will' is central in Bonhoeffer's doctrine of God and (his) theological anthropology. "The 'will' of subjects is crucial to his presentation of the Christian-ethical concept of 'person' at the heart of his theology of sociality." 19

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

individuality...existing in a state of responsibility in the midst...of time”¹¹⁷ that everything, he insisted, is real and can be located.

The concept of the barrier becomes decisive. It has its “form and structure in personal experience”.¹¹⁸ In a highly compressed argument¹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer discusses the relationship of the “I” and the “You and concludes, “Other persons can become objects of my reflection on their I-ness, but I will never get beyond the fact that I can only encounter the other as a You. I can never become a real barrier to myself, *but it is just as impossible for me to leap over the barrier to the other.*”¹²⁰ This means that “You” are defined and understood as the other who confronts me and requires of me an ethical decision and an ethical response.

It is Clifford Green who points out that Bonhoeffer’s interest in the ‘other’ did not originate in his appreciation of Martin Buber, whose book *Ich und Du* was published in 1923 and who, in distinguishing between “I-It” and “I-You”, sought first of all to overcome the objectification of people and then to “create a realm of intimacy between persons, overcoming the objectified I-It world.”¹²¹ It was the philosophers Theodor Litt (1880-1962), Emanuel Hirsch and Eberhard Grisebach (1880-1945) who interested Bonhoeffer; they insisted on the reality of a highly significant ethical component to the encounter between people. While deeply concerned to stand against the objectification of people, Bonhoeffer “stresses the ‘other’ as boundary and barrier to the self; he emphasizes ethical encounter rather than intimacy...This personal-ethical model of transcendence, which is found throughout Bonhoeffer’s theology, distinguishes him clearly from Buber.”¹²² This established an ontological category of person and personhood for Bonhoeffer that would come to full flower years later in the *Ethics*, where people were always in social and ethical encounters with an other person; “...This is the Christian basic-relation of I and You [*Du*], self and other. It presupposes the theological axiom that the human person always exists in relation to an Other, namely God, and that human relations are in some way analogies of this fundamental relation.”¹²³

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 50-54.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹²¹ Ibid., 5.

¹²² Ibid., 5-6.

¹²³ Ibid., 50. f.56. [Editor's comment].

“Barrier” is a powerful theological and spatial marker that stops us in our tracks, forcing on us awareness of the other as distinct and separate, and requiring a consideration of what the other needs or demands of us by way of an ethical response. Years later Bonhoeffer will write, “Being a neighbour is not a qualification of someone else; it is their claim on me, nothing else. At every moment, in every situation I am the one required to act, to be obedient.”¹²⁴

The barrier guarantees transparency and reality in transactions since it shifts the cognitive self from the centre of the social transaction and in so doing shifts the definition of a relationship from one where the other is simply a means to an end, usually my end, to one where the other’s need is the focus of attention. Collectively “the church can be understood in terms of social philosophy as the reality of persons encountering one another”¹²⁵ in such a way and, as Joachim von Soosten points out, the notion of sociality that underpins this concept “is defined structurally by vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung], both with regard to the Christological foundation of sociality and the ecclesiological form it requires.”¹²⁶ It will become clear that this relationship between Christological foundation and ecclesiological form will become a major point of interest as Bonhoeffer’s life unfolds.

In his commitment to the sociality of persons, Bonhoeffer was passionately committed to proclaiming and protecting the individuality, distinctness and separateness of persons, for this is the only way to maintain the essential ethicality of social transactions. It was also the only way to stay in touch with the “threat of absolute demand”. With tongue in cheek no doubt, Bonhoeffer ribs the Idealist who knows what he or she ought to do, and, what is more, he (or she) can always do it precisely because he or she ought!¹²⁷ In a surprisingly candid but totally consistent manner, he challenges the idealist to introduce some humanity and reality into living: “Where is there room, then, for distress of conscience, for infinite anxiety [Angst] in the face of decisions.”¹²⁸ It is everywhere, of course, but it is only known where a start-point that embraces ethicality as a mode of being makes the demand of the other on me.

¹²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 76.

¹²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 298.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

In the end, barrier permits our distress and anxiety, protecting and allowing our vulnerability. And more than that: for though “fundamentally separate and distinct” in the church we are not totally removed from the other, or as Ernst Feil puts it, “The thou alone provides a *real boundary* through which deadly isolation is lifted and *genuine sociality* is established. This is true because the thou of the neighbour and the thou of God belong together.”¹²⁹ Barrier secures a social order that is neither exploitative nor disinterested. It is not exploitative, in as much as that barrier secures the ethical character of inter-personal transactions, ensuring that we are obligated to the other because our interest is in the other before it is in ourselves and precisely in that reality we cannot remain disinterested. In this sense barrier draws us together.

The shape of the church defined by the notion of ‘boundary’

The boundary of personhood and ecclesial community

In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer commences his enquiry into the nature of ‘religious community’ in an unexpected way; immediately the issue becomes “concretely *the question of the Christian concept of person*. What one understands about person and community simultaneously makes a decisive statement about the concept of God. *The concepts of person, community, and God* are inseparably and essentially interrelated.”¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer has already put his readers on notice about his starting points when he declares the links between these concepts: “Every concept of community is essentially related to a concept of person.” This means that it “is impossible to say what constitutes community without asking what constitutes a person [and] since the purpose of this study (*Sanctorum Communio*) is to understand a particular concept of community, namely that of the *sanctorum communio*”, the enquiry of necessity is quite concretely about the Christian concept of person. Further, God must not be thought of in isolation but only in relationship either to a person or a community of persons. Or again, if we are to arrive at an understanding of the essence of Christian community we could start our

¹²⁹ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 8.

¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 34.

journey from a view of God or a view of person. And if we chose to start with a view of person then we would need to invoke a “well-grounded view of both God and the concept of community.”¹³¹

Associated with the idea of community is that of sociality, ideas that are closely linked but not identical. 'Sociality' is an idea that represents the tendency of groups and persons to develop social links and live in communities which in turn reflects a basic human striving and provides any community with a solid base.¹³² Bonhoeffer then stretches the meaning of sociality by investing it with interpretive mana as he recognises the social intention of "the fundamental Christian concepts. 'Person', 'primal state', 'sin', and 'revelation' appeared fully understandable only in relation to sociality."¹³³ This means that all categories should be taken seriously without conflating or confusing any of them since sociality defines the concepts of person, primal state, sin, revelation, and of course, community. These ideas are necessary to appreciate the general structure of “empirical social formation” especially individuals or personal centres of agency, the unity and commitment of the group, and the structure of the community.¹³⁴

If “the social intention of...revelation [appears] fully understandable only in relation to sociality”¹³⁵ the question might be asked “What is the relation between revelation and sociality?” and “Does revelation have its own form of sociality?” Revelation is that Word of God addressed to men and women and spoken from the outside. “Revelation, that is, the person of Christ, exists in a *social form*: the church. Revelation is not an idea, a past historical happening, a doctrine, or an entity. It is a *person*, and since person and community are inseparable, the revelation of Christ is present in a personal-communal form: “Christus als Gemeinde existierend.”¹³⁶ The form of sociality that revelation takes is the form of Christ existing as church-community. Or to put it another way, the social intention of Christ is to exist as church-community in order that “the rehabilitation and

¹³¹ Ibid., 34.

¹³² Jeremy Butterfield, ed. *Collins English Dictionary*, 6th ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1532.

¹³³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 22. f.5.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 22.f.5.

¹³⁶ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 53.

renovation of genuine humanity for all people”¹³⁷ might occur. Here in this *Gemeinde*, “Christ the Stellvertreter is the *initiator* and *reality* of the new humanity.”¹³⁸

But how does a person’s sense of identity, maintained by a persistent sense of personal being and shaped by their relationships with others, fit with the reality of their life in a group that in its own turn is shaped by a communal identity? Do the two fit together without doing damage to either? It is into this discussion that Bonhoeffer injects the spatial concept of ‘boundary’ which is a pivotal notion, since ‘boundary’ is the theological category that operates to guarantee and protect individuality, identity, personhood and community. It is already clear that while the notion of barrier as that which brings us up sharply against the reality of the other and drives an ethical re-definition and understanding of transcendence, the idea of boundary is closely allied with it.

Bonhoeffer introduces his theological rationale for the existence of boundary, a notion that sits closely with “barrier” but serves a quite different, though specific, purpose.

The experience of ethical solidarity is based upon the utmost singularity of the person, so that even in the awareness of the closest solidarity, the ontic-ethical separateness of individual persons caused by sin can never end, nor disappear from consciousness. One cannot avoid the boundaries of the self. Here we are faced with the I-You-relation...actualised in a sinful way, whose ‘overcoming’ [‘*Aufhebung*’]¹³⁹ is only possible in the concept of the church.¹⁴⁰

Not only was Bonhoeffer challenging the priority of the quest for an epistemology that got in the way of ethics, but it is now clear that when approaching the concept of Christian community, Bonhoeffer was also challenging the starting point of the idealists, who starting from a very different place, maintained that “origin and telos stand in real, unbroken connection...”¹⁴¹ Bonhoeffer declared the very opposite; we are all deeply flawed by virtue of the broken history in which we share. This is the only history on offer

¹³⁷ Ibid., 53.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 56.

¹³⁹ ‘*Aufhebung*’ can also be translated ‘abolition’, ‘cancellation’, ‘suspension’, or ‘annulment’, words which suggest a very robust understanding of what the church makes possible.

¹⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 117.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 62.

and the Christian doctrines of primal state, sin and reconciliation force us to concede that “the reality of sin...infinitely alters the essence of things.”¹⁴²

It follows that the concept of person must be understood differently. In an act of rebellion, seeking to know good and evil, unbroken community of life as it was in the beginning was ruptured and in “losing direct community with God, (human beings) also lost, by definition, unmediated human community.”¹⁴³

But in *Sanctorum Communio* it remains a concern at the conceptual level since it was unmediated human community and the impossibility of dealing with this dilemma that drove Bonhoeffer to adopt a consistent stand against all idealist positions that hinted at social atomism, any form of collectivity or fusion that threatened to negate the individual, and any form of absorption into a group that subsumed the individual under some sort of universal that denied the reality and importance of the person. He also made it clear for instance, that to be “in Christ” was not to be understood as a relationship implying any sort of “mystical union” in which the individual might somehow lose themselves in their union with Christ.

This, however, creates a fundamental problem about the relationship between individual and community. Bonhoeffer introduces the concept of personal being as “structurally open or closed” as a way of managing the difficulties inherent in maintaining what at first sight appears to be a major contradiction: how can individuality and community be respected without devaluing or negating one or the other?

There are two non-negotiables in Bonhoeffer’s understanding about individuality and sociality that sustain his ecclesiology: First, intentional, purposeful and responsible actions born out of will are oriented towards other wills, and second, the awareness that an individual has of him or herself - their self-consciousness - arises at the same moment as that individual is aware of existing in community.

In this ‘doxology’ which appears rather extravagant, yet contains the essence of the two points above, Bonhoeffer concludes

¹⁴² Ibid., 62.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 63.

In infinite closeness...I and You are joined together, inseparable from one another forever, resting in one another, intimately participating in one another, empathizing, sharing experiences, bearing together the general stream of interactions of spirit. *Here is where the openness of personal being becomes evident.*¹⁴⁴

But now a question emerges: Does it make sense to speak of being responsive towards each other in sociality if all seems to become one? “Does not everything that appears individual merely participate in the one, supra-individual working of spirit?”¹⁴⁵

Here again one sees Bonhoeffer’s distaste for idealism, in which the ‘openness’ of the person might simply “turn into its opposite, that of apersonal spirit...[while] the I plunges into a sea of surrounding spirit”.¹⁴⁶ He vigorously opposes any sort of thinking that threatens to vaporise the individual, concluding that the ‘openness’ of the individual now demands a certain sense of ‘closedness’, so that we are never forced to “give up the idea of the I-You relation.” If we were to do this, it would have disastrous consequences for the nature of Christian community.

Committed as he was to attributing equal weight and value to social and personal being, Bonhoeffer asks, “What is the meaning of community as a metaphysical unit in relation to the individual person?” He ends up ‘entertaining’ the idea that there could be what he calls an “*individual* collective person in which the individual participates – one that transcends all individuals but would be incomprehensible without the correlate of personal, individual being.”¹⁴⁷ This makes sense when Bonhoeffer goes on to say that a person is born out of community, while the collective person is born along with the individual person.

Here is Bonhoeffer’s theological reflection;

God does not think of people as isolated individual beings, but in a natural state of communication with other human beings...God does not desire a history of individual human beings, but the history of the human *community*. However, God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of *human beings*. In God’s eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 77.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 79-80.

This delicately balanced arrangement that holds individuality and community without one destroying or becoming detached from the other, along with the issue of unmediated human community, will be addressed by Bonhoeffer within the Preachers' Seminary at Finkenwalde. Here he will invoke the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who as the Life of the new humanity stands between, mediating the relationship and maintaining the characteristic "being with one another" and the "active being for one another", "which are the constitutive social acts of the *Liebesgemeinschaft*"¹⁴⁹ - the community of love.

Personhood

I have proposed that Bonhoeffer introduced the concept of boundary or *Grenze*¹⁵⁰ which contains the meanings of 'limit' or 'boundary' as the theological category that guarantees and protects individuality, identity, personhood and, paradoxically, community. The community that interested Bonhoeffer, was of course the church, the redeemed community of the collective person, "Christ-existing as church-community, the new humanity in Christ. Three years later, in his 1930 inaugural lecture "The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology",¹⁵¹ Bonhoeffer paid serious attention to the issue of boundary and revelation in the context of "what it means to be a human being" by traversing "the most recent philosophy", and considering the proposals of Paul Tillich and Eberhard Grisebach.¹⁵² Tillich writes that "...the person comes to his essence only where, standing at his boundary [Grenze], he experiences the inbreaking of the infinite",¹⁵³ while Grisebach, Bonhoeffer says, seems "to have the most incisive articulation of the recognition that the person can understand himself only on the basis of his boundaries...in contrast to all human self-understanding from the perspective of immanent possibilities" but, who "only by absolutizing the You in the place of the I and

¹⁴⁹ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 58.

¹⁵⁰ Throughout the DBWE edition of the Bonhoeffer corpus, *Grenze* is usually translated as "limit" - as a limit that is not to be challenged or as a restriction that is to be observed for one's well-being. When used with other spatial terms, *Grenze*, may be translated as "boundary" where it may "describe the line of demarcation between two entities or the limits on those entities as they encounter this boundary." (See *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis, 1-3*, 85 f.15, and *Berlin 1932-1933*, 264. f.2.)

¹⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 389-408

¹⁵² Eberhard Grisebach (1880-1945) - German philosopher and educator who held positions in the universities at Jena and Zurich, where he was Professor of Philosophy and Pedagogy.

¹⁵³ Cited in Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 397.

attributing to it a status belonging only to God...remains master (of himself and) of the other person as well.”¹⁵⁴

Whichever way the philosophers turn, Bonhoeffer suggests, they will always be trapped. For in philosophy, as the philosophers draw their own boundaries, “the question about the human being is ultimately always posed such that the human being himself finds the answer, because that answer is already contained in the question...The human being understands himself on the basis of his possibilities in self-reflection, meaning further that he understands himself only in connection with his works.”¹⁵⁵ All of which Bonhoeffer sees as the “thinking of the *cor curvum in se*”, and for that reason, fruitless. “If the question about the human being is to be posed seriously, it can be so only where the human being is before God...(and) here the question about the human being becomes serious precisely because it no longer includes its own answer.” But that in itself is not enough, for “If the human being is to get an answer to the question about the human, to the question he not only raises but is himself, then he must be torn completely out of his inversion into himself and be directed to that which is absolutely exterior to his own existence.”¹⁵⁶ For Bonhoeffer, the concept of possibility, of establishing oneself before God from within one’s own limits, itself a form of semi-Pelagianism, has no place in theology.

The concept of boundary then is summed up: the boundary is not in the form of some extant thing that constitutes a boundary between “two manners-of-being”, it is one between persons; it is determined by the notions of sin and holiness; and the theme of theology is the crossing of this boundary by God, namely forgiveness of sins and sanctification. And most importantly, “the theological concept of boundary is determined not through the rational stasis of the concept of possibility but rather through the dynamic reality of God.”¹⁵⁷ So the “children of mercy” (Luther) can only be known “from within the Christ who exists as church-community, from within his word that supports the church-

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 398-99. The other philosophers Bonhoeffer refers to in his lecture are Max Scheler (1874-1928) German philosopher and Professor of Philosophy at Cologne and Frankfurt; and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) Professor of Philosophy at Marburg and Freiburg.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 399.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 400-02.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 404-05.

community and without which that church-community does not exist.”¹⁵⁸ Thus do boundary and revelation exist.

Personhood in the new community

The personhood of the members of this new community is grounded in and shaped by Christ and the church-community, and the following things can now be said.

1. To be a Christian is to be human and to be human “is to be a person before God.”¹⁵⁹ To participate in the death and resurrection of Christ is to become human and Bonhoeffer offers the Pauline notion that “it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20) as a radical statement about what it means to live in and before God and to be human.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, and reflecting his total commitment to the connectedness of person and community, Bonhoeffer indicates that he will use the term “‘*Christian concept of person*’...for the concept of person that is constitutive for the concept of Christian community and is presupposed by it.”¹⁶¹
2. Personhood depends upon fundamental separateness and difference. Because of this uniqueness, personhood is to be borne with a sense of ‘solitude’. This is because no one person can know the other, “but can only acknowledge and ‘believe’ in the other.”¹⁶²
3. “Personal being is fundamentally indissoluble”.¹⁶³ For Bonhoeffer, this is an ethical personhood, a personhood that “is neither a psychologically comprehensible fact nor an epistemological necessity,”¹⁶⁴ since people stand in complete isolation in relation to each other and “person” arises only in relation to another. The “experience of ethical solidarity is based upon the utmost singularity of the person, so that even in the awareness of the closest solidarity, the ontic-ethical separateness

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 407.

¹⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 4.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 136 f.29.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶² Ibid., 54.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 203.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 54.

of individual persons caused by sin can never end nor disappear from consciousness. One cannot avoid the boundaries of the self.”¹⁶⁵

4. The idea of “personal identity” does not appear to play a large role in Bonhoeffer’s thinking; instead, the notion of “personal being” is central to his logic of self-hood.¹⁶⁶ Why might this be? In another context, Miroslav Volf notes Wolfhart Pannenberg’s suggestion that the root of sin may lie deep inside humankind’s desire for identity, “the instinctive will to be oneself, that is written into the very structure of ourselves. Though essentially healthy, the will to be oneself carries within it the germ of its own illness. Pannenberg describes the germ as the tendency of the self ‘in fact [to] become the infinite basis and reference point for all objects, thus usurping the place of God.’”¹⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer will say in the 1933 Summer lectures on Christology that the Christological question is fundamentally an ontological one since the personal structure of being is complete in the historical Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer is describing a new ‘order’ of person whose very being is re-described by Jesus and whose being shares in the structure of the Messianic event as a result of having been pulled into the reshaping experience of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and of community out of which this new awareness of personhood has grown and in which it is nurtured and matures. This is personhood redeemed; life the way it was meant to be.¹⁶⁸
5. Personhood shows social vitality when every single, separate person in community carries “their individual viewpoints to the limit...”¹⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer makes an interesting point about individuality. In order to maintain social vitality, he says, we must look to Galatians, where “The decisive passages in the New Testament do not say: *one* theology and *one* rite, *one* opinion on all matters public and private, and *one* kind of conduct. Instead they say: *one* body and *one* Spirit, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and father of us all (Eph 4:4ff.; 1 Cor. 12:13; Rom 12:5)...this means the objective principle sovereignly establishes unity, unites the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶⁶ The subject “Identity” is not listed in the index of any of the English Edition volumes.

¹⁶⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 90.

¹⁶⁸ Personhood - or self-hood - is any person’s owned sense of (personal) being shaped by their ability to relate to others and maintained by that cluster of unique characteristics and experiences held by one person and ‘owned’ by no one else, by which that one particular person knows themselves and is recognised by others. At the core of self-hood is ‘being’ that gives a person particularity and substance.

¹⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 192.

plurality of persons into a single collective person [Gesamtperson] without obliterating either their singularity or the community of persons.”¹⁷⁰

6. Personhood is forged in self-disclosure. Bonhoeffer would later declare in his Christology lectures, “There is no access to the human person, other than the person’s decision to reveal himself. I cannot get to another person unless that person reveals himself to me. This self-revelation of one person to another, however, in reality takes place in the church of Jesus Christ, in the event of the forgiveness of sins, when one presents oneself to another as a sinner, confesses oneself to be a sinner, and receives from the other forgiveness for one’s sin.”¹⁷¹
7. Since the church is both *peccatorum communio* and *sanctorum communio* in the same moment, Bonhoeffer followed Luther who maintained that a Christian is not so in fact, but in becoming: Christians “prove their identity not in what they have become, but by always remaining in the process of becoming.”¹⁷²

What can be said by way of summary? In an article “*Christian Doctrine: I Chalcedon Revisited*”, George W Stroup writes:

What constitutes the identity of a person is a complex philosophical issue. Most recent responses to the question describe personhood not in terms of an innate nature or substance but in more dynamic categories which emphasize the interpretations given to individuals in light of their emerging history. Personal identity is a matter of conscious reflection on the relationship between past history and present projection, and, consequently, is a hermeneutical concept.¹⁷³

Although Stroup uses the concept of identity, it seems to me that this is exactly the point that Bonhoeffer is making when he suggests that concepts of being, “insofar as they are acquired from revelation, are always determined by the concepts of sin and grace, ‘Adam’ and Christ.”¹⁷⁴ The relationship between past history and present projection lies right here. “Only to faith, in revelation, do we have access to the knowledge that we are sinners in the wholeness of our being, since it is only then, by God’s word, that the wholeness of our

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 192-93.

¹⁷¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 309.

¹⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 305.

¹⁷³ George W. Stroup, “*Christian Doctrine: I Chalcedon Revisited*,” *Theology Today* XXXV, no. 1 (April) (1978): 52-64: 56.

¹⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 32.

being can be placed into the truth.”¹⁷⁵ Christian personhood, according to Bonhoeffer, is formed out of the reality of being ‘in Adam’ on the one hand, and ‘in Christ’ on the other. Quoting Luther, Bonhoeffer writes, “‘Seek yourself only in Christ and not in yourself, and you will find yourself in him eternally’. Here, the person *in se conversus* [turned in upon itself] is delivered from the attempt to remain alone – to understand itself out of itself – and is turned outwards towards Christ.”¹⁷⁶

There can be no doubt that in writing a specific, systematic, and theological account of the church as he did, and in his insistence that “the Christian concept of person is really exhibited only in sociality...(and also) that human spirit generally is possible and real only in sociality”,¹⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer is making a claim of enormous anthropological and, let it be said, psychological significance: Christian personhood and the knowledge that a Christian has of her or his own being is crafted out of the relationship that the individual sustains with Jesus Christ who, present as church-community, becomes the primary social environment in which their life is shaped into the form of Christ.¹⁷⁸

If “the human experience of identity has two elements; a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate”,¹⁷⁹ then it is not unreasonable to suggest that the experience of being a Christian has the same two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. But, it must be asked, “belonging to” what and “separate from” what? For Bonhoeffer the matrix of restored being is the church; that environment in which the being of humanity restored has its origin and in which it takes form and shape. The church is the environment within which Christians belong and within which they remain separate but not apart from one another. Individuality is prized and community is gifted as the first-fruits of the restored world. Here we find a safe, secure and necessary environment for self-formation.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 137.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 33.

¹⁷⁸ I accept Clifford J. Green's *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, as the definitive text and statement about the communal environment of the church in which individuals form and claim their restored identity.

¹⁷⁹ Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 47.

¹⁸⁰ This is what the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer was referring to when he said to his youngest sister, Susanne that the children always had their "parents to help us over every difficulty and, however far away we may be

Ecclesial community

The boundary between persons also protects community. Bonhoeffer now suggests that human community is present only where and when there are “purposeful acts of will” and that these intentional acts must be reciprocal to establish credible community. Reciprocal will, or unity of will, exists where one person in some way intends and wills the other, and is intended and willed by the other either for a pure union of persons or for some specific purpose beyond the intended person. Otherwise will, or shared energy, simply runs parallel toward a goal.¹⁸¹

In an editorial footnote,¹⁸² Clifford Green proposes that it is this intentional will that constitutes the difference between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*).¹⁸³ Societies (*Gesellschaften*) do not engage in reciprocal willing; they “do not will each other but rather a particular goal toward which all the members of the *Gesellschaft* are reaching; therefore, their wills are ‘parallel’ toward that goal - rather than ‘reciprocal’ toward each other.”¹⁸⁴

Bonhoeffer gives credit to Ferdinand Toennies (1855-1935), a representative of the predominant ‘Formal Sociology’ school of German sociology in the 1920s as has already been mentioned, for describing these two distinct forms of association in this way. His own views on the issue are reflected as he furthers his exploration of ‘community’ [*Gemeinschaft*] and notes that “the first act of affirming that one belongs to a community is usually *embedded in a concrete, living, non-formal act* such as conscious participation in the work of the community.” Such a community is a life-community since people

from them, that gives us a shameless security.” Eberhard Bethge. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*. (London: Collins, 1970) 9.

¹⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 83.

¹⁸² Ibid., 83. f.74.

¹⁸³ However, Robert Hollinger in *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*. ed M.Gottdiener. Vol. 4, Contemporary Social Theory. (Thousand Oaks. Ca: Sage Publications, 1994), 26-28, commenting on the use of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* suggests that the distinction between them is “highly problematic”. He points out that “*Gemeinschaft*” represents nostalgia and a wish to return to the Golden Age of classical Athens favoured by the Romantics. “The notion that all was wonderful in some real or imagined *Gemeinschaft*, or could be in a new one, and that things have been going downhill without one is little more than a nostalgic longing for something that never existed.” Hitler’s notion of Das Volk, “with its clear implication that strangers are like a cancer that need to be eliminated for the vitality of the community”, can be seen as a culmination of *Gemeinschaft*. Notions of a *Gesellschaft* exist in modern philosophy as well and represent the urban over the rural; “the modern city is the essence of *Gesellschaft*.”

¹⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 83. f.74.

“intended for vital and personal existence, can ‘live’ in them’.”¹⁸⁵ Societies [*Gesellschaften*] on the other hand are stripped of all that is intimately personal since their ‘structure of purpose’ lies in a contract which represents the interests of each person. So far Bonhoeffer is showing interest in the “will as determined by direction, its intentions towards purpose and meaning.”¹⁸⁶ Now another factor becomes important – the strength of the wills toward one another. Will this be a relation of force, where community is no longer possible, “*or a genuine association of authentic rule [Herrschaftsverband], (which) not only makes community possible, but in most cases realises it*”?¹⁸⁷ Not only would these be important questions for the church, but his question may well represent a growing concern for the social structures that were to emerge within Germany in the years that lay immediately ahead.

Once again however, we see Bonhoeffer’s blunt recognition of a reality that will not be evaded; community and unity of will “*only build upon the inner separateness of I and You...the person who is united with me in common intention is structurally just as separate from me as the one who is not so united. (For) between us lies the boundary of being created as individual persons.*”¹⁸⁸ Anything less than this and Bonhoeffer would have become extremely concerned. Transgressing this boundary in some sort of “mystical fusion” was to be avoided at all costs, a point of view that Miroslav Volf argues in a similar way when he writes, “surrendering the particularity of persons in order to preserve their communal aspect...is a poor exchange, for surrendering the particularity of a person means surrendering personhood itself.”¹⁸⁹

The essential issue here is Bonhoeffer’s clarity about the separateness of, and difference between, persons. Paradoxically however it is the only basis upon which the community of the church can be established for there must not be any loss of individuality, being, or personhood if there is to be true community. It is only “in the word of Christ (that) we have community with God”,¹⁹⁰ and in an important aside that will later shape his attitude to “holiness”, he notes that in spite of reciprocal willing in community, partisanship and strife

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸⁹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 182.

¹⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 173.

will occur and genuine life will reflect this in a conflict of wills”, as he follows Kant and Hobbes, "Genuine life arises only in the conflict of wills; strength unfolds only in strife."¹⁹¹

There is more to be said about the nature of the ecclesial community in the following chapters. But at this point Bonhoeffer invites a contrast with another form of social rule or social form; namely that of the *mass*.

The mass has a life but only in the present moment; it has no link with the future and no reference to the past. Here there is no social bonding of wills but rather a situation where wills simply react to stimuli; bonding is accidental and “an effective stimulus produces a necessary reaction.”¹⁹² That is all. But from Bonhoeffer’s point of view the mass represents something very dangerous: “In the mass, the boundary of personhood is lost, and the individual is no longer a person but only part of the mass, drawn into it and directed by it. The mass is a unity, however, that is not supported by the separateness of the person and thus cannot last. It is the simplest social form and creates the most powerful experiences of unity.”¹⁹³

But the mass also breeds a sense of helplessness that comes as individuals lose their own sense of being and identity within it. André Dumas makes an interesting comment in this regard: "...Nazism claimed to be the instrument of divine providence, and the helpless and fanatical masses along with the nationalistic and irresponsible middle class wanted the church to bless this instrument of providence."¹⁹⁴ Of course it was the refusal of church men and women to offer this blessing that started the movement that eventually led to the creation of the Confessing Church. And Bonhoeffer’s acute observations about the mass would become apparent as mass meetings became a potent form of eliminating individuality and bullying people into consensus within the Third Reich.

What was Bonhoeffer attempting to accomplish in his review and development of these social forms? He was placing the eschatological and Christological reality of the church into the concrete layers of the temporal world in which the church has its observable life and being, and starting to make some claims for it that could only be made in faith and from the inside. This community, he acknowledged, was distinguished from all others by

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 84-85.

¹⁹² Ibid., 93.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 93-94.

¹⁹⁴ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 71.

the nature of its being and its telos. He was describing that form of communal life that has its beginnings in the activity of a creator God and which is appointed within its own life to recreate “the connective tissue of torn-apart humanity”.¹⁹⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spatially structured ecclesiology

Act and Being

Bonhoeffer graduated in December 1927 following the successful oral defence of his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* and his Graduation Theses.¹⁹⁶ One month later he passed the first theological examination of his regional church, the Consistory of Mark Brandenburg.

Eberhard Bethge believes that a major issue was now confronting Bonhoeffer, for upon passing his church theological exams he would have to decide whether to set course within the church as a pastor or remain in the university as an academic. “His family took it for granted that he would choose the latter, where few obstacles and only friendly advancement awaited him. But his problem was not how to enter the academic world, it was how to escape it. The pulpit appealed to him more than the professor's lectern.”¹⁹⁷

In February 1928 Bonhoeffer arrived in Spain where he spent the next year working as assistant pastor amongst expatriate Germans living in Barcelona. In January 1929 he returned to the university in Berlin, eager to “read as long and as much as I wish, more

¹⁹⁵ John Webster, *Confessing God. Essays in Christian Dogmatics 2* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 160. Webster is quoting the words of Jean-Marie Tillard from his book *Eglise d'Eglises*.

¹⁹⁶ Of the eleven Graduation Theses Bonhoeffer submitted, four were related directly to the church. #2. The identification of “being in Christ” and “being in the church community” are in Paul in unresolved contradiction with his concept of Christ in heaven. #5. There is no sociological concept of the church that is not theologically based. #6. The church is to be understood as Christ ‘existing as community’ and as a collective person. And #7. In its sociological structure the church embraces in itself all possible types of social association and transcends them in the ‘community of spirit’; this rests on the fundamental social law of vicarious representation. *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*. 439-441.

¹⁹⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 96.

than to write – I have done enough writing.”¹⁹⁸ He had however, already been in touch with his former teacher, Reinhold Seeberg, about a post-doctoral dissertation; he was fascinated by epistemology and wanted to study the question of consciousness and conscience in theology, and link these issues “to several Luther citations from the major Galatians commentary.”¹⁹⁹ He also confided to his friend, Helmut Rössler, that he wished to include a section about “the problem of the child in theology”,²⁰⁰ a question that may have had its roots in his work with the Sunday School children in Grünewald parish, a class he had been teaching during the time he had been writing *Sanctorum Communio* and which he had found very demanding.²⁰¹

Bonhoeffer began work in the University as assistant to Wilhelm Lutgers, a specialist in German Idealism, and on gaining a lectureship, presented his inaugural address in July 1930 entitled “The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology”.²⁰² Also in July, his *Habilitationschrift, Act and Being* was accepted by the University and published in September. Within 18 months Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist party would be in Berlin, in power.

In *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer, aware of the growing power of the populist *völkisch* movement²⁰³ and the collapse of theological traditions based on the belief in “human rationality and moral perfectibility”,²⁰⁴ demonstrates his determination to provide for the emerging dialectical theological stream an epistemology that did justice to the unique theological category of revelation.²⁰⁵

In the Editor’s Introduction to *Act and Being*, Wayne Whitson Floyd comments;

Epistemology was to be understood in terms of the dynamics of power – humanity’s desire to have the power to make itself over in its own image, rather than God’s, and humanity’s concomitant resistance to any encounter with genuine Otherness that threatens the central, sovereign position of the human subject, the “I”. What is needed, Bonhoeffer is proposing in *Act and*

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 3.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 3.

²⁰¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, See 91-94 for an account of this experience.

²⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 389-408.

²⁰³ Wayne Whitson Floyd, “The Search for an Ethical Sacrament: From Bonhoeffer to Critical Social Theory,” *Modern Theology* 7, no. 2 (1991): 175-93 where Floyd describes the way in which the concept of *volk* was used by the Nazis.

²⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 7.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 31.

Being, is a theological epistemology, or philosophy of knowledge, capable of articulating an alternative vision of divine and human community that transcends the desire of the knower to grasp and control the object of knowledge, whether God or another human being.²⁰⁶

Bonhoeffer's project aimed to demonstrate that it was possible to sustain a relationship between the activity of thinking, and the being transcendent to that activity, the being who was "ontologically distinct from the thinking subject."²⁰⁷ This would be a confrontation with Idealism at its very core. Yet it was also intended as a "vigorous transcendental argument...[whose] concern is with the conditions of the possibility of theology's responsible thinking about Otherness"²⁰⁸ – a philosophical argument fuelled by Bonhoeffer's own deep appreciation of the traditions from which German theology had developed but which were, in his opinion, now lacking in substance and the ability to provide the church with a "conceptuality adequate to the theological category of revelation".²⁰⁹

"...It should already be apparent", Bonhoeffer wrote, "that all of theology, in its teaching concerning knowledge of God, of human beings, and of sin and grace, crucially depends on whether it begins with the concept of act or of being."²¹⁰ The experience of being human and the question of how we know what we know lies at the heart of being, and whenever and wherever "the capacity of human beings to know is attacked, nothing less than being human itself is at stake..."²¹¹

This demonstrates just how seriously Bonhoeffer took the issue of epistemology on behalf of the church. With its focus on these same questions, the Enlightenment had brought its own world of epistemological confidence and had sought to replace the diminishing

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 11.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 8.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 29-30.

²¹¹ Ibid., 30. The 'modern' debate about act and being had been running since the time of Thales, regarded as the first Greek philosopher, born in the mid 620's BCE. Is there an essential essence of things, Thales had asked and if so what might it be? His answer was "Yes, there is", and for Thales "this nature was a single material substance, water." Since then, through Heraclitus, for whom everything was in the process of flux and becoming reflecting continuous change, and Parmenides, who had maintained that everything simply is, the debate about act and being had continued by way of Aristotle and Aquinas, on the one hand, and Plato and Augustine on the other. In post-enlightenment Europe the debate had been shaped by Georg W. F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant and influenced in 1920's Germany by Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger.

certitude and dominance, previously held and offered by the medieval church, with that of the so-called emerging, objective scientific method.²¹²

As a result of the exposure in his own family to truth, fairly and honestly researched and understood, Bonhoeffer was committed to establishing the certitude of faith in Jesus, while at the same time hoping for a resolution of the divide between believing and knowing which he had heard Karl Heim discuss in Tübingen. For Bonhoeffer this was a “pastoral issue” in that the question of act and being took the form of a dialectic between the *actus directus* (the act of believing and trusting) and the *actus reflectus* (the act of knowing and reflecting on one’s faith).²¹³ Bonhoeffer remained cautious of the *actus reflectus*, a process in which “consciousness has the power to become its own object of attention, conscious of its own self in reflection.”²¹⁴ Bonhoeffer also takes the precaution of reminding his readers and listeners – as he does on other occasions throughout his corpus – that both the *actus directus* and the *actus reflectus* are to be taken as theological interpretations of our behaviour and not psychological ones.²¹⁵

Act and Being was Bonhoeffer’s attempt to craft a form of thinking that emerges out of the life of obedient discipleship and theological reflection of the church which, he argued, is the actual community in which God in Christ unifies act and being,²¹⁶ or perhaps more accurately, the only community in which act and being can be resolved. This argument is not dissimilar to the one Colin Gunton suggests when he asks “Can we know the essence or being of God? Yes we can...God in his being can be known only by God in his acting in

²¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation. The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 5. Brueggemann points out that Stephen Toulmin (*Cosmopolis*) and Susan Bordo (*The Flight to Objectivity*) make the case that the Cartesian development – the “new separated individual consciousness...that had no reference point outside itself” – was not a “buoyant act of imagination, but was instead a desperate manoeuvre to cope with anxiety”. Thus “objectivity” emerged as a way to fend off the ominous chaos that gripped Europe following the assassination of Henry IV of Navarre, who had been expected to bring peace to France and Europe during the European wars of the seventeenth century.

²¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 28.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

²¹⁵ In an editorial footnote in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 454 f.20, Clifford Green draws attention to the fact that “the concept of *actus directus* (in contrast to the *actus reflexus*) derives from early Protestant thinking and was suggested to Bonhoeffer by Delitzsch, *System of Biblical Theology* (1855). This substantial book has been digitized by Google and is available on-line. Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890) was a German Lutheran theologian and Hebraist. He held professorships in theology at Rostock, Erlangen and Leipzig and is well known for his translation of the New Testament into Hebrew. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Delitzsch. Accessed 28 January 2011).

²¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 109-22. Part B is entitled “The Problem of Act and Being in the Interpretation of Revelation and the Church as the Solution to the Problem”, while Section 3 is entitled, “The Church as the Unity of Act and Being”.

self-disclosure in incarnation. God is in his act of disclosure.”²¹⁷ But for Bonhoeffer, the ‘solution’ would be a corporate one. John Phillips, in arguing that the thesis of *Act and Being* is preliminary to everything that Bonhoeffer wrote about in *Sanctorum Communio*, states it with determination, “A Christian conception of revelation must, by definition, be an ecclesiological statement.”²¹⁸

Certain that the concept of revelation “has to be thought about within the concreteness of the conception of the church”, Bonhoeffer proposed that only here a consideration of act and being could occur since the church was

...the only sociological category in which interpretation of act and being meet and are drawn into one. The dialectic of act and being is understood theologically as the dialectic of faith and the congregation of Christ...The theological concepts of object and knowledge are shown to be determined by the sociological concept of the person and must be recast accordingly...This entire study is an attempt to unify the concern of true transcendentalism and the concern of true ontology in an ‘ecclesiological form of thinking’.²¹⁹

In saying this Bonhoeffer redefined the meaning of “transcendentalism” and “ontology” in the following ways. Given the reality that God’s revelation has become knowable in Christ, God can never be objectified but

is only in the act of believing. In ‘my’ believing the Holy Spirit attests itself. That this is so is not a matter of demonstrable fact...It is true ‘existentially’ [‘existentiell’], that is to say, in the situation of being encountered. Accordingly, my knowledge of God depends in each instance on whether God has known me in Christ (1 Cor.13:12; Gal.4:9) on whether God is effecting faith in Christ in me.²²⁰

We cannot place ourselves into the truth, we can only believe. This is the “cognition of revelation.”²²¹ Clifford Green notes that Bonhoeffer’s phenomenology of religion is “impressively similar to Freud’s description [of religion]...[and] psychologically documents Bonhoeffer’s view that ‘religion’ offers a spurious transcendence...[that] has no independent, transforming power.”²²² The only transcendence-existence question that

²¹⁷ Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being. Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 36.

²¹⁸ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 57.

²¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 31-32.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²²² Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 297.

now matters “is the question of the *other person* and their claim, of the *other* being, of the *other* authority. It is the question of *love for the neighbour*.”²²³ Transcendence is this worldly, it is socio-ethical, and it has to do with the claim of the other on me.

Similarly, Bonhoeffer had redescribed the nature of being in a social manner and approached ontology, not as a metaphysics as Aristotle had done, but rather “as a phenomenology of the being of God and human beings in the social relationships of historical, human communities...stress[ing] the necessity for concrete anthropological concepts in theology (being ‘in Adam’ or ‘in Christ’) against formal and neutral interpretations. More significantly still, he perceived the being of Christ with the same concreteness: his freedom is that freedom in which his *being is with and for* humanity; this formulation was to lead to the Christological formula, “Christ, the man for others,” so crucial in the prison letters.”²²⁴

The *cor curvum in se* (The heart turned in upon itself)

Bonhoeffer’s starting point was Martin Luther’s *cor curvum in se*, the “heart turned in upon itself.”²²⁵ In starting here Bonhoeffer takes issue with Seeberg’s religious *a priori* and Holl’s idea of ‘conscience’. He attacks, overturns and disposes of both concepts. “The conscience and repentance of human beings in Adam are their final grasp at themselves, the confirmation and justification of their self-glorifying solitude.”²²⁶ And in passing it should be noted that Bonhoeffer was deeply concerned over something he believed both Barth and Bultmann were doing; that is “introducing into faith a dangerous element of permanent reflection” which could be fatal in that it could invade anyone’s thinking only to establish ego once again, thus “establish(ing) (its) secret domination.”²²⁷

²²³ Ibid., 227.

²²⁴ Ibid., 102. “Theology must always speak in terms of God’s concrete way of being. God is the personal name of One whose being is always ‘being-just’, ‘being-holy’, ‘being-love. 86.f.65.

²²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 58.

²²⁶ Ibid., 139.

²²⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 134.

Throughout *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer is talking with the philosophers, whom he judged guilty of the original sin of confinement in the self. The central, sovereign position of the "I" was already established in German Idealism through the belief that the properties of an object or a being were never to be thought of as something-in-themselves, but were always and only 'available' as they were perceived by the perceiver. They were not something the other possessed in themselves, distinct and separate from the experience of them.

Bonhoeffer also knew that thinking "is as little able as good works to deliver the *cor curvum in se* from itself."²²⁸ It was this burning desire to see theology delivered from the rule of "I" that drove his quest to reconcile theologies of act and theologies of being; "...is it merely a coincidence", he asked, "that the most profound German philosophy resulted in the enclosing of the all in the I?", a state of affairs he described as "the world of the 'I' without grace".²²⁹

The *cor curvum in se* would push him toward the mystery of God in revelatory self-disclosure, and Karl Barth whom Bonhoeffer met for the first time in the summer of 1931, provided support and legitimacy for this. Bonhoeffer's use of Luther's *cor curvum in se* would also lead him eventually to the clear conviction that "concepts of being ...are always determined by the concepts of sin and grace, 'Adam' and Christ".²³⁰ The acceptance of this belief required a certain humility on the part of mankind and in the end, grateful acceptance of *sola gratia*, the only possible 'solution' that would free life from entrapment to self-centeredness and self-gratification, both of them code words for self-delusional ego-centricity.²³¹

In 1931 Bonhoeffer gave a lecture at Union Theological Seminary in New York entitled "Concerning the Christian Idea of God"²³² in which, amongst other things, he addresses the "problem of a theological theory of knowledge."

²²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 80.

²²⁹ Ibid., 80.

²³⁰ Ibid., 32.

²³¹ The Anglican Order for Evening Prayer captures and expresses the essence of the *cor curvum in se* beautifully in the following words from the prayer of general confession. " Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against the holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us..."

²³² Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 451-61.

Philosophical thinking can never extend beyond this category [of possibility]...The reason for this is that thinking is in itself a closed circle, with the ego as the centre...Thinking always means system and the system excludes the reality. Therefore, it has to call itself the ultimate reality, and in this system the thinking ego rules.

It follows that not only the other man but also God is subordinated to the ego. This is the strict consequence of the idealistic and, as far as I see, of all exact philosophical thought which tries to be autonomous. This fact of the captivity of human thinking in itself...[and] its inevitable autocracy and self-glorification...can be interpreted theologically as the corruption of the mind, which is caused by the first fall.²³³

His unyielding belief in the matter of the heart turned in upon itself becomes the springboard for a sophisticated engagement with the philosophers and the line that he had drawn in the sand in *Act and Being* about human autonomy would guide him throughout the rest of his life.

In *Act and Being* the boundary changes

In *Sanctorum Communio* 'boundary' was related to the creation and maintenance of selfhood and community: in *Act and Being* the spatial reference of 'boundary' is associated with Christ. Preceding this is Bonhoeffer's introduction to *Dasein*, the word taken from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* published in 1927, and used to represent 'human existence' or 'being' in the most basic yet profound sense as the "mode of human beings as distinct from other existing things".²³⁴ Though humans-in-their-being may consider themselves to be the "world's reference point", and though that world "has existence only in reference to thought", Bonhoeffer's problem - he calls it a "profound contradiction" -

is that 'I' cannot be thought because it is the precondition for thinking itself...thinking is the boundary of existence out of which human beings live; it is a boundary in that...human existence is always out in front of human beings, but already behind them every time *Dasein* sets out to understand its own existence as *Dasein*.²³⁵

²³³ Ibid., 452-53.

²³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 35. f.4.

²³⁵ Ibid., 38.

Thinking lies entrapped and imprisoned within itself pointing Bonhoeffer towards Luther's words; "*ratio in se ipsam incurva [reason turned in upon itself]*".²³⁶ So the boundaries of reason evaporate and leave us with an illusion: "...There are for reason essentially no boundaries for even the boundaries are thought away until they are no longer genuine boundaries. Reason can only be brought into obedience: the obedience of speculation, the obedience to Christ, or however else one may name it. There is a boundary only for a concrete human being in its entirety, and this boundary is called *Christ*."²³⁷

What does this mean? Boundaries normally indicate the limits of space or the spaces of beings or groups of beings in such a way that difference appears on both sides of the boundary. This would be the case whether the word and concept was used theologically or concretely and geographically. Bonhoeffer's statement points to Christ who is the boundary (marker) between two realities. On one side of the boundary is the world of illusion where the 'I' evaporates as it is trapped in the world and where it cannot exist independently of thinking, and on the other side, a world shaped by "a believing way of knowing".²³⁸ Christ is the centre of this "believing way of knowing" in the *actus directus* and Christ is the boundary of this "way of knowing" in the *actus reflectus*. By moving Christ to the centre, Bonhoeffer announces his intention to move beyond the Protestantism of the time in order to avoid the confusions that go hand in hand whenever an understanding of 'God' is immersed too deeply in the philosophical and cultural traditions of the day or age. He is laying the groundwork that will allow him to make a "contribution to the understanding of the problem of act and being within the concept of revelation."²³⁹ He is also, as Dumas points out, asserting what he sees as the "determining principle of theology, i.e., that all speech is based on reality rather than on possibility" thus aligning himself with Karl Barth, rather than Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. "Thus", concludes

²³⁶ Ibid., 41.

²³⁷ Ibid., 45. This lengthy and densely packed argument is the first section of Part A entitled "The Transcendental Attempt". Here Bonhoeffer attempts to resolve the "problem of Act and Being". In the middle of this tortured argument Bonhoeffer makes an interesting allusion to the close connection between Idealism and Materialism. "Idealism is neighbour to materialism (Hegel - Marx)" 41. This is the same connection that Keith Ward makes in his book *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*. (Oxford: One World, 2002).152-58.

²³⁸ Ibid., 126.

²³⁹ Ibid., 79.

Dumas, "philosophy's boundary is not defined by something that finally completes it, but by the action of Jesus Christ that precedes it."²⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer's review of the ontological attempt to resolve the act and being issue²⁴¹ leads him to the conclusion that "*Per se*, a philosophy can concede no room for revelation unless it knows revelation and confesses itself to be Christian philosophy in full recognition that the place it wanted to usurp *is* already occupied by another – namely, by Christ."²⁴²

Thus the question of knowledge about God and the certainty of that knowing grew out of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the state of the heart of humankind and the place of the Christian community. Epistemology was reinstated as a result of belief in Christ and knowledge about God; the reuniting of act and being, and believing and knowing that come together in the person of Christ. This belief in Christ will be significantly sharpened in *Discipleship*, where Bonhoeffer will talk directly about obedience to the call of Christ.²⁴³

"A believing way of knowing", which he called existential knowing, was part of Bonhoeffer's resolution to the issue of the theological doctrine of human self-understanding. And in order to complete the resolution of act and being, he proposed "ecclesial knowing" – the theological knowing that is a function of the church. Its object is 'all the happenings held in remembrance in the Christian community of faith: in the Bible; in preaching and sacrament, prayer, confession and in the word of the person of Christ which is preserved as something that exists in the historical church.'²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 103-04.

²⁴¹ In Section 2 of Part A, (The Ontological Attempt) Bonhoeffer reviews the positions of G.W.F. Hegel, Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, and the German Jesuit, Eric Przywara (1889-1972).

²⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 78.

²⁴³ Charles Marsh (*Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*) points out that in the "Marcan account of Levi's decision to follow Christ...the only claim the text makes about discipleship is: follow Christ..." (107). In this 'simple' yet profound command and response "an 'abstract Christology', a christology which is oriented in a system of doctrine or general religious knowledge is placed in contrast to a discipleship bound to Christ...knowing Christ is following Christ..." In this statement Marsh makes the link between being and act in behavioural terms.

²⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 130.

‘Being in Adam’ and ‘Being in Christ’

Bonhoeffer now attempts a solution to the act/being ‘problem’ by interpreting revelation, first in terms of the concept of act, and then in terms of the concept of being, and finally by proposing the corporate church *as* the unity of God’s act and God’s being.²⁴⁵ André Dumas put it like this: “The church acts as a regulative principle to end the ongoing trench-warfare between the beyond and the within – between advocates of *act*...(or, as we would say, the event), and the advocates of *being* (or as we would say, the institution).”²⁴⁶ The use of the preposition “*in*” finds its fullness and completion in the phrases “being *in* Adam” and “being *in* Christ” where the word “being” is used as both noun and verb.

Having torn themselves apart from community with God and others, men and women in their essence have their being “in Adam”. Having turned God “into a religious object”, humans have become their own “creator and lord”. In their knowing, they begin and end with themselves. Clinging to themselves, at their very limits, any true knowledge that they might have of themselves lies “imprisoned in untruth” as they seek in repentance or active contrition to find a way out of themselves. It does not work. “In Adam” represents the bankrupt ontological end-point because, it is assumed, the only way out is by appeal to conscience. That too is a dead-end, for it is merely a person bargaining with themselves. Bonhoeffer argues that the attempt to understand oneself “from oneself remains in sin, (therefore) the designation of human existence in Adam as the being-of-a-sinner is correct at the formal ontological level...”²⁴⁷

The solution to this dilemma of human beings being encapsulated in themselves comes only as humanity re-orient its gaze towards Christ. This escaping from the power of the I into the power of Christ is to be placed *into* truth by Christ which in turn means to die to self. So a person “placed *into* truth by Christ” is no longer turned inwards, is freed from the attempt to understand him or herself out of that same self, and now lives “in the contemplation of Christ.” Here we find what Bonhoeffer calls the “original freedom as God’s creature” since there is no longer any need to be creator and creature at the same

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 81-135.

²⁴⁶ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 97.

²⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 137-50.

moment. Life is now to be lived in disregard of self and “wholly in contemplation of Christ.”²⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer concludes:

In the Christian doctrine of being, all metaphysical ideas of eternity and time, being and becoming, living and dying, essence and appearance must be measured against the concepts of the being of sin and the being of grace or else must be developed anew in the light of them. For only on this basis was it also possible to define the being of sin, grace, and revelation as a being that was described as the unity of act and being, as personal being.²⁴⁹

He is, of course, talking about Jesus Christ in whose being, the being of sin and of grace and of revelation is fully defined. Using Martin Luther’s words, “Seek yourself only in Christ and not in yourself, and you will find yourself in him eternally”,²⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer points to the being who is the initiator of faith and to the act of believing in Jesus Christ, in whose being act and being belong together.

Summary

By July 1930 Bonhoeffer had completed and submitted *Act and Being*. Beyond the academy, disruptive forces were unleashing increasing uncertainty into the fabric of German society; the Great Depression which began late in 1929 was biting deeply into Germany’s fragile post war economy and a combination of international debt, unmanageable reparation payments required by the Treaty of Versailles, and maintenance of the internal welfare system would bring about an eventual collapse of the unstable relationship between labour and capital.²⁵¹ Moses notes that “To all intents and purposes parliamentary government had ceased in Germany from 1930 because no consensus could be arrived at as to how to manage the economy.”²⁵² None of the three chancellors appointed by the President following the 1930 elections until January 1933 were able to stabilize the situation. Adolf Hitler would be installed as Chancellor in January 1933 with a “brief to return the economy to a ‘healthy’ footing.”²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 150-61.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 151.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 149. Bonhoeffer is quoting from a 1519 sermon of Luther, “A Sermon on Preparing to Die”.

²⁵¹ John A. Moses, “Bonhoeffer’s Germany: The Political Context,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3-21.

²⁵² Ibid., 15.

²⁵³ Ibid.

One year after submitting his *Habilitationschrift* and delivering his inaugural lecture, Bonhoeffer would be back in Germany to take up a teaching position in Berlin following a year of post-graduate study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Now life would take more than a few unexpected turns, but his commitment to the church about which he had written in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* would not falter.

This is the ecclesiology “with which [Bonhoeffer] began his theological career so passionately.”²⁵⁴ It had been written for the university, essentially using “the conceptual language of others”,²⁵⁵ yet his ecclesiology of the eschatological church stretching from the beginning until the end of time had a breadth and elegance about it. It had theological shape and substance yet it still had to be ‘tested’ and time would tell whether it would gain wide acceptance amongst Christians in Germany, and whether it would shape and sustain the life of the German church under increasingly difficult circumstances.

The shape of the concrete, historical church and the form of its social geometry begins to appear. This community of Christ shall have a name; it shall be called *sanctorum communio* and at the same time *peccatorum communio*. It shall bear witness to life lived within the boundaries of death and resurrection, and within its own life it shall recognize that people cannot be avoided or evaded, for the ‘barrier’ makes it clear that the other person’s demand on them is unavoidable and an ethical response mandatory. Within this community it is more important to know and respond to the other, than it is to claim to know something about that person. Bonhoeffer believed that epistemology should never get in the way of ethics.

Within this community the boundary of personhood protects the unique singularity of every person while at exactly the same moment necessitates the existence of the community within which life is lived, not in isolation but in community with one another. This is the renewed community of humanity shaped and structured by Jesus Christ into which and into whom we are incorporated solely by the grace of God.

²⁵⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

The church knows of a present history in which men and women had their being in Adam, limited and constricted by the enclosedness of their I, and of one in which men and women may be placed *into* the truth by Christ, the centre and boundary of faith, where men and women may have their being in Christ and find their original freedom as God's creatures. Now "the human being sees his own unity grounded in God's word directed toward him, a word whose content is judgement and grace. Here the human being recognizes that his own essence is neither to be *capax* nor *incapax infiniti*, that his essence is not his own possibilities but rather is determined by the statements, 'You are under sin,' or 'You are under grace'." ²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 405.

Chapter Two

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spatially structured ecclesiology in *Creation and Fall* and the lectures on Christology

'Who is at the Centre'?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been back in Berlin for a year following his Sloan Scholarship at Union Theological Seminary in New York, when a confluence of factors brought about a major crisis for the young theologian who was still only 27. This crisis had been in the making for some time.

"Then something happened," he wrote, "something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible...I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it - but I had not yet become a Christian..."¹ This oft-quoted portion of a 1936 letter written "to an acquaintance to whom he was close for a time"² - though in contrast to Bethge's restraint, Clifford Green bluntly calls this person "a girlfriend"³ - refers to the tectonic shift that occurred for Bonhoeffer at some stage during 1932.

Much later, in April 1944 in a letter to Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer confesses that while he has learned a great deal during his time in prison, he does not think he has changed very much throughout his life. Then, speculating about the influences on his life that have led to significant, if not profound change, he can identify only two; "my first impressions abroad, and under the first conscious influence of Papa's personality. It was then that a turning

¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 205.

² *Ibid.*, 204

³ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 141. The letter was written to Elisabeth Zinn. Bethge says that Zinn was a "distant cousin" (*Bonhoeffer. A Biography*.137), while Keith Clements (*Bonhoeffer and Britain*, 66) says she was Bonhoeffer's second cousin and his fiancée.

from the phraseological to the real ensued.”⁴ It is this phrase, “from the phraseological to the real”, that is taken to describe Bonhoeffer’s major crisis.

In spite of a promising start in his own “Personal Recollection”,⁵ Bonhoeffer’s cousin Hans Christoph von Hase, fails to throw much light on the meaning or content of Bonhoeffer’s phrase “from the phraseological to the real”. Von Hase proposes that the years between 1928 when Bonhoeffer went to Barcelona, and 1930/31 when he was in New York, were an “incubation period” during which four major concerns were highlighted for Bonhoeffer - who was still only in his mid-20’s – “(1) understanding the wrath of God, (2) comprehending the reality of God’s gracious presence in the church (*Sanctorum Communio*), (3) work(ing) for peace, and (4) live with death and renounce marriage in anticipation of coming persecution.”⁶ von Hase does not succeed in showing how the convergence of these ideas led to what Bonhoeffer, by his own reckoning, regarded as a major shift in his view of the world worthy of the description “becoming a Christian”.

Clifford Green makes a more compelling case.⁷ In 1932 Bonhoeffer realised that, to date, his life had been driven by “ambition” by turning “the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself” and that he had never made a faith commitment to Jesus or his church; to use his own words, he “had not yet become a Christian”. This phrase had a rich blend of meaning for Bonhoeffer. He had been moved by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and won over by an understanding of costly grace and radical obedience to Jesus. He had also made a deep discovery that “the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church”,⁸ and that that belonging imposed a sacrificial obligation upon the believer.

Green suggests that some time during the summer of 1932, Bonhoeffer was faced with the need to resolve the issue of his own over-powered ego and his ego-centric life, issues that Green argues mark the logic, though of necessity an autobiographical logic, of *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*.⁹ That Bonhoeffer was “a highly autobiographical thinker”

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 358. (Letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 22 1944).

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 591-604. “Turning Away from the Phraseological to the Real. A Personal Recollection.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 595.

⁷ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 105-84.

⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 205.

⁹ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 124-26.

is underlined by John de Gruchy. Quoting Clifford Green, he writes, “But significantly, Bonhoeffer’s autobiography ‘was not the experience of an isolated individualist but, like the basic pattern of his thinking, [was] intrinsically social’”.¹⁰

In a comprehensive review of the logic of sociality developed by Bonhoeffer in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, Green concludes that Bonhoeffer’s life issue was “the power of (his) dominating and accomplished ego...and the attempt of the self ‘to replace the missing other’ (that) is the consequence of the isolation of the self in a violated sociality.”¹¹ Green goes on to argue that the heart of the soteriological problem for Bonhoeffer, which he discovered alive and well within himself, was “power over others and the loss of mutual love in community.”¹²

Bonhoeffer prayed “to God that (it) will never happen again” and admits that he “had never prayed, or prayed only very little. For all my loneliness, I was quite pleased with myself. Then the Bible, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from that. Since then everything has changed.” It was, Bonhoeffer reports, “a great liberation”.¹³

This acknowledgement marks a turning point of enormous significance, for it charts the shift from theology as a “more academic matter”, as he mentioned to his brother Karl-Friedrich in a January 1935 letter.

It may be that in many things I seem to you rather fanatical and crazy. I myself am sometimes afraid of this. But I know that, if I became ‘more reasonable’, I would have to hang up my entire theology the next day for the sake of honesty. When I first began, I imagined it quite otherwise - perhaps a more academic matter. Now something very different has come of it. I now believe that I know at last that I am at least on the right track - for the first time in my life....I believe I know that inwardly I shall be clear and honest with myself only if I truly begin to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. That is the only source of power capable of blowing up the whole phantasmagoria [i.e., the Nazi illusion] once and for all...¹⁴

¹⁰ John W. de Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Witness to Jesus Christ* (London: Collins, 1988), 1. Here de Gruchy is quoting Clifford Green from Green’s “Introduction to the English Edition” of Bonhoeffer’s *Fiction from Prison. Gathering up the Past*, ix. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.

¹¹ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 124.

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 205.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

Once, an observer of the church, Bonhoeffer is now a participant and his “supreme concern” is with “the revival of the church and of the ministry...”,¹⁵ a startling comment for its comprehensive commitment to the health and re-formation of the Church which recalls the ‘boast’ made as a young adolescent in response to his siblings’ best efforts to dissuade him from life as a theologian; “Then I shall reform it [the church].”¹⁶

Bonhoeffer’s life from here on cannot be understood unless the magnitude of this shift is appreciated. But how would his becoming a Christian shape and re-shape his ecclesiology?

Creation and Fall

At twelve noon on Monday January 30 1933 at the Reichstag on Platz der Republik, Berlin, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.¹⁷ The Third Reich was born and within six months the church elections mandated by Hitler would change the ecclesiastical landscape forever. The “crisis of 1933”¹⁸ to which Bonhoeffer refers and his new found allegiance to Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount will have profound consequences for him and his understanding of the Church.

The morning after Hitler’s installation as Chancellor, Tuesday January 31 1933, at the University of Berlin, students meet for Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s continuing, regular early morning lecture series and immerse themselves in the meaning of the birth of the universe.¹⁹ In an almost certainly serendipitous juxtaposition of historical event and lecture series, Bonhoeffer’s concern this day, the 12th lecture in the ‘*Schöpfung und Sünde*’

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ In his second term as President of the Weimar Republic, Paul von Hindenburg did what he could to oppose the Nazi Party’s rise to power, but was eventually obliged to appoint Adolf Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933. In March he signed the Enabling Act of 1933 which gave special powers to Hitler’s government. Hindenburg died the next year, after which Hitler declared the office of President vacant and made himself the “Führer” - the combination of both president and chancellor.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_von_Hindenburg (Accessed 29.01.2011)

¹⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 205.

¹⁹ In an arresting comment, Larry Rasmussen, Editor of Volume 12 in the DBWE edition (Bonhoeffer. *Berlin 1932-1933*, 4) notes that Bonhoeffer’s Berlin lectures were offered at precisely the same time that the majority of students were demanding “a ‘Germanic’ education and flocked to Hitler’s racial-ethnic (*völkisch*) community of new promise and national rebirth.”

series,²⁰ was with "The Pious Question": "Did God really say"? (Gen 3:1-3). Bonhoeffer described this as "the utterly godless question" because "the question already contains the wrong answer. It is that with this question the basic attitude of the creature toward the Creator comes under attack. It requires humankind to sit in judgement on God's word instead of simply listening to it and doing it."²¹ In this time of great uncertainty Bonhoeffer urges the students to "focus their attention on the word of God as the word of truth in a time of turmoil."²²

There can be no doubt that at the beginning of a period in the life of the German people that Bonhoeffer correctly recognised as one that would be marked by chaos and darkness, he was anxious for his students to take the Word that had been spoken at the beginning of time seriously, for it was that same Word that had turned chaos into ordered life and darkness into life sustaining-light. We cannot know what premonitions, if any, Bonhoeffer might have had about how the word of the new Führer might shape and form the life of the nation in the years that lay ahead.

And where was the true 'Word' to be found in that environment that would become increasingly dark and chaotic? His answer, from the Christology lectures, would be that the 'Word' was to be found wherever the church was found. "The God-human who is present in time and space is veiled in the *ὁμοίωμα σαρκός* (Rom. 8:3)²³...(and) is present in his person to the church as Word, sacrament, and church-community."²⁴

Bonhoeffer's writings, sermons and lectures were now providing an alternative vision of how life might be imagined and lived over against the version of life now brought into being by the National Socialists to which by and large, the emergent *Deutschen Christen* consented. The church that Bonhoeffer had construed, spoken, preached and written about would now begin to suffer, and the unfolding events "would force Bonhoeffer's life onto a different course...(as) it became increasingly clear that academic discussion must give way to action. It was imperative to relinquish the shelter and privilege of the academic rostrum

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 108. f.12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 107-08.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

²³ The phrase *ὁμοίωμα σαρκός* literally means "likeness of flesh" and not Paul's full phrase in Romans 8:3 "in the likeness of human flesh." It is unclear whether the Greek is student shorthand or Bonhoeffer's intention. See Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 313. f.34 and 356 f.171 where the editors make a similar point.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 313 & 15.

as well as the protected 'rights and duties of the ministry' if the power of weakness were to be credible."²⁵

In the 1936 letter mentioned earlier, Bonhoeffer referred to the events that now started to unfold as the "crisis of 1933", which would become the *Kirchenkampf* that would not end until the Third Reich was overthrown. It started with Hitler's accession to the Chancellorship in January and continued with the burning of the Reichstag a month later, the emergence of the Jewish question, and the rigged church elections of July 23 1933 which "decided the question of power in the church, but not the question of truth".²⁶ This in turn provoked an attempt by Herman Sasse²⁷ and Bonhoeffer to craft the first draft of a binding confession, which became known as the Bethel Confession. This followed Martin Niemöller's²⁸ "pivotal role"²⁹ in July in encouraging members of the Young Reformation Movement, the precursor of the Pastors' Emergency League, towards this decision.

In April the Aryan clause for the reconstruction of the professional civil service was introduced by the National Socialists. The clause directed against people of Jewish origin, amongst other prohibitions, prohibited anyone who had Jewish blood or was married to a Jew to practice any ministry or hold any office within the church, since ministers were civil servants. Bonhoeffer was clear that had the clause been imposed on the German churches, it would have provoked a *status confessionis* and would have warranted a public separation from the German Church.

Following the introduction of the Aryan Clause, Niemöller and Bonhoeffer sent out a call to ministers to establish the Pastors' Emergency League. Although they did not use the words "*status confessionis*" they made the point that as a result of the Aryan Clause "a position which must be regarded as unjust is proclaimed as church law, and the confession

²⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 258.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁷ Hermann Sasse (1895 – 1976). Lutheran theologian. Sasse was initially influenced by the classical liberalism of his teachers, such as Adolf Harnack. He was an active participant in the ecumenical movement and became a vocal critic of the National Socialist Party and Germany's new chancellor, Adolf Hitler. He did not sign the 1934 Barmen Declaration.

²⁸ Martin Niemöller (1892 – 1984), Lutheran pastor and one of the founders of the Confessing Church was bitterly opposed to the Nazis' Aryan clause. He was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen (north of Berlin) and Dachau (northwest of Munich) concentration camps from 1937 to 1945 and following the war was one of the initiators of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt. He became a pacifist and anti-war activist.

²⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 297.

is violated."³⁰ It was during this turbulent period that Bonhoeffer delivered two lecture series that went to the heart of his own new life and his developing theology of the church; *Creation and Fall*,³¹ and the Lectures on Christology.³²

The style of Bonhoeffer's earlier, carefully crafted documents presented to the university to satisfy the requirements for his dissertations now gives way to the intensity of the urgent, spoken word; the academic has become "the theologian for preachers".³³ The difficult and at times obtuse constructions of *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* give way to the less complicated and compelling simplicity of the spoken word. His lectures become carefully calibrated tracts for the demanding times addressed to the church to fulfil its true calling.

The boundary at the tree of life at the centre

Spatial imagery in *Creation and Fall*

Though Bonhoeffer uses spatial imagery throughout *Creation and Fall*, it cannot be claimed that the imagery refers specifically to the theological character of the eschatological church or the spatial character of the empirical church.

However, the two accounts of the Creation are found in the "church's book" and

...therefore need to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end. In the church...the story of creation must be read in a way that begins with Christ and only then moves on toward him as its goal; indeed one can read it as a book that moves toward Christ only when one knows that Christ is the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.³⁴

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (London: Collins, 1965), 248.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Originally, lectures given to students at the University of Berlin under the title 'Creation and Sin. A Theological exposition of Genesis 1-3' in the winter semester 1932-33. The lectures were published late in 1933.

³² The 'Lectures on Christology', given in the summer semester of 1933, are reconstructed by Eberhard Bethge from notes taken by students who attended the lectures. They were published in Germany in 1960, in England under the title *Christology* in 1966, and in the USA under the title *Christ the Center*. The most recent translation is to be found in Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*. 299-360.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

Or when, in other words, the story is set within the eschatological 'boundaries' of the beginning and the end of the church's witness to Jesus Christ. John Webster elaborates this point when he writes, "The *Wissenschaftlichkeit* (or scientific nature) of exegesis is its orientation to Scripture as the church's book, that is, a text which has its place in that sphere of human life and history which is generated by God's revelation...(and) theological exegesis construes Scripture as a unified whole, and defines that coherence Christologically."³⁵

Bonhoeffer is insistent that this story be read with focussed Christological intent, a point he elaborates when he writes,

The attempt...to take a gigantic leap back into the world of the lost beginning, to seek to know for ourselves what humankind was like in its original state and to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created is hopeless. It fails to recognize that it is only from Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind...Only in the middle, as those who live from Christ, do we know about the beginning.³⁶

Which of course, immediately put Bonhoeffer on a collision course with the state, a point alluded to in the "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition" of *Creation and Fall*. There, the editors refer to Adolf von Harnack's proposal to eliminate the Old Testament from the Christian witness for the "sake of the people". von Harnack had written that "the greatest number of objections that 'the people' ['das Volk'] raise against Christianity and against the truthfulness of the church arise out of the recognition that the church still accords to the Old Testament." Rütter and Tödt point out that "the artificial removal of Jesus from Judaism, became the central demands of National Socialist, and so of 'German Christian', church politics, once Hitler was named Reich Chancellor..."³⁷ a proposal, a heresy no less, that Bonhoeffer rejected and fought against throughout his life.

In *A Brief History of Time*, the British physicist Stephen Hawking asks, "Even if there is only one possible unified theory [about the world we inhabit] it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe fit for them to describe?"³⁸ An honest question is deserving of a worthy answer. A story that spells out

³⁵ John Webster, "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *Word and Church. Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 100.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 62.

³⁷ Ibid., 157.

³⁸ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam, 1998), 184.

“the peculiar relation between humankind and God above and beyond...”³⁹ will breathe fire into the equations and make a universe fit for description. For Bonhoeffer there were other questions to be asked; in the first *Creation and Fall* lecture he puts two more searching questions, “How do you know about the beginning?” and “Which God are you talking about anyway?”. In order to avoid the pitfalls that beset them, Bonhoeffer reminds the students who sat in these lectures that this is not the sort of story set in time where event and effect is to be related to prior cause. “No question can go back behind the creating God, because one cannot go back behind the beginning”.⁴⁰ With a wry smile no doubt, Bonhoeffer quotes Luther, who when asked what God was doing before the creation of the world, replied “He was cutting sticks to cane people who ask such idle questions”, a reference to Augustine's comment that God “was preparing hell for those who pry too deep”.⁴¹

The story of the beginning is the story of the Creator who freely creates out of nothing (*das Nichts*) and in whose creation the creature is set to take his and her rightful place together with the Creator. It is the story of how Adam, the collective man seeking to become like God, loses that rightful place within the created order. This is the church's story and it is a grand eschatological announcement, which in Bonhoeffer's hands also becomes a pronouncement of judgement for the times. It is hard to avoid the thought that Bonhoeffer's lectures were offered as a judgement on the emerging Third Reich which was promoting itself as an eschatological event ushering in a *Neue Ordnung*. In this sense, *Creation and Fall*, which was not presented with a view to being published, became a spoken tract for the times.

Created, then, out of the absolute freedom of God and receiving the gifts of creatureliness and human freedom in obedience and gratitude, Adam also inherits the limit of prohibition, for at the centre of the world gifted to him were the two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the fruit of which he was not to desire nor seek to possess. A boundary was marked out that excluded Adam whose life was to ‘revolve’ around these trees, this centre that would test his status and protect his being as creature.

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

⁴¹ Ibid., 32.

Adam knows his limit by recognizing and accepting his creatureliness and in a singularly compact and profound paragraph, Bonhoeffer brings together the spatial descriptors and gives meaning to true personhood:

The human being's limit is at the centre of human existence, not on the margin; the limit or constraint that people look for on the margin of humankind is the limit of the human condition, the limit of human technology, the limit of what is possible for humanity. The boundary that is at the centre is the limit of human reality, of human existence as such. Knowledge of the limit or constraint on the margin is always accompanied by the possibility of failing to know any internal limit. Knowledge of the boundary at the centre means knowing that the whole of existence, human existence in every possible way that it may comport itself, has its limit.

There where the boundary – the tree of knowledge – stands, there stands also the tree of life, that is, the very God who gives life. *God is at once the boundary and the centre of our existence.* Adam knows that.⁴²

The God who creates and gives life through his Word speaks to humankind's situation from outside, and constitutes at the same time, the centre of humanity's existence. By turning away from themselves to focus on the outer edges where humans can see the limits of their accomplishment, the limits of what is possible, and the limits of the human condition, humankind looks away from the centre of human existence and reality. In doing this, humanity loses the connection with life, falling in love instead with the heady possibilities of life lived without the prohibition that paradoxically protects and permits a full-flowering of primal human partnership. So God is *Mitte* and *Grenze* at precisely the same moment in order to create, protect and preserve human community. That is what these stories are about.

In this act of creation in which God created the man “in our image according to our likeness...(so that the man and the woman) might have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth”,⁴³ Adam was offered the possibility of becoming benevolent ruler of the created order. “To say that in humankind God creates God's own image on earth means that humankind is like the Creator in that it is free...for the worship of the Creator.”⁴⁴ This is a freedom that brings with it opportunities and obligations. Being free for the worship of the Creator also means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am bound to

⁴² Ibid., 86.

⁴³ Genesis 1:26 & 28.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 62.

the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free.”⁴⁵ By interpreting *imago dei* not as an attribute ‘acquired’ by an individual but as an image of the relationship with others, Bonhoeffer reinforces and establishes the *imago dei*, now essentially an ethical concept, as the basis for ethics which will operate *only* within a new community. The new community is the new community in Christ, the very community within which lies this book and this story.

It is Clifford Green who comments, “Bonhoeffer expounds the *imago Dei* as an *analogia relationis* under the rubric of the freedom of God and human freedom”⁴⁶ introducing a “long overdue and far-reaching revision into the whole theological tradition. The image of God is understood not as an individualistic attribute but as a particular social relationship between persons, based on the relationship of God to humanity.”⁴⁷ Traditionally of course reason had been regarded as the ‘function’ comprising the human image of God, but as Green continues, “In the light of the resurrection of Christ we know that the freedom of true humanity is being-free-for...others on the basis of their freedom for God through Christ. Most specifically, this social freedom of the Creator and humanity is the freedom of love.”⁴⁸

In the midst of this grand opportunity, Adam is addressed, “Don’t touch the fruit of the tree”, a prohibition that he fails to recognise as one that protects and one that acknowledges he is free from himself and for the other to be creature which means living within limits (*Grenze*).⁴⁹ This is the prescription for being human.

The arrival of the partner-woman⁵⁰ is significant in that she brings with her “the power of the other”, and since Adam is now “cursed with the knowledge of good and evil ...he can only strike out against the other person who is placed by his side to embody his limit,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁶ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 191.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 191-92.

⁴⁹ Amongst New Zealand Maori a strong sense of tapu continues to exert influence on societal life. It is regarded as the strongest force in Maori life and has numerous meanings and references. Tapu can be interpreted as “sacred” or defined as “spiritual restriction” or “implied prohibition”, containing a strong imposition of rules and prohibitions. A person, an object or a place, which is tapu may not be touched by humans and in some cases not even approached. Today, tapu observances are still in evidence concerning sickness, death, and burial. Tapu is also evident in the Marae (Maori meeting place) and in the whare (home). (Based on <http://history-nz.org/maori6.html>. Accessed 19 July 2010)

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 94-102.

against the 'grace' of his limitation."⁵¹ In this way Bonhoeffer announces the struggle of the unmediated relationship, an issue he will return to in *Life Together*.

Bonhoeffer addresses the way in which relationships swing - often violently - between life and destruction, community and isolation, and love and hate. The important point here for our argument is hinted at in Hilde Pfeiffer's⁵² notes on the Bonhoeffer lectures when she records that "the protest against this breaking apart [of the limit and love] from each other is the community of the church", and from Udo Kohler's notes, when he records, "That is why the community with others that remains intact is the church",⁵³ indicating again that Bonhoeffer is thinking about the church as he unfolds an interpretation of these primal events.

Sicit Deus? The question that contains the wrong answer

Contesting the genuine limit from the outside

Adam lives in the light of that knowledge until he is seduced into believing that perhaps he might become like God and in response to the pious question "Did God really say...?"⁵⁴ Adam caves in. Creatureliness is destroyed.⁵⁵

In the two chapters, "The Pious Question" (Gen. 3:1-3),⁵⁶ and "Sicit Deus"⁵⁷ (Gen. 3: 4-5), Bonhoeffer proposes that the serpent's question "already contains the wrong answer" in that, if it is to be answered at all, it puts the answerer in the position of going behind God's word and imposing a human "Yes" or "No". Either way, the human is the loser because in doing so he has imposed his own judgement on the mind of God. "And this is achieved by proposing that, on the basis of an idea, a principle, or some prior knowledge about God,

⁵¹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 274. f.28.

⁵² Hilde Pfeiffer and Udo Kohler were students in Bonhoeffer's lectures.

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 100 f.17.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 103-10. "The Pious Question".

⁵⁵ William James (1842 – 1910) the American psychologist and philosopher believed that in any contest between will-power and imagination, imagination would win everytime. Here, the seductive power of the imagination thinking about the possibility of what life could be should one "become like God", won handsomely against the prohibition.

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 103-10.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 111-14.

humankind should now pass judgement on the concrete word of God....at that point they become God's master, they have left the path of obedience, they have withdrawn from being addressed by God."⁵⁸ This was the point Bonhoeffer made the day after Hitler's installation as Chancellor of the Reich. In the same lecture he went on to interpret the words of the serpent spoken to the woman, "You will not die at all..."⁵⁹ They stand over against the word of God which was that if the man and the woman ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would die. "Truth against truth. God's truth against the serpent's truth. God's truth tied to the prohibition, the serpent's truth tied to the promise, God's truth pointing to my limit, the serpent's truth pointing to my unlimitedness..."⁶⁰

Now the image of *boundary* is used to mark one dimension of life from another. It appears closely with other spatial images: *middle*, *limit* and *centre*.⁶¹ A boundary is breached, imposed limits are torn apart, a centre is invaded and raided and the loneliness of standing in the middle is overwhelming, for the essence of being human is ripped out of the soul of the man and the woman. "Adam *is* sicut deus, and this 'is' is meant with complete seriousness...losing the *limit* Adam has lost *creatureliness*. Adam as limitless or boundless [Der grenzenlose Adam] can no longer be addressed with regard to Adam's creatureliness."⁶²

Everything is changed forever and God can no longer address the man from beyond, because that is exactly what the man has invaded and where he now stands. Henceforth God will speak to the creature in a different way; he will speak to "humankind with regard to its creatureliness that can never be abrogated... in Jesus Christ, in the cross, in the church."⁶³ Even this word from God, however, will be contested, for in spite of the fact that the man invaded the "inviolable centre and boundary of life" the word of God will come to them repeatedly from this same centre. Now though, "they (will) renounce the life that comes from this word and grab it for themselves. They themselves stand in the centre. This is disobedience in the semblance of obedience, the desire to rule in the semblance of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁶¹ Ibid., 115-20. "The Fall".

⁶² Ibid., 115.

⁶³ Ibid., 116.

service, the will to be creator in the semblance of being a creature, being dead in the semblance of life.”⁶⁴

This seems to be a remarkable attack on the state or put another way, a major critique of a *theologia gloriae*. Martin Luther in the theses presented for the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation might have been talking about Adam - or a Hitler - when he reminded the church that “a theology of glory calls evil good and good evil...”⁶⁵ This is worse than disobedience, “it is rebellion...the destruction of creatureliness, a defection, a falling away from being safely held as a creature” leading eventually to the “destruction of creation by the creature.”⁶⁶ And equally as frightening, the “other”, now “sharply defined” and recognisable as the one the man might love and respect, and given to the man as his own limit and boundary, now gets in his way and out of dividedness is experienced as an enemy and a competitor to be possessed. Creaturely affection, out of which springs a deeper knowledge of God’s creating grace, has died an unnatural death. The other in her grace and fullness is lost. For when the boundary is breached in the grab for the fruit, Adam is left “standing in the middle which means living from (his or her) own resources and not from the centre. Having no limits means being alone.”⁶⁷ This is the road to solitude and isolation.

Unlike the idealists who drew a straight line between the beginning and the telos, Bonhoeffer insisted that the dislocating historical existence portrayed in this story breeds forms of isolation that are unbearable. Edward Farley in his *Ecclesial Man*, makes a similar point when he comments on how we may turn the ‘other’ into a social isolate:

Competitiveness, aggressiveness, and protection describe the stance toward the enemy. Idealization, placing at a distance (on a pedestal), and dehistoricizing describe the stance taken toward the idol. And callousness, depersonalizing, and forgetfulness describe the relation to the other in the mode of flight. We conclude that insofar as societies and face-to-face communities reflect disrupted historical existence, they are permeated by these forms of isolation.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁵ See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development*, ed. Roy A Harrisville, trans. Roy A Harrisville (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 38.

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 120. .

⁶⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁸ Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man. A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 157.

From now on the man must live in the fallen world as *sicut deus*. At the same time and in God's goodness he will not lack the word of God. "Adam lives between curse and promise".⁶⁹

Life in the twilight zone

Now, Bonhoeffer insists, life is lived in "extraordinary twilight". This is a psychological twilight zone where ambiguity abounds and subtle – and some not so subtle – seductions attract our attention and threaten our place in the created order, facing us with the ultimate reality that while both trees in the garden remain untouched and "constitute both the boundary and the centre", the moment we reach and grasp for life we will lose it.⁷⁰ It turns out that both the serpent and God were right!

The serpent was right: You will be like God; you will by no means die, that is, die the death that means ceasing to exist. But the Creator was also right: On the day that you eat from it you shall die, that is, die the death that means being *sicut deus*...Humankind *sicut deus* is (now) dead, for it has cut itself off from the tree of life; it lives out of its own resources, yet it cannot live. It is compelled to live, yet it cannot live. This is what death means.⁷¹

Driven out and banished from the garden, Adam now finds himself on the other side of the boundary. Now he is on the outside and the limit, meant to be the re-assuring, life protecting boundary is now an abrasive, painful and rude reminder of how far the man has removed himself from being the creature.

Bonhoeffer points to the damage waiting to be done against another person as the creature transgresses the boundary with another, and brother hurts brother, all as a sign of the boundary transgression within creation.⁷²

And from now on the boundary that separates paradise from the ground on which Adam toils will be just there, where the tree of life stands...The boundary has not shifted; it is where it always was, at the tree of life in the centre, where no one may set foot. But Adam now stands in another place. The limit is no longer in the centre of Adam's life; instead it assails Adam from the outside. Adam keeps on running up against it; it is always in the way...Adam's

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 132.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 104 and 89.

⁷¹ Ibid., 135.

⁷² Ibid., 118.

life outside the gate is a constant attack on the kingdom from which he is shut out. It is a flight, a search...But the gate stays shut.⁷³

Our thinking is torn apart and our very existence is “grounded in contradiction.”⁷⁴ Personhood is splintered. Selfishness replaces love and respect and gives rise to the break in immediate community with God; within the human community innocence is shattered. Now human beings “live their own lives” rather than the same life in God and make demands of each other. Man no longer accepts the limit “as God the Creator’s grace.”⁷⁵

So the power of life becomes the power of destruction, the power of community becomes the power of isolation, and the power of love becomes the power of hate⁷⁶ and very soon people reach the limits of their abilities and the boundaries of their very existence. At this point the man has become “...lord of its own world...solitary lord and despot of its own mute, violated, silenced, dead, ego-world [Ichwelt].”⁷⁷

And when they do hear a voice, the man and the woman delude themselves into believing they hear themselves as God. Bonhoeffer had already referred to this possibility when he quoted Eberhard Grisebach in *Act and Being*:

Limits are placed upon me, therefore, through the experience of conscience, from myself and never but through myself, but I never am provided a genuine limit from without. That is [...] just the astounding thing about conscience, that human beings hear only themselves in an ultimate and frightful isolation and therefore believe that they are hearing themselves...as God.⁷⁸

The man and woman even create life, but it is life “in the community of human beings and death that is characterised by obsessive desire.”⁷⁹ They now have what they wanted, a mind that goes behind the mind of the Creator God.

⁷³ Ibid., 144.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 100. In this connection, it is interesting to speculate that this, as in other places, is an embedded message addressed to National Socialism, this one in particular about the consequences of failing to live life defined by the boundary at the centre.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 142.

⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 142-43. f.13.

⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 145.

Summary

What can be said about Bonhoeffer's use of spatial imagery in his theological interpretation of Genesis "under the premise of the church",⁸⁰ or as the "church's book"? In spite of the critics who attacked *Creation and Fall* following its publication,⁸¹ Bethge commented approvingly, "This eschatological interpretation of creation did not represent a retreat from the world. *Creation and Fall* was aimed at the 'centre of life'. Nowhere previously had the idea of the 'centre' in contrast to the borders and margins of life, played such a role for Bonhoeffer."⁸²

It is clear that Bonhoeffer's use of the spatial images in this way in *Creation and Fall* is theological and that in the interpretation he offers, Bonhoeffer draws on the Hebraic understanding of the creating and sustaining acts of God directed into the midst of our existence, our being and our identity before God. This structure of creation, torn apart as it was by man seeking "the god of his desire outside of reality" or the "de-structuring of the reality given by God"⁸³ and seeking to live "in a world where God is not", is re-structured in space and time by Jesus on

...the *second* tree of life planted in the 'middle' of reality, in the middle of that strange Garden of Eden which is the Garden of the Mount of Olives and the Place of the Skull. Here Jesus Christ, the second Adam, re-structured the world by refusing to covet the edges as the first Adam had done, so that he could give men back the knowledge of reality that God had originally given them...The new Adam, being himself conformed to the world around him, re-created that world by restructuring it in the midst of time and space.⁸⁴

By "refusing to covet the edges" of life and from its very centre, Jesus gave a new form and shape, a new structure and meaning to life. The form is that of the suffering servant and the shape that of the crucified Messiah standing in the place of another: while life is structured with Christ at the centre which imparts the meaning of one who is there-for-the-other. These are the continuing gifts of God in the constant re-creation of resurrection life through the Spirit in the church.

⁸⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 215.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸³ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 150.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

Bonhoeffer's last chapter is entitled, simply, "Cain".⁸⁵ Cain, the child of the man and the woman, is cursed and becomes the *murderer*: like Adam, he too becomes involved in something that can be attributable only to the Creator; Cain destroys life.

Which leads Bonhoeffer directly to the doxological ending of this story:

The end of Cain's history, and so the end of all history [das Ende der Geschichte überhaupt], is Christ on the cross, the murdered Son of God. This is the last desperate assault on the gate of paradise. And under the whirling sword, under the cross, the human race dies. But Christ lives. The trunk of the cross becomes the wood of life [zu Holze des Lebens], and now in the midst of the world, on the accursed ground itself, life is raised up anew. In the centre of the world, from the wood of the cross, the fountain of life springs up. All who thirst for life are called to drink from this water, and whoever has eaten from the wood of this life shall never hunger and thirst. What a strange paradise is this hill of Golgotha, this cross, this blood, this broken body. What a strange tree of life, this trunk on which the very God had to suffer and die... The tree of life, the cross of Christ, the centre of God's world that is fallen but upheld and preserved...⁸⁶

In his book *Martin Luther's Theology*, Oswald Bayer draws attention to Luther's belief that creation establishes and preserves community.⁸⁷ By concluding his theological exposition with the story of Cain, this is exactly the point that Bonhoeffer is making. Sociality and community lie at the heart of Genesis 1:1 - 4:1, and the direct consequence of the desire to be like God is the total dislocation of the created community by an invasive act of treachery in which one person's will is imposed on another in an act of murder.

The tree of life, now become the cross of Christ, gives life back to community just as it had originally promised to give life to community. Commenting on the sacrament of baptism, Bayer notes, "...it must be made clear that no human being lives in neutral space."⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer's interest in these chapters was to ensure that the space men and women occupied was that space of community created and then re-created and preserved by Jesus Christ. By taking and using the images of spatiality, Bonhoeffer has given serious theological consideration to structure, shape, form, boundaries and life at the very centre.

⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 145-46.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 95-119.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

A bold story has been told and a dramatic picture drawn; of bounded spaces that have shape, of lines in the sand, boundaries that move from the edges to the centre, and a prohibition drawing attention to permissible behaviours that would provide identity to being and security to the creature known as Adam. Bonhoeffer would add new depth of meaning to the idea of structure and shape later in the year when he would present his lecture series on Christology; here Bonhoeffer would link his spatial, signature notion of *Stellvertretung* ('standing in the place of an other') with reality re-shaped and re-structured by Jesus Christ.

'Who is at the centre'?

Spatial imagery in the lectures on Christology

Within six months of the conclusion of the *Creation and Fall* series, Bonhoeffer presented the Christology lecture series, "...a complete course, of perhaps eighteen lectures, in the summer semester of 1933."⁸⁹ The disruptive nature of Hitler's Reich was already apparent. For Bonhoeffer however, "the summer of 1933...was the high point of (his) academic career for now he lectured on Christology."⁹⁰ Andreas Pangritz shares the same expansive view of the opportunities that lay ahead for Bonhoeffer in that summer of 1933 as he notes that Bonhoeffer's "Christocentrism...is the precondition for an unprecedented opening of the horizons of the church. By no means does he try to define Jesus Christ. On the contrary: his purpose is to liberate Christ from every Christian and non-Christian definition of the time. His question is the 'question of encounter' between Christ, the church, and the world, in other words the question 'Who are you? Speak for yourself!'"⁹¹

⁸⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Bonhoeffer's *Christologie* of 1933," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, ed. Martin E. Marty (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963), 147.

⁹⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 219.

⁹¹ Andreas Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ, for Us, Today?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 136.

Ernst Feil believes that these lectures, the last given by Bonhoeffer as a full-time lecturer at Berlin University, should be regarded “as the fruit of his theological endeavours up to that point and the foundation of his subsequent practical work and its diverse ramifications.”⁹²

There is another good reason to take these lectures seriously; it is clear that by the time of the rigged church elections in July 1933, Bonhoeffer had thrown his weight behind the *Kirchenkampf* and, as Edwin H. Robertson, translator of the reconstructed student lecture notes that were published as *Christ the Center* points out, Bonhoeffer was single-minded in his intention that “the resistance would be theological rather than political.”⁹³ The church and its shape in the struggle with the Reich would be formed by a robust Christology.

Christopher Holmes confirms the importance of this Christology offered by Bonhoeffer at the same time as the level of state supported violence was increasing;

...it is legitimate and perhaps necessary, I suspect, to read *Christ the Center* as one of the most potent – albeit a potency which is not without its problems – twentieth century theological attempts to resist immanentizing and domesticating tendencies in Christology and ecclesiology...what Bonhoeffer does, by arguing that the historical Christ is the present Christ who is both humiliated and exalted as Word, as sacrament and as church, is to present a *politics* of Christ’s presence, the presence of one who always and indefatigably questions us, our assumptions, our words, and ways of being.⁹⁴

And Edwin Robertson adds that, “If today we are to understand what (Bonhoeffer) meant by the Church it is essential to read these lectures.”⁹⁵

⁹² Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 74.

⁹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 18.

⁹⁴ Christopher R. J. Holmes, “Wholly Human and Wholly Divine, Humiliated and Exalted: Some Reformed Explorations in Bonhoeffer’s Christology Lectures,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (Autumn) (2007): 224.

⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 9.

‘Who are you, Jesus’? and ‘Where might you be found’?⁹⁶

The exciting, and as it turns out, the potentially complicating aspect of the lectures on Christology is that while Bonhoeffer remains firmly in control of the academic pursuit of understanding, he now has a personal story that injects itself into that search for truth; he has become a Christian and though he never describes how this happened, Jesus has become his contemporary. By his own admission this event put to death the power that he had previously had over others and restored to him the lost mutuality of love in community.⁹⁷ As Matt Jenson points out, the lectures “give us a window into the mind of a theologian wrestling with fundamental questions of faith and scholarship.”⁹⁸

Perhaps it is not out of the question that these lectures - as well as the earlier *Creation and Fall* – might be read as autobiography contained within the framework of his response to revelation and his own faith in search of understanding. For Bonhoeffer’s quest had changed; disputing Descartes’ “only reliable starting point in the pursuit of truth...*Cogito ergo sum*”, he started from a different point. As Daniel Migliore points out, “The logic of Christian faith differs radically from this Cartesian logic in at least two respects. First, the starting point for enquiry for the Christian is not self-consciousness but awareness of the reality of God....Not ‘I think therefore I am’ but ‘God is, therefore we are’ (Ps. 8:1, 3-4)...Second, for Christian faith and theology, inquiry is elicited by faith in God rather than being an attempt to arrive at certainty apart from God. Not ‘I seek certainty by doubting everything but my own existence,’ but ‘Because God has shown mercy to us, therefore we enquire’.”⁹⁹

In order to make sense of his own experience of “becoming a Christian”, and as the framework for the Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer addressed two questions; “Who is this Christ who has made himself known to me as my contemporary”? and “Where is this

⁹⁶ Pelikan, “Bonhoeffer's *Christologie* of 1933,” 149. “...by the answers to these two questions the mystery of Jesus Christ is made clear in all its mysteriousness.”

⁹⁷ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 125.

⁹⁸ Matt Jenson, “Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 2 (2005): 143.

⁹⁹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding. An Introduction to Christian Theology. Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: MI William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 5.

Christ to be found in the world”? or, put rather more colloquially, “Who are you, Jesus”? and “Where might you be found”? The formal answers to these questions are the central claims of the Christology lectures; “As the Crucified and Risen one, Jesus is at the same time the Christ who is present now”, and whose presence is to be understood spatially and temporally... (as) “Christ in his person is indeed present in the church as person.”¹⁰⁰

Informed by his own experience, Bonhoeffer now knew that these questions and assertions required a personal response. Which is why Bonhoeffer shunned any enquiry about the question as to “How” Jesus was or could be fully human and divine, a question which he considered represented the essence of scientific enquiry and not the essence of a believing or faithful response that would establish Christ as contemporary with the believer.

He argues that the essence of scientific enquiry lies in humankind’s ability to classify information. To do this, two questions must be asked: “How did this or that (thing or event) happen”? and “What does it mean”? But Jesus, God’s logos who has appeared in history as Person, defies the logic of classification and Bonhoeffer refuses to be drawn into an answer to the question “How is the Word to be understood and classified”? He regarded the question as impertinent; it was, he believed, “the godless question, the serpent’s question”,¹⁰¹ recalling the earlier “Sicut Deus” of *Creation and Fall*. Look to the classifications of Jesus and to the history of the attempts to understand, verify, confirm or validate who Jesus is, Bonhoeffer warns, and nothing will change. “Jesus’s own witness to himself, then and now, stands on its own and substantiates itself”¹⁰² Jesus authenticates himself; not only that, but he stands beyond the very possibility of being categorized and classified. So rather than seeking to classify Jesus, it is better to ask the question that shows we understand who this person who makes a claim on our life is and ask the question “Who are you?”, though even this is a difficult question to ask.

The question of ‘who’ expresses the otherness of the other. At the same time the ‘who question’ interrogates the very existence of the one asking it. With the ‘who question’, the person asking is queried about the limits of his or her own being. If the person asking must hear, in reply, that his or her own logos has reached its limits, then the questioner has encountered the boundaries of his or her own existence.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 310.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 303.

¹⁰² Ibid., 304.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 303.

The question “Who is this who meets me”? which Bonhoeffer called “the austere question”,¹⁰⁴ stretches human reason to its limit and can only be asked within the church or, as Bonhoeffer puts it, “within the context of faith”, where it “becomes a form of knowledge”; and there, within the context of faith, it “will receive its answer.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, it can only be asked as an act of faith because the question in reply, “And who then are you?” will require an act of faith in response, an *actus directus*. Christ cannot be known “at arm’s length...(but) can only be truly known relationally through the mutuality of the question of identity”,¹⁰⁶ a reality that is expressed by Edwin Robertson when he writes “...Christ is not interpreted from history any more than he is interpreted from my experience. History is interpreted from him, as I am interpreted from him.”¹⁰⁷ Who I am is interpreted by Christ. Matt Jenson comments “Christ can neither be objectified nor subjectified. Rather, he is the ultimate interpreter, who provides the ground for clear, significant meaning for both history and humanity.”¹⁰⁸ Christology, Bonhoeffer concludes, is concerned not with “what Christ has done but rather who Christ is. To put it in the abstract: The personal ontological structure [personale Seinstruktur] of the whole, historical Christ is the subject matter of Christology.”¹⁰⁹

The point of asking the Christological question is to “bring out the ontological structure of the *who*, without getting caught in either the Scylla of the ‘how question’ or the Charybdis of the ‘that question’.”¹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer refers to the early church confessional disputes about the nature of Christ on the one hand, and the post enlightenment pursuit of truth, which was disinterested in Christ as the Word of God addressed to humankind, on the other; neither pursuit according to Bonhoeffer, took the church very far. Clearly appreciative of Luther, Paul and the New Testament, Bonhoeffer notes that they stayed on track and sailed “right through the middle”.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 307.

¹⁰⁶ Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," 144.

¹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," 145.

¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 310.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

So what can we know about the person of Christ whose very being and presence is ‘hidden’ within the likeness of sinful flesh? (Rom 8:3). For Bonhoeffer, everything hangs on a sequence of statements that are in themselves an answer to the question “...by virtue of what personal ontological structure is Christ present to the church?”¹¹²

It is the ‘*pro-me*’ structure. The being of Christ’s person is essentially relatedness to me. His being-Christ is his being-for-me. This *pro-me*...is to be understood as the being of his very person. The very core of his person is *pro-me*...I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me. 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. 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*...what is decisive about the *pro-me* structure is that, with it, both the being and the works of Christ are maintained. Being-there-for-you comes together with being-there-for you. The presence of Christ as the *pro-me* is his real being-for-me.¹¹³

The *pro-me* is so important for Bonhoeffer that he is certain enough to claim that unless Christology – and theology – say “right from the beginning that God and Christ can only be Christ *pro-me*”¹¹⁴ they condemn themselves, by which he means that whatever is then said about Christ can have no substance, nor can it be true. It is in the *pro-me* structure of his being that Jesus is “the one who has really bound himself in the freedom of his existence to me... He does not *have* the power of being for me, but he *is* the power.”¹¹⁵

This statement has the ring of autobiography about it, born deep inside Bonhoeffer’s being and out of the new life he now possessed as a result of Christ’s presence and power for him. Previously, it seems, Bonhoeffer had imperilled his own well-being as his isolated self, locked into a violated sociality and knowing little if anything of the Christ for him, struggled for some sense of an authentic sociality in which he could “be free for others in a genuine mutuality of love and service”.¹¹⁶ In his becoming contemporaneous with Christ who is for-him, Bonhoeffer had been gifted with Christ’s personal presence and power.

¹¹² Ibid., 314.

¹¹³ Ibid., 314-15.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 314.

¹¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 48.

¹¹⁶ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 125. For a more complete statement of this issue see Bonhoeffer, *A Theology of Sociality*, 119-26.

Jenson writes, "This being for me is an ontological statement and, as such, is the heart of who Christ is. Thus, it is the heart of who God is."¹¹⁷

The reality of Christ's presence is never contested by Bonhoeffer. Christ is present in the Church through his *pro-me* structure and consequently, standing in my place "He is there for his brothers and sisters in that he stands in their stead....If this is so, then he *is* the new humanity. There where the new humanity should stand, he himself stands, by virtue of his *pro-me* structure. That means he *is* the church-community."¹¹⁸ The emphasis placed by Bonhoeffer on the *pro-me* is the personalised aspect of God's promise in Christ. This ought never to be thought of as a "static disposition of God" but as "the relentless dynamism of God's unbidden saving agency."¹¹⁹ For as Ziegler points out, to say that God exists, is meaningless unless God exists to save; the two realities are inseparable in the *pro-me*, "in keeping with the identity of revelation and reconciliation. This identity in fact makes it 'godless' (Bonhoeffer says) to think of God's presence apart from the divine saving activity 'for me' in Christ."¹²⁰

When faced with the question of what bringing the risen and ascended Christ into our space and time means, Bonhoeffer writes, "It all depends upon Christ being present to his Church as person in space and time".¹²¹ And if Jesus Christ is present where might he be?

Where does he stand? For me, he stands in my place, where I should be standing. He stands there because I cannot, that is, he stands at the boundary of my existence and nevertheless in my place. This is an expression of the fact that I am separated, by a boundary that I cannot cross, from the self that I ought to be. This boundary lies between my old self and my new self, that is, in the center, between myself and me. As the limit, Christ is at the same time the center that I have regained. As boundary, the boundary can only be seen from its other side, outside the limit. Thus it is important that we human beings, in recognizing that our limit is in Christ, at the same time see that in this limit we have found our new center. It is the nature of Christ's person to be in the

¹¹⁷ Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," 151.

¹¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 315.

¹¹⁹ Philip G. Ziegler, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?," *Modern Theology* 23:4, no. October 2007 (2007): 588.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 588.

¹²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 59.

center. The One who is in the center is the same one who is present in the church as Word and sacrament.¹²²

This is another of Bonhoeffer's structurally formal, conceptual and academic declarations. But now it is laced with his autobiography. Jesus Christ stands for me as only he can since his very *pro-me* structure both allows and requires it. What I should be as a person I can never be by my own doing, and I am aware of how divided I am within myself and how split off I am from the self I should be. Jesus stands on the boundary between what I am and what I should be and that is where I am judged. Life in the shadowy realms of "should" and "ought" is not of much interest to Bonhoeffer however; much more hopefully, Jesus discloses two worlds and becomes the rediscovered, authentic centre of life.

Bonhoeffer has already established that it is the nature of the person of Christ to be in the centre, spatially and temporally, an idea that is not to be taken as a psychological claim since as he reminds us, "the center of our existence is [not] the center of our personality."¹²³ "Christ as the center of our existence" is to be taken as an "ontological [-] theological (statement) because it refers...to the persons we are before God. Christ is not the center that we can see is here but rather the center according to our faith."¹²⁴ Thus Bonhoeffer links personhood to the person of the risen Christ. Throughout, Bonhoeffer has insisted on Jesus Christ's presence and contemporaneity as person and not as some depersonalised idea or idealised value, but as a function of his being in which his wholly divine presence today is of a piece with his historicity as person who, wholly human, lived, died and rose again.

It is the real presence of the resurrected Christ, "the presence of Jesus Christ as history and His attestation of himself, in the power of his resurrection"¹²⁵ that points the way to an answer to the second question, "Christ, where might you be found"? which, in turn will throw light on Edwin Robertson's suggestion that "if today we are to understand what (Bonhoeffer) meant by the Church it is essential to read these lectures."¹²⁶ For Bonhoeffer,

¹²² Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 324.

¹²³ Ibid., 324.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 324.

¹²⁵ Pelikan, "Bonhoeffer's *Christologie* of 1933," 156.

¹²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 9.

all 'forms' of Christ point towards the church-community and as Jenson points out "Bonhoeffer has little time to discuss Christ's presence in anywhere but the church."¹²⁷ "The God-human Jesus Christ is the one who, in his *pro-me* structure, is present in his person to the church as Word, sacrament, and church-community"¹²⁸ is Bonhoeffer's precise summary of the matter.

Christ as Word points the way to community since the Word is spoken as address to humankind which requires a response. It is dialogue and it is always current since it is always spoken into the moment, forever fresh and new. Address requires community otherwise it lapses so, "...the word in the form of address is only possible as word between two persons, of speaking and response, responsibility."¹²⁹ "The initiative is (God's), as it always is; but the response is authentically ours in Christ."¹³⁰ Not only is Christ present as the Word spoken as address, but in the Word present in the preaching of the church as the word of judgement and forgiveness, for "if Christ is not wholly present in the sermon, the church breaks down."¹³¹

Christ is also present as Sacrament and in the Sacrament. Once again Bonhoeffer asserts the primacy of the presence of the complete person of the God-Man in the sacrament, in his exaltation and humiliation. This is the way Christ is present and exists in the Church.¹³² And Christ is present as the church and in the church-community: "Christ is the church by virtue of his *pro me* being. "The church-community, between his ascension and his second coming, is the form he takes."¹³³

In his linking of the concepts of boundary with centre (*Mitte*) by means of Christ as mediator (*Mittler*) and by insisting that this occurs in our time and in the space called the church, Bonhoeffer makes it clear, in his mind at least, that church in time and space carries the signs of this 'transaction'. This is the community of people who are marked by the judgement and the justification of God, people in whose life judgement has been

¹²⁷ Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," 153. f.46.

¹²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 315.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹³⁰ Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology," 153.

¹³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 318.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 318-23.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

annulled by justification and in whose midst life on the edge has been transformed into life in the likeness of Christ; these very people had good reason to contest the world being managed into existence by the National Socialists since by the middle of 1933 they were starting to see the results of the manipulation of the German Protestant church.

Bonhoeffer spoke to this issue in the Christology lectures in the section entitled “Christ as the Centre of History.”¹³⁴ The promise of a Messiah is alive everywhere and always and this expectation is what gives history its significance. Corrupt messianic promises abound; it is only Christ who is “at one and the same time the destroyer and the fulfiller of all the messianic expectations of history.”¹³⁵ The church as the “center of the state, also constitutes the limit of the state, because the church recognizes and must preach that the entire promise, from a human point of view, was broken on the cross of Christ...the cross of Christ is doubly present to us, in the forms of both the church and the state. Christ himself is present to us, takes shape, only in this two fold form, but is only present to us if we live by his cross.”¹³⁶

Jesus Christ ‘exalted and humiliated’

So, Christ is present as the spoken word of proclamation, of judgement and forgiveness; present in the sacrament as Sacrament; and present, existing in time in and as the Church. “The church-community, between his ascension and his second coming, is the form he takes.”¹³⁷ This form, that is, the form of the church-community, as Bonhoeffer now points out, “*is* the body of Christ...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”.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Ibid., 325-27.

¹³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 62.

¹³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 326.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 323.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

In the concept of Christ present, “exalted, and humiliated” Bonhoeffer articulates Jesus’ “mode of existence as man.” Shunning any interest in the two natures, or in the question “*How* can God be the humiliated man?” Bonhoeffer shows more interest in the question “*Who* is the humiliated God-Man?” and enquires

about [Jesus’] way of existing as a human being...in Christ’s being humiliated, we are talking about neither divinity nor humanity, but rather the *ὁμοίωμα σαρκός* (‘fleshly form’)...How is Jesus’s particular way of existing as the Humiliated One expressed? In that he has taken on sinful flesh. The conditions for his humiliation are set by the curse, the fall of Adam. In being humiliated, Christ, the God-human, enters of his own free will into the world of sin and death. He enters there in such a way as to conceal himself [there], so that he is no longer recognisable visibly as the God-human. He comes among us humans not in *μορφή θεοῦ* (‘Godly form’) but rather incognito, as a beggar among beggars, an outcast among outcasts; he comes among sinners as the one without sin, but also as a sinner among sinners. This is the central problem for all Christology.¹³⁹

Thus Jesus exposes himself fully to the world of sin and death, to the reality of the fallen creation and precisely because it is Jesus who carries real human flesh, and is tempted and anguished, and “subject to the same condemnation as we, therefore we are saved.”¹⁴⁰ In all of this, Bonhoeffer insists, there is great ambiguity. “The resurrection of Christ does not get us around the stumbling block. Even the Risen One remains the stumbling block for us. If it were not so, he would not be for us....We only believe in the resurrection of Jesus if we do not take away Jesus Christ as the stumbling block. Only the disciples see the Son of God. They see with the eyes of blind faith, because as believers who see nothing they become, as such, those who see, in their belief in God’s glory.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid., 355-56.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 357.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 359.

Personhood and the lectures on Christology

Bonhoeffer had already begun to address the issue of personhood in *Sanctorum Communio* and offered further building blocks to his anthropology in *Creation and Fall*. Here, in the lectures on Christology, he contributes significantly through his use of the *pro-me* structure by claiming that one is a person before God whose very *pro-me* structure of being is given in Christ in order that my being might now be centred in Jesus Christ. In so doing he describes his own process of “becoming a Christian” within the framework of his own Christology.

The following statement under the title ‘Christ as the Centre of Our Existence’ raises some interesting issues however;

The centre of our existence is [not] the centre of our personality. This is not a psychological statement, but rather an ontological [-] theological one, because it refers not to our personality but rather to the persons we are before God. Christ is not the center that we can see is here but rather the center according to our faith. In the fallen world, however, the centre is at the same time a boundary. Human beings stand between law and fulfilment. We have the law but not the possibility of fulfilling the law. Christ as the center means that he is the fulfilment of the law. Thus he is both the limit of human life and the court in which humankind is judged. But Christ is not only the end of our existence – its limit – but also the beginning of the new existence, and that means the center. That Christ is the center of our existence says that he is the judgement and the justification.¹⁴²

Bonhoeffer’s point is clear: This statement is “an ontological [-] theological one”, and though the last sentence captures the essence of a theological position precisely, one is left wondering exactly why Bonhoeffer feels the need to distance himself from something that could also reasonably be described as “psychological” even if, by the use of the word “psychological” Bonhoeffer means truth that can be arrived at without revelation. One acknowledges that Bonhoeffer has crafted a theological statement utilizing the spatial images of centre and boundary, but then to say that this does “not mean that (Christ) is central in our personality, our thinking and our feeling...”¹⁴³ makes little sense. “Boundary” and “centre” may *mean* judgement and justification, but the statement “Christ

¹⁴² Ibid., 324-25.

¹⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 60.

is the center of our existence” as a theological statement is also practical and quite concrete with an observable outcome that might be described as a public demonstration of the effect of transformed being. A personality that is shaped from the centre of (its) being since Christ is become its new centre, is in reality a profound demonstration of Christ our judgement and our justification. To say less is to retreat into a private spirituality that can quickly become that of a hidden follower which, of course, Bonhoeffer regarded as a contradiction in terms. In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer will argue that Jesus Christ requires an obedient following after that impacts a person’s core and effects a life lived fearlessly in Jesus’ name. The outcome will be visible within the individual and within the church-community in such a way that it makes a difference. This is what Jesus required of the church within a national political system that was becoming increasingly chaotic.

My judgement is that this statement in which Bonhoeffer disclaims any intention to make statements that impinge on the ‘psychological’ or immanent, thereby taking him into the realm of “classification”, reflects the way he felt as he faced the precise, scientific world of his highly regarded physician and psychiatrist father¹⁴⁴ and that of his brilliant physicist brother, Karl Friedrich. Dietrich, now inhabiting, the world of spiritual commitment and articulation, a world, that while no less real, was harder to nail down and, by his own insistence, did not lend itself to ‘classification’.

Now an important issue arises: How does Bonhoeffer imagine that, as a result of Jesus’ *pro-me* structure and the gift of Christ’s contemporaneous presence to those who believe, an individual might be incorporated into the *pro-me* structure of Jesus in their journey towards Christian maturity? Indeed, what might the *pro-me* mean to different people?

¹⁴⁴Karl Bonhoeffer "never took a specific and categorical position, to my knowledge, in the controversy about the theories of Freud, Adler, Jung and other "psychoanalysts"...he had no urge to advance into the realm of dark, undemonstrable, bold and imaginative interpretation, where so much has to be assumed and so little can be proven..." Words of Karl Bonhoeffer's friend and colleague Robert Gaupp, Professor of Psychiatry in Heidelberg, quoted in Bethge. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 22

Jesus – a gift *pro-me*

Lisa Dahill¹⁴⁵ addresses this question as she observes that, from the beginning, Bonhoeffer developed the motif of the priority of the other over the self as a definition of Christian maturity, and that “in a process simultaneously sacrificial and redemptive ...in one’s own becoming a “person for others”, one participates in the very being and mystery of Jesus Christ himself, the consummate person for others.”¹⁴⁶ To turn away from the other even though that turning away might represent a “self-protective repudiation of the other”, she writes, “would mean a denial of Jesus Christ himself and thus of one’s own authentic existence.”¹⁴⁷

Dahill then asserts, quite correctly in my opinion, that Bonhoeffer’s conception of the primacy of the other “emerged, not from some universally valid human reality but from a specific psychosocial stance;¹⁴⁸ that of the separative self, the traditionally socialized male.”¹⁴⁹ There are, however, other “configuration(s) of human selfhood”.¹⁵⁰ The one that particularly interests Dahill is the “soluble” or “porous” self, typical of abused people both women and men, who have learned as a result of familial or social rejection, to silence their own selves in the face of their abusers. To be there for the other, if one’s self is soluble, is not redemptive, and the “focus on others and their needs, desires and demands to the exclusion of oneself is the shape of an excruciating life.”¹⁵¹ To continue to be available for others at the expense of one’s own integrity, simply prolongs the agony of a non-life lived at the constant behest of an other.

¹⁴⁵ Lisa E. Dahill, "Jesus for *You*: A Feminist Reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, no. August 2007 (2007): 250-59.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁴⁸ This recalls the comment of James Cone who observed that “theologians do not normally reveal the true source of their theological reflection...More often than not it is a theologian’s personal history, in a particular socio-political setting, that serves as the most important factor in shaping the methodology and content of his or her theological perspective.” (James H. Cone. *God of the Oppressed*. Preface vi).

¹⁴⁹ Dahill, "Jesus for *You*: A Feminist Reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology," 253.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

Thus an issue of great significance emerges: do we experience ourselves as a “self” or as an “other”. Dahill suggests that there is a gender tendency for males generally to locate themselves as “selves” who by definition will be attentive to the “other” in imitation of Christ as their *Stellvertreter*, while those who have been socialised into the ‘other’ location, those whose selves are porous or soluble, will need to pay attention, not to the other but to their own “selves” if there is to be any redemption. This can only be done by recognising and appropriating the *pro-me* of Jesus. “Jesus” she says, “is simply gift “for me.”¹⁵²

Jesus’ death is once and for all, completely vicarious in its redemptive power. This death ends death and bursts forth into resurrection. These wounds heal wounds and do not inflict them. This One for others is, always, for me, and the blood and water flowing from his body, his heart, are meant to birth and nourish, not to justify continuing haemorrhage. Marginalized and rejected, Jesus himself becomes “other” in solidarity with all “others,” in order to redeem each one for holy new *self*-centering, for conformation to one’s own authentic being in him, for selfhood that is able to love in freedom and abundance.¹⁵³

Some careful work remains to be done about how Bonhoeffer conceives a person moving from a state of unholy self denial or abnegation in which the *pro me* of Jesus Christ is not a release but a further humiliation – the state of humiliation? – to the state of holy self-acceptance and recognition, based on Jesus being *pro-me*, in which one is all-of-a-piece and intact in Christ – perhaps a state of exaltation? This clearly falls in the direction of theology applied and Bonhoeffer does offer a clue, though as is often the case, it appears on the face of it to be one that necessitates a careful reading of the appropriate passage.

In the *Ethics*, in ‘History and Good [2]’ under the heading “The Structure of Responsible Life”,¹⁵⁴ Dahill draws attention to Bonhoeffer’s unswerving commitment to completely devoting one’s own life to that of the other as a definition of selfless living. “Only those who are selfless live responsibly, which means that only selfless people truly *live*.”¹⁵⁵ In

¹⁵² Ibid., 256. “The full promise of Jesus’ attention enacts spiritually what the patient-focus of truly healing therapeutic relationships does psychologically: both create the attentive and unwavering focus of transformative ‘holding space’.” 256.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 257.

¹⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 257ff.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 259.

the next paragraph however, Bonhoeffer opens a door to thinking about this from a different perspective. The vicarious responsible life may be corrupted by

absolutizing either my own self or the other person. In the first case, the relation of responsibility leads to violation and tyranny...in the second case, the welfare of the other person for whom I am responsible is made absolute while ignoring all other responsibilities...the origin, essence, and goal of responsible life is denied in both cases, and responsibility has become a self-made, abstract idol.¹⁵⁶

Dahill connects this thinking with the very struggle Bonhoeffer had as he weighed his own future, "Over-responsibility toward a particular person or situation therefore is a form of idolatry, attempting to set up an absolute principle (i.e., an abstraction) and denying the ever shifting concreteness of well-discerned vocation in every new situation."¹⁵⁷ The clue may lie in Bonhoeffer's "Christ is the center of our existence...the center in which we believe within the space of the person in whom we believe" affirmation. Such a statement allows us to think about the two-step process of decentering and recentering, and although Bonhoeffer does not use these particular words, his use of the phrase "Christ is the center of our existence" holds out rich possibilities in re-interpreting the concepts of boundary, centre, judgement and justification.

Miroslav Volf¹⁵⁸ points us in a helpful direction. Writing during the early 1990s at the time of the Croatian War of Independence, Volf tells of the horrors of the destruction of his people and their places. Strong and complex tribal identities fuelled desolation and despair, precursors to the situation that Dahill had in mind when she wrote about damaged and not-well-formed selves. How, Volf wondered, should we approach the "problems of identity and otherness and...the conflicts that rage around them?"¹⁵⁹ Shunning the so-called 'social arrangement options'¹⁶⁰ he suggests that instead of "reflecting on the kind of society we

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Dahill, "Jesus for *You*: A Feminist Reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology," 258.

¹⁵⁸ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶⁰ "Social arrangement" proposals offer plans on "how a society (or all humanity) ought to be arranged in order to accommodate individuals and groups with diverse identities living together - a society that guards universal values, or that promotes the plurality of particular communal identities, or that offers a framework for individual persons to go about feely making and unmaking their own identities...their main interest is not social agents, but social arrangements." (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20).

ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, I will explore *what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others.”¹⁶¹

This sounds like something in which Bonhoeffer might have been interested. For in spite of the confidence with which he proclaimed that Christ stands there *pro-me* in the place where I should but cannot stand, and that redeemed humanity will emerge as I, in Jesus, am there for others in the company of the fellowship of the church-community, he too, in a similar way engaged the notion that a radical response in obedience to Jesus Christ would lead directly to the “*kind of self we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others.” The realization that the self must be reconstructed as the redeemed community unfolds is an unsettling business for it will almost always involve, at the same time, the reconstruction of an identity, which is no easy task if one is poorly resourced for this task.

Volf describes the process of how selves in search of a centre wrongly and sinfully weave a self out of competing demands and pleasures only to centre themselves upon themselves.¹⁶² This is the *cor curvum in se*, well known to Bonhoeffer, that according to the Apostle Paul needs to be nailed to the cross: “I have been crucified with Christ”, and then raised with Christ: “and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:19)

Notice, says Volf, that

the new center of the self is not a timeless “essence,”...an essence that waits only to be discovered, unearthed, set free. Neither is the center an inner narrative...The center of the self – a center that is both inside and outside - is the story of Jesus Christ, which has become the story of the self. More precisely, the center is Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected who has become part and parcel of the very structure of the self.¹⁶³

This new centre does not obliterate the self; it transforms it. The transformed centre of “self-giving love (is) made possible by and patterned on the suffering Messiah” and it is here, in the heart of love that “judgements about exclusion must be made and battles against exclusion fought.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 20-21.

¹⁶² Ibid., 69-71 “The Self and its Centre”

¹⁶³ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 71.

The Apostle Paul's use of the imagery of dying and rising in the Galatians letter, describes a process Bonhoeffer recognised well though he did not describe it as "decentering and recentring". "The life of the body of Christ has thus become our life", Bonhoeffer writes in *Discipleship*. "In Christ we longer live our own lives, but Christ lives his life in us. The life of believers in the church-community is truly *the life of Jesus Christ in them*. (Gal 2:20...)." ¹⁶⁵

And with even more point,

Once again, who can live so chapters 5 and 6 (the 'Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew's gospel) are one? None except those whose old self has died in Christ and who have found a new life in Christ's community of discipleship. Love as the deed of simple obedience is death to the old self and the self's discovery to exist now in the righteousness of Christ and in one's brothers and sisters. Then the old self is no longer alive, but Christ is alive in the person. The love of Christ the Crucified, who leads the old self in us to death, is what lives in Christ's follower. Disciples find themselves only in Christ and in their brothers and sisters. ¹⁶⁶

The concept of the decentered self goes back a long way, perhaps, as Lawrence Wills suggests, to the Greek and Roman philosophers. ¹⁶⁷ Wills points out that the study of asceticism in the early Christian tradition, has been transformed recently as a result of understanding Christian ascetic acts as ways of disciplining or even remaking the self. The focus shifted from external ascetic practices to 'technologies of the self' or 'decentering the self'. Wills says that in our postmodern world 'decentering of the self' happens when we become aware that "views of reality that place the self at the centre of the plane of consciousness are socially constructed...(and) the decentred self...(becomes) acutely aware, by a sort of fracturing of the psyche, that the self stands condemned and unworthy, in need of ...radical redemption." ¹⁶⁸

The process of collapsing the 'old self' and rebuilding the 'new self', essentially an act of faith in Jesus Christ in which the redeemed self is reclaimed, bears a striking resemblance to the bold and uncompromising claim, "Christ is all this only because he is the one who stands in my place, in my behalf before God, *pro-me*. Christ as the mediator is precisely

¹⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 221.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁶⁷ Lawrence M. Wills, "Ascetic Theology before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* Vol 74, no. 4 (2006).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 903.

the end of the old, fallen world and the beginning of the new world of God.”¹⁶⁹ This centering of life in Christ can only happen because “Christ is *pro-me*”, a statement made in faith from the inside of the community known as the church. It places Christ right at the centre, restructuring personal ego and reshaping it into that of the suffering Messiah for “In Christ man... finds his new centre again.”¹⁷⁰

André Dumas describes Part One of the lectures on Christology as “striking”, and after observing that this is a “Christology employing the categories of structure and space”, more importantly for the issue of personhood, writes “the church is the concrete place where human existence receives its form and structure in Christ, where the everyday world rediscovers its true reality... This is why to be a Christian is to become true man once more.”¹⁷¹

It is clear that Bonhoeffer is making two very important points in these lectures: first and importantly for the question of personhood, identity, being and (Christian) definition, the form and structure that gives life reality is the form and structure of life that is found in Christ; and second, that it is in the church where men and women find the place that will give their lives this “form and structure” for it is around Christ, this ‘hidden centre’, that the church revolves in a recurring cycle of repentance and faith:

Thus the *sanctorum communio* continues to fall again and again, it comes into being anew, passes away, and comes into being once more,... Yet for the *sanctorum communio* this movement, its repentance and faith, revolves round a fixed point: the word is what causes the church to break-up into the community-of-the-cross, and through the word it is ‘built-up’ to become the Easter-community.¹⁷²

Bonhoeffer has used this colourful and lively phrase ‘community-of-the-Cross’ earlier in *Sanctorum Communio*.

The absolutely contemporary character of the death of Jesus is no longer available to us. This results for us *in the paradoxical reality of a community-of-the-Cross*, which contains within itself the contradiction of simultaneously representing utmost solitude and closest community. *And this is the specifically Christian church-community*. But a community-of-the-Cross exists only

¹⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 327.

¹⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 60.

¹⁷¹ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 33-34.

¹⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 213-14.

through the Easter message. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ his death is revealed as the death of death itself, and with this the boundary of history marked by death is abolished, the human body becomes the resurrection-body, and the humanity-of-Adam has become the church of Christ.¹⁷³

So to be in the church, this community-of-the-cross and community-of-the-resurrection, is to be in Christ, just as to be in Christ is to be in this particular community whose life is marked by death and resurrection. Dumas describes it as “making Christological reality the center of one’s very being...(and) maintaining the full range of thought, action and meditation about the mystery of the incarnation that saves confession from being a series of worn-out platitudes, life from a barely-endured pragmatism, and piety from inner smugness.”¹⁷⁴

Summary

Bonhoeffer’s own experience of becoming a faithful follower of Jesus Christ only a year before the Christology lectures, had left him in no doubt that if one was to be a disciple it would involve the whole person in encounter with the Christ, the Counter-Logos who appears in history, not as an idea that might be managed and classified, but as Person toward whom response as person is the only proper and adequate way of behaving. Since there is no way of assimilating this Word into the existing order of the human logos, the only proper and adequate question to be asked of the Word become flesh is “Who are you?” - a question that expresses “the otherness of the other. At the same time the “who question” interrogates the very existence of the one asking it...To sum up: the question of one’s existence is the question of transcendence.”¹⁷⁵ Or as it is in *Christ the Center*, “In theological terms: it is only from God that man knows who he is.”¹⁷⁶ While the question itself “is the question asked by horrified, dethroned human reason, and also the question of

¹⁷³ Ibid., 151-52.

¹⁷⁴ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 16.

¹⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 303.

¹⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 31.

faith: 'Who are you? Are you God's very self?' This is the question with which Christology alone is concerned."¹⁷⁷

The Christology that unfolds in the lectures is not systematic for it is, after all, contained in the body of perhaps eighteen lectures which themselves are reconstructed from student notes. Jaroslav Pelikan questions the way Bonhoeffer formulates the central issue, "How versus Who", thereby forcing the argument into an a priori pattern. He is also critical of the lectures which, he suggests, do not "rise much above the level of the textbook or theological encyclopaedia"; and asks "Is this interpretation of heresy and of dogma an accurate report of the history of Christology?"¹⁷⁸

Pelikan's contention that the Christology of the lectures is forced into "an a priori pattern" is an important point but one that Bonhoeffer sweeps away as a major stumbling block when he notes that

The question of 'who' is the question about transcendence. The question of "how" is the question about immanence. But because the One who is questioned is the Son himself, the immanent question of 'how' can never comprehend him. Not 'how' is it possible for you to exist? - that is the godless question, the serpent's question - but rather, 'who' are you?¹⁷⁹

Bonhoeffer's logic is the logic of existential encounter and, as Clifford Green points out, defies the problem posed by the Chalcedonian language of reification when referring to the problems posed by the paradox of the two natures in one person formulation. The logic of encounter is dismissive of any spectator attitude towards Christ:

'How' questions are questions of cognitive reason, not questions of faith; they are the means by which reason seeks to master a problem, not questions in which people are encountered by their Lord...If the proper question of Christology is 'who is Jesus Christ?' this is a question which can only be asked to the Christ who is *present*. Christology is not concerned with an ideal of Christ nor with the historical influence of Christ, but with the resurrected Christ, the living God, who is really present. Furthermore, Christ is present as person not in isolation but *only in relation to persons*.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 302.

¹⁷⁸ Pelikan, "Bonhoeffer's *Christologie* of 1933," 162.

¹⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 302-03.

¹⁸⁰ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 209.

With Pelikan's questions hanging over the lectures, why are they so compelling? I think it is because they are shaped by what Martin Marty calls Bonhoeffer's "comprehensiveness, directness, and theological intuition."¹⁸¹ In the summer of 1933 when Bonhoeffer offered the Christology lectures at the age of 27, he was already deeply involved in the emerging opposition to National Socialism. He would have known that lectures on the university campus would not have much to commend them unless they addressed the academic issues in an honest and robust way, as well as speaking to the white-hot issues of the day. For Bonhoeffer was always the practical theologian: Does it faithfully represent the address of God to humankind? Is it compelling? Will people be moved to live their life in the light of God's address to us in Jesus Christ? *Creation and Fall*, offered some months earlier, almost obliged Bonhoeffer to speak about Christ which he now did, drawing on his own experience of the contemporary Christ and interpreting that experience within the Christology of the lectures. His "theological intuition" did not lead him astray.¹⁸²

Already it is possible to see the shape of Bonhoeffer's response to the emerging church struggle. In a hint of the urgency and response of total obedience to Jesus that will become apparent in *Discipleship*, when Bonhoeffer writes, "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",¹⁸³ and while the issue of Jesus Christ's contemporaneity to the believer based on this self-attestation is central to the logic of the lectures, the church as the community of those who share this experience and knowledge of the contemporaneous Christ also takes a prominent place in the lectures.

¹⁸¹ Martin E. Marty, ed. *The Place of Bonhoeffer. Problems and Possibilities in His Thought* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963), 144.

¹⁸² It is interesting to observe the photographs on the covers of the English works editions: both *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* show Bonhoeffer as an unsmiling, rather earnest young man, 22 and 24 years of age respectively, in a dark suit and tie. By 1933 and now aged 27, in the photograph on the cover of *Creation and Fall* he has matured and appears to be much more relaxed and confident, with a smile and open necked shirt. The photograph on the cover of *Berlin 1932-1933* which contains the Christology lectures, shows Bonhoeffer dressed in a knitted sweater, wearing a tie, leaning forward as if to engage. He seems here an altogether believable and engaging man.

¹⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 358. The words in *Christ the Center* convey the sense more directly; "The only assurance which faith accepts is the Word itself, which comes to me through Christ." 110.

Bonhoeffer reiterates some of what has been said about the church in *Sanctorum Communio* and anticipates some of what will form the lectures series, *Discipleship*. It is Jesus Christ in the power of his resurrection, “the presence of Jesus Christ as history”,¹⁸⁴ who is present in his *pro-me* being, as contemporary address to humankind inviting dialogical response. Jesus Christ is present in the church’s preaching as the Word of judgement and the word of forgiveness and justification. Jesus Christ’s presence as Sacrament is assured as he expresses himself in his humiliation and exaltation. And in the *Christus absens*, the church-community is the form of his presence until his coming again. Bonhoeffer’s Christology is simultaneously incarnational, communal¹⁸⁵ and eschatological.

What is new is to be found in Bonhoeffer’s attention to the historical Jesus and “about his way of existing as a human being.”¹⁸⁶ It is his humiliation, one “of the modes of existence of the one who has become man”, that interests Bonhoeffer. As the editors to the English edition point out in their introduction, Bonhoeffer’s interest in the humiliation was his way of “emphasizing a potent theological point, namely, that in the very act of becoming *fully* human God in Jesus Christ has taken on *the full reality of human sinfulness*. “Humiliation” captures this better than “humbling”.¹⁸⁷ So, Bonhoeffer writes, “The conditions for his humiliation are set by the curse, the fall of Adam. In being humiliated, Christ, the God-human, enters of his own freewill into the world of sin and death.”¹⁸⁸ The humiliation is thus not in his being human but in his being hidden in the ὁμοίωμα σαρκός, the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom 8:3) “taking upon him all that flesh is heir to” but which, with the exaltation, is done away. Jesus enters the world of sin and death

...in such a way as to conceal himself [there], so that he is no longer recognisable visibly as the God-human. He comes among us humans not in μορφή θεοῦ (“Godly form”) but rather incognito, as a beggar among beggars, an outcast among outcasts; he comes among sinners as the one without sin, but also as a sinner among sinners.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Pelikan, “Bonhoeffer’s *Christologie* of 1933,” 156. “...The real presence of the resurrected Christ forms the only tenable presupposition for theological method.”

¹⁸⁵ Clifford Green, “Human Sociality and Christian Community,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 124.

¹⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 355.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 46.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 356.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

On the face of it Jesus' acts are ambiguous and it is only in faith that believers recognise that the more urgently people asked him if he were the Christ they also recognised that "Christ's incognito had to become even more impenetrable."¹⁹⁰ Even the resurrection is ambiguous and as the risen one Christ does not lift his incognito. That will happen only when he returns in glory.

All of which seems a long introduction to the incognito and humiliation of the church in which we can glimpse a form of the church that will start to unfold in the prison letters.

With the humiliated Christ, his church must also be humiliated. It cannot seek any visible authentication of its nature, as long as Christ has renounced doing so for himself. Nor may it, as a humiliated church, look upon itself with vain self-satisfaction, as though being humiliated were the visible proof that Christ is with it. There is no law here, and the humiliation of Christ is not a principle for the church to follow but rather a fact. Even the church can be high, and it can be lowly, if only both conditions occur for the sake of Christ. It is not good for the church to hasten to proclaim its lowliness. But it is not good either for the church to hasten to proclaim its greatness and power. It is only good for the church to seek forgiveness for its sins.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 358.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 360.

Chapter Three

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spatially structured ecclesiology in *Discipleship* and *Life Together*

‘Deprived of space beneath their feet...’

During the turbulent spring and summer of 1933, the period of Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* and Christology lecture series, the church struggle intensified. Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse were asked to produce a confession to be used as the theological basis for the emerging Confessing Church, “something usable and widely accepted by the time the national Synod met at the beginning of September”.¹ Earlier, Pastor Martin Niemöller had asked and declared, “Is there theologically a fundamental difference between the teachings of the Reformation and those proclaimed by the German Christians? We fear: Yes! – They say: No! – This lack of clarity must be cleared up through a confession for our time. If this doesn't come from the other side – and there's no sign of it coming soon - then it has to come from us; and it has to come in such a way that the others must say Yes or No to it...”.² In August 1933 Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse offered the Bethel Confession.³ The confession as it stood was not accepted and Bonhoeffer, feeling increasingly isolated within the Christian community in Germany, resolved to withdraw to England. In July, the previous month, he had travelled to London to be interviewed for the position of pastor to two German-speaking congregations and had come away from the interviews quite uncertain about his future or the wisdom of the venture.⁴

¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 301.

² Ibid.

³ A full copy of the “August version (of the Bethel Confession) that Bonhoeffer had made in Berlin” appears in Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 374-424.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, 235.

It is not clear how widely Bonhoeffer consulted before he finally made his decision to leave Germany and go to London in the autumn of 1933. Keith Clements claims that Bonhoeffer took advice from friends in Germany and England including Arthur Burroughs (Bishop of Ripon) who suggested to him that "England needed just such an interpreter of Germany at that moment", a reference to Bonhoeffer's ability to interpret to the ecumenical movement just exactly what was happening in Germany,⁵ while Bethge makes little reference to any substantial consultation with colleagues, except that friends who were "close to Bonhoeffer during that late summer of 1933 recall that he continued to be tormented by doubts about the proper course of action, even after he had decided to go to London."⁶

What is clear is that he did not talk with his mentor Karl Barth. However, immediately following his induction into the position of pastor to St George's German Evangelical Church in Sydenham and St Paul's German Reformed Church in London's East End in October 1933, he wrote to Barth informing him that he really had wanted to ask Barth whether he should go to London or not, adding "I knew that I would have to do what you told me and I wanted to remain free; so I simply withdrew myself."⁷ After having decided not to seek Barth's advice which he now acknowledges was "wrong...and I must ask you to forgive me", he continues;

I hope that I did not come purely out of annoyance at the state of affairs in our church and at the attitude of our particular group...If one is going to discover quite definite reasons for such decisions after the event, one of the strongest, I believe, was that I simply did not any longer feel up to the questions and demands which came to me. I felt that I was incomprehensibly in radical opposition to all my friends, that my views of matters were taking me more and more into isolation...and all that made me anxious, made me uncertain. I was afraid I would go wrong out of obstinacy - and I saw no reason why I should see these things more correctly, better than so many able and good pastors, to whom I looked up - and so I thought it was probably time to go into the wilderness for a while and simply do pastoral work...Another symptom was that the Bethel confession, on which I really worked so passionately, met with almost no understanding at all. I think I know for certain that this did not put me personally out of humour; there was really not the slightest occasion for that. I was simply uncertain in my mind.⁸

⁵ Keith Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006), 21.

⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 326.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, 234.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 235-36.

Barth did not reply immediately. One month later however he fired off an angry response to Bonhoeffer roundly castigating him for abandoning the fight and playing “Elijah under the juniper tree or Jonah under the gourd.”

Be glad that I do not have you here in person, for I would let go at you urgently in quite a different way, with the demand that you must now leave go of all these intellectual flourishes and special considerations...you are a German...the house of your church is on fire...you know enough and can say what you know well enough to be able to help and...you must return to your post by the next ship. As things are, shall we say the ship after next? I cannot tell you emphatically and urgently enough that you belong to Berlin and not to London.⁹

Bonhoeffer would not return to Germany to “the burning house of his church” until April 1935, eighteen months later. During his time in London, in addition to his preaching and pastoral responsibilities, Bonhoeffer was busy; he attempted “to influence directly the course of events in Germany through entreaty or advice to his allies there”; he successfully enlisted the support of the German pastors working in England and their congregations to the cause of the Confessing Church; and he recruited “the ecumenical movement into the struggle”¹⁰ in the process broadening his “own Lutheran base to encompass the spirituality of an ecumenical church.”¹¹ He also made numerous trips backwards and forwards to Berlin - “one is close enough to want to take part in everything, and too far away for active participation”¹² Bonhoeffer had written, - and built a significant number of contacts with English churchmen that sustained his ecumenical involvement on behalf of the Confessing Church and subsequently provided him with many of his foreign contacts in his work with the German military intelligence organisation, the *Abwehr*. The most significant of these would be with George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, with whom he built a lasting, lifelong friendship.¹³

⁹ Ibid., 239-40.

¹⁰ Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain*, 36.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Narrow Path. Daily Bible Readings with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Aileen Taylor (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), xi.

¹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 327.

¹³ For a compelling picture of George Bell, see Peter Raina. *Bishop George Bell. The Greatest Churchman - a Portrait in Letters*. (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006)

From London, Bonhoeffer watched the first national Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church convene in Barmen at the end of May 1934 and adopt the Barmen Declaration based on a draft by Karl Barth. In six bold theological assertions the Synod recognised the “indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of confessional churches”¹⁴ and grounded itself theologically in the constitution of the German Evangelical Church. At Barmen the Confessing Synod made it clear, that the Lordship of Christ stood over against the totalitarian state and that based on this Lordship and the supremacy of scripture, no diminishing of the Jewish dimension to the Christian Faith was permissible.

Six months later in October, he watched again as the Confessing Church, which had by now “rightly separated itself from the state church and represented a fighting and ‘monastic’ purification of it”,¹⁵ gather in Berlin-Dahlem. The logical outcome of the Barmen Synod and its Declaration was the formation of an emergency church government by the Dahlem Confessing Synod in which the Synod challenged the authority and legitimacy of both the Reich Church and the German Christian movement and proclaimed itself the only legitimate Protestant Church.¹⁶

In April 1933 Ludwig Müller, an unknown military chaplain from Königsberg, in Germany’s north-east, had been appointed by Hitler as his confidential adviser and envoy in all matters concerning the Protestant church. In June 1933 Müller became Reichsbischof and was appointed head of the Church of the Old Prussian Union and of the Church Federation Office to manage the *Gleichschaltung*, the Nazi regime's effort to integrate and harmonize the separate Protestant regional church bodies into a single Reich Church.¹⁷ Through *Gleichschaltung* every German institution was required to reshape itself to conform to National Socialist policies and through this process the Nazi regime successively established a system of total control over Germany's citizens achieving

¹⁴ From the concluding stanzas of the Barmen Declaration.

¹⁵ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 71.

¹⁶ http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1569 (Accessed 30 July 2010)

¹⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 270f. Müller suicided on 31 July 1945 following the German surrender.

crippling control over all aspects of German society and commerce.¹⁸ The Confessing Church emerged from this process retaining its independence and its commitment to the intent of the Declarations made at Barmen and Dahlem. This was possible only because of the fundamental rethinking of the nature of Church and Gospel that had been provoked by the ideology of National Socialism.

In April 1934 Müller had ordered the closure of the Old Prussian Union Preachers' Seminaries forcing the Confessing Church there "to take the responsibility for theological training, colleges, seminaries, and examination officials into its own hands."¹⁹ The issue that forced this move was the requirement that "students for the ministry were forbidden to take the examinations unless they could present proof of their pure Aryan descent. This move, so clearly dictated by Nazi ideology, forced the opposition Confessing Church to take the matter of ordination under its own control and to organise seminaries under Confessing Church auspices."²⁰ Eventually of course this would put the seminaries at odds with the Reich Bishop as well as the Nazi regime. In June 1934 Bonhoeffer was approached and invited to become Director of the Preachers' Seminary at Finkenwalde in Pomerania in the north-east of Germany. He agreed and his appointment was confirmed by the Old Prussian Council of Brethren in July. He was to commence his new job in January of the following year. Later than planned however, he left London in the spring of 1935, returned to Germany and at the age of 29, commenced work late in April. With the Confessing Church now under increasing siege from the Reich Bishop, he took up his position at Zingst in the north of Germany on the shores of the Baltic Sea and within weeks the seminary relocated to Finkenwalde near Stettin.

Bonhoeffer now devoted his time and energy to developing and integrating the theme of discipleship and life lived in obedience to Christ. Bethge proposes that as early as 1933, even before Finkenwalde, "discipleship" was fully evolved in Bonhoeffer's thinking. The theme of discipleship, he argues, goes right back to Barcelona in 1928 but that at that time his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount "was the conventional Lutheran harmless

¹⁸ Robin W. Lovin, "Bonhoeffer for the Twenty-First Century," *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly* 923, no. February 3, 2006 (2006).

¹⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 410.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 12.

understanding of it." The events of 1933 crystallized his appreciation of the need for something that would dynamically confront the issues of the day. "The preaching of a non-committal message of grace and the triviality of ecumenical statements on peace" would not save the day. According to Bonhoeffer, "the time for a 'breakthrough theology' had come...the emphasis now had to be on eschatology, not the theology of creation". By "interpreting belief in Christ as discipleship, Bonhoeffer raised (his) Christology from its academic deathbed."²¹ This rather startling claim emerges from the fact that *Discipleship* presents a Christology lived out in a form of radical obedience to Jesus who calls men and women, requiring in reply their obedient response as followers. "The call creates a new and full existence."²²

The Preachers' Seminary at Finkenwalde became a laboratory, a lived experiment as to what this new and full existence might mean; this radical form of discipleship that embraced justification – "the creation of the new person" – and sanctification – "the preservation and protection of that person until the day of Jesus Christ."²³ *Discipleship* (*Nachfolge*) and *Life Together*, describe and interpret the Finkenwalde experience and experiment.

Discipleship

*Discipleship*²⁴ is conceived in the context of young men in a process of theological and pastoral formation in preparation for parish ministry during a time of unfolding crisis. Befitting the times it is urgent, intense and Christocentric, representing "the Christological intensification of [Bonhoeffer's] position in *Sanctorum Communio*".²⁵ It would become "Finkenwalde's own badge of distinction."²⁶

²¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 457-60.

²² *Ibid.*, 455.

²³ *Ibid.*, 454.

²⁴ *Discipleship* emerged from student lectures given by Bonhoeffer at the Zingst and Finkenwalde seminaries between 1935 and 1937 and at lectures given during the winter semester 1935-36 at Friedrich-Wilhelm University, Berlin and into the spring term of 1936 when his teaching permit was finally revoked by the Reich Ministry of Education on August 5, 1936. Bonhoeffer completed his work on *Nachfolge* on August 26, 1937. It was published in November 1937. In 1948, SCM Press published an abridged English edition of *Nachfolge*, as *The Cost of Discipleship* and in 1949 it was published in the USA.

²⁵ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. 77

²⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 450.

Discipleship also became Bonhoeffer's testimony to his own life, changed and transformed as it had been in the summer of 1932, three years earlier. By now he was in no doubt at all that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ belonged to the church and that this imposed a sacrificial obligation upon him. It was now becoming clearer to him how far that obligation must go. *Discipleship* is his declaration about the limits of that obligation and his prescription for the "revival of the church and of the ministry" which by now had become his greatest concern.²⁷

Clifford Green has argued that that the theology of radical obedience that Bonhoeffer calls for overlays the theology of sociality spelled out in the earlier *Sanctorum Communio*,²⁸ and that autobiography shines out from almost every page of *Discipleship* though it is interesting to note that Bonhoeffer himself later wondered whether or not he had got it wrong. Years later in a letter written from prison to Eberhard Bethge he recounted his 1931 meeting in the United States with a young French pastor, Jean Lasserre. Lasserre had said at the time that he would like to become a saint, while Bonhoeffer replied saying that he would like to 'learn to have faith'. "I thought I myself could learn to have faith by trying to live something like a saintly life. I suppose I wrote *Discipleship* at the end of this path. Today I clearly see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by it."²⁹

But the idea of "learning to have faith" or "acquiring faith" did not capture the urgency of the moment nor did it reflect the existential or theological dimension of obedient response Bonhoeffer was now becoming aware of. He had already been involved in a battle with the ecumenical movement about this very point. While in London, Bonhoeffer had urged those in the movement to break their ties with the Reich Church but to no avail. Bonhoeffer had written to Henry Henriad, the Director of the World Alliance in Geneva,³⁰ castigating him for the slowness of the Alliance's response to the urgent situation unfolding in Germany,

...the slowness of ecumenical procedure is beginning to look to me like irresponsibility...To procrastinate and prevaricate simply because you're afraid of erring...seems to me to run almost counter to love...to believe means to decide. And can there still be any doubt as to the nature of that decision? For

²⁷ Ibid., 205.

²⁸ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 154f.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 486. (Letter to Eberhard Bethge, July 21 1944).

³⁰ The 'World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches'.

Germany today it is the Confession...the cause of Christ is at stake, and are we to be found sleeping?...Christ is looking down at us and asking whether there is anyone who still confesses him.³¹

The year before, Bonhoeffer had written to his friend Erwin Sutz also whilst in London, asking Sutz for some help in his preaching on the Sermon on the Mount. "Discipleship of Christ - I'd like to know what that is – it is not exhausted in our concept of faith."³² Urgency and the search for the shape of a radical obedience in response to God's Word and God's world would now drive Bonhoeffer's search for a way forward. This is the point that John de Gruchy is making when he writes about the way Bonhoeffer structured *Discipleship*; "Bonhoeffer clearly wanted to show that following Jesus the suffering Messiah (the Synoptics) is an integral part of believing in and obeying Christ as Lord (Paul). In this way he sought to counter the Lutheran tendency to separate justification by faith from costly discipleship both in theology and practice."³³

"Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace."³⁴ The opening salvo, the first words of *Discipleship*, is flung with urgency towards the Church in Germany and though its meaning looks plain enough, behind these words lies Bonhoeffer's awareness of the depth of the struggle he was embarking on.

It was in Søren Kierkegaard's³⁵ critique of the hollow formalities of the Danish National church a century earlier that Bonhoeffer now found an ally. In the Danish church and now in the German Lutheran church, Luther's understanding of grace was being badly misrepresented and had now become "a principle of righteousness, rather than the outcome of God's gift of righteousness". When this happens "there is no new existence in Jesus Christ, no boundary between the life of sin and the new life of holiness, no need to embrace the cross. Such Christians have merely to let grace do it all and to accommodate themselves to the orders of creation as the only true way to obey God. This was the cheap grace against which Bonhoeffer inveighed."³⁶ Bonhoeffer, like Kierkegaard before him,

³¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 368-9.

³² *Ibid.*, 458.

³³ de Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Witness to Jesus Christ*, 25.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43.

³⁵ Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855), influential Danish philosopher and theologian.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition". 12.

was convinced that in order to avoid this error and recover the experience of costly grace, as distinct from talk about a doctrine of (cheap) grace, a new radical obedience to Jesus was necessary. And to make the point clearer he reminds his listeners that “Our confession will not save us...God will not ask someday whether our confession was evangelical, but whether we did God’s will. God will ask that of everyone, including us. The boundaries of the church are not the boundaries of a privilege, but those of God’s merciful selection and call.”³⁷

The concept of boundary, already used by Bonhoeffer, becomes an even more important spatial referent in *Discipleship* for it is already clear that the boundary of the church, established by “God’s merciful selection and call” frames Christian identity defined as the difference between “the life of sin and the new life of holiness” and that without this boundary there is no distinctiveness in Christian being or confession, no new existence in Christ.

Lisa Dahill in her book *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood, Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation*, draws attention to this new point of reference that Jesus becomes in the life of the obedient follower.

The call (*Ruf*) of Jesus is the first act of grace...his call comes as the inbreaking voice of God, announcing the possibility of a new form of life in radical discontinuity with the old...the voice of Jesus creates a new reality in which people are invited to live...³⁸

Then comes the appeal to allegiance, the *Bindung an Jesus Christus* or the being bound to Jesus. Here is the “spatial metaphor of proximity to Jesus” and this being bound to Jesus is the centre of discipleship.³⁹ “Bonhoeffer makes clear that Jesus isn’t interested in merely being added to already configured lives as an appendage. Christ wants to be the center of people’s lives forcing them to let go of all that previously occupied them.”⁴⁰ This is the demand of costly grace.

³⁷ Ibid., 179.

³⁸ Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood. Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 74-75.

³⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77.

The visible form of the body of Christ and the occupation of space on earth

In the summer of 1937, only a matter of months before the Gestapo would close the seminary at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer delivered the lectures, “The Visible Church-Community”.⁴¹ In these lectures, Bonhoeffer places two claims side by side; “The Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth”, for which there is one immediate consequence: “...anything that takes up space is visible.”⁴² Then in a series of arguments and assertions he leaves the church in no doubt about the given-ness of its visibility and presence in the life of the nation. But is it not obvious that the church takes up space and is visible? Bonhoeffer must have thought not, for his concern was with the “evil sophistry which uses the cross of Jesus to derive from it the church’s call to conformation to the world.”⁴³

Bonhoeffer draws attention to the spatial and visual metaphor used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to underline the truth that the disciples of Jesus can never be invisible; they are, rather, the city built on a hill.⁴⁴ He pays little attention to the visible city except to say that it “is the community of disciples.” To search for a way to be invisible is not an option, “Any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows him.”⁴⁵ In addition, the disciples are salt and light (Matt 5: 13); the question is never asked as to whether the disciples want to be salt and light.

Placed in the context of the Confessing Church *vis a vis* the National Socialists and the Reich Church, it is not hard to see that Bonhoeffer is making a direct appeal to the hearts and minds of his listeners, reminding them that Jesus’ call to follow leaves a person with only two options: one is either to become a visible disciple on the narrow road, the other is not to follow.

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 225-52. There is also an earlier ‘section’ with the same title (110-15) embedded in his explication of the Sermon on the Mount.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 225. Bonhoeffer will return to this theme - using these same words - in the *Ethics* “Christ, Reality and Good”, 62-63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-14; Matt 5: 14-16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

Bonhoeffer's observation was that by the summer of 1937 the Reich Church had well and truly become an apparatus of the National Socialists and that by joining the state in its project to exclude Christians of Jewish heritage from leadership within the church and, by extension the state's antisemitic programme, the Reich Church had become invisible and an invisible following after Jesus was a contradiction. It no longer declared a message that put the local gods on notice and under judgement, nor did it call everyone to a radical obedience of discipleship by grace through faith in Christ. The Reich Church had given away its ministry of redemption. It had settled into a programme of accommodation even if that included the articulation of faultless doctrine. This was precisely the point that attracted Bonhoeffer's ire; for in contrast to the claim that the Body of Christ takes up physical space and is visible, he proposes that "a truth, a doctrine, or a religion needs no space of its own. Such entities are bodyless. They do not go beyond being heard, learned, or understood"⁴⁶ and the church is not defined by "a truth [or a] doctrine" alone.⁴⁷

In commenting on this proposition of the visibility of the body, André Dumas notes:

For faith, no matter how evangelically correct it may be, is only an abstract belief when it is cut off from the immediacy of obedience...but if (the churches) are not willing to respond unquestioningly to the call of Jesus Christ, have they not made faith a matter of words rather than deeds? Their faith may be doctrinally unassailable, but are they *disciples*, bearing responsibility along with Christ for witnessing in the world? They may know all about the history of redemption, but are they agents of redemption now?⁴⁸

The essential, defining reality of the church is that it is visible and occupies space in the world; it is this church to which we shall point and say in faith "the new creation has come about in the church-community."⁴⁹ In this regard, Bonhoeffer was placing himself well within mainstream Christian theology, for as Badcock points out, when we confess in the great ecumenical creed

'We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church'...here at least, something of what we say we believe in *can* be seen in space and time as an ordinary human institution. Though we may draw Augustinian distinctions

⁴⁶ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁷ Truths and doctrines were still important to Bonhoeffer for there "is still such a thing as heresy", though Bonhoeffer does concede that "it is not always easy to recognise where a legitimate theological interpretation ends and heresy begins." Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 231-32.

⁴⁸ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 119.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 244.

between the visible and the invisible church, mainstream Christian theology is committed to the view that the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church is, in the final analysis, what we can actually see. There is in ecclesiology no final escape into otherworldliness.⁵⁰

Bonhoeffer grounds visibility in the incarnation; Jesus was born in a stable and “hung on a gibbet”. Jesus’ own body was solid, visible and space-occupying and by extension we can say “The body of the exalted Lord is likewise a visible body, taking the form of the church-community.”⁵¹ By occupying space, Bonhoeffer insists, the church has substance; like the light on the hill, it can and must be seen, and it cannot be hidden; there can be no convenient retreat into any form of docetism of the sort Bonhoeffer claimed Hegel had demonstrated in his own theology of the church. This holy, catholic, and apostolic church is no apparent body that denies its own visibility. If it would become like this, the church cannot claim to be the Body of Christ.⁵² It is almost possible to hear Bonhoeffer’s impatience with the use of what he believes is the dangerous notion of invisibility which “implies that the visible i.e., the empirical church is not church.”⁵³ He has already addressed this issue in *Sanctorum Communio*:

...the term invisible is...not used here as the opposite of what is visible to the eyes, but to describe the essence of an object, whether it be visually perceptible or an object of thought. The ‘essential’ church becomes literally visible in the empirical church. Its members are very concretely visible, but only faith sees them in their capacity as members. It makes no sense to speak, as is quite frequently done, of the invisible church becoming visible. The ‘invisible’ church is visible from the outset. It is proper only to speak of the empirical form corresponding to a greater or lesser degree to the essence. The invisible and the visible church are one single church.⁵⁴

It will be recalled that in his Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer had gone to great lengths to ensure that his students understood that the “early church stood against this (docetism), because it knew what the docetists of every age have forgotten, namely, that Christ was not an idea but rather an event. It is not the idea of a Redeemer that must be proclaimed, but rather Christ who must be understood as having become human. Only he can redeem real

⁵⁰ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 8.

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 226.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 226. f.6.

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 221.f.92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

people. Everything depends on Jesus' existence in history."⁵⁵ In the same lecture Bonhoeffer had suggested that "all liberal theology must be understood in the context of a docetic Christology. Liberal theology only wanted to see, in Jesus, the embodiment of a certain doctrine. Thus the humanity of Jesus is basically not taken seriously..."⁵⁶ And so, he concluded, "the church must reject every form of docetism...every form of Greek idealistic thinking to the extent that it works with the distinction between idea and appearance. For with this distinction such idealism abolishes the first premise of all theology, that God, out of mercy freely given, truly became a human being, rather than becoming, out of necessity, the realization of some human principle."⁵⁷

Bonhoeffer's assertion that the church is visible and that it is to be perceived as concrete reality occupying real space on planet earth was expressed as a real concern in a 1931 letter, written to his friend Helmut Rössler. Bonhoeffer had written, "I am now chaplain at the Technical Institute: how am I to preach such things to these people? Who still believes it? This invisibility will destroy us. If we cannot see in our personal lives that Christ was present then let us see it at least in India."⁵⁸ But this insane and persistent being thrown back to the invisible God himself – nobody can take that forever."⁵⁹ Wanting to get beyond the idea of God to the reality of God himself, Bonhoeffer was quite disinterested in the adjectives that were, and still are, frequently used to describe God; words such as "omnipotent" or "omniscient" or phrases such as "God who is God always and everywhere". These words and phrases merely 'describe' an idea of God.⁶⁰ And so, a year later, in his 1932 paper to the Youth Conference in Czechoslovakia entitled "A Theological Basis for the World Alliance?" Bonhoeffer had said "the church must be able to say the Word of God, the word of authority, here and now, in the most concrete way possible, from knowledge of the situation." Pointing clearly towards the position he will espouse in the *Ethics* a decade later he continued, "The church may not therefore preach timeless principles however true, but only commandments which are true today. God is 'always'

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 336.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁵⁸ A reference to Bonhoeffer's hope that at some stage he might visit with Mohandas Gandhi at his ashram in India.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

God to us ‘today’.”⁶¹ “God alone is the *concretissimum*.”⁶² What matters is the God who is concrete.

It was this commitment to concreteness that spilled over into Bonhoeffer’s desire to see the church as visible event. Indeed, in his essay “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Political Theology”, Stanley Hauerwas maintains, with a great deal of credibility it must be said, that “Bonhoeffer’s work from beginning to end was the attempt to reclaim the visibility of the church as the necessary condition for the proclamation of the gospel in a world that no longer privileged Christianity.”⁶³

In a 1936 Finkenwalde lecture, Bonhoeffer refers to Luther’s doctrine of grace and noted that as a result of Martin Luther’s confirmation of Constantine’s covenant with the church a minimal ethic prevailed. “Luther of course wanted a complete ethic for everyone, not only for the monastic orders. Thus the existence of the Christian became the existence of the citizen. The nature of the church vanished into the invisible realm. But in this way the New Testament message was fundamentally misunderstood, inner-worldliness became a principle.”⁶⁴ It was this retreat from the world, represented by “inner-worldliness” that Bonhoeffer would not tolerate. His commitment to visibility was part and parcel of his search for the concrete character of revelation and his concern with the witness of this truth to the life of the church. “According to the witness of the New Testament, the church is the city of the hill. Today, it has to venture to live ‘outside in its own life in simple obedience...It has to define its limits...It has to make itself distinct and to be a community which hears the Apocalypse. It has to testify to its alien nature and to resist the false principle of inner worldliness.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, 162.

⁶² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching. Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. Clyde E. Fant, trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 140.

⁶³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith. Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 34.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, 324.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 324.

In his essay “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson’s Ecclesiology,”⁶⁶ David Yeago draws attention to two phenomena that played a significant part in shaping post-Reformation Lutheran ecclesiological development. First, Lutheran churches “became dependencies of the princes” and the church-government of the territorial princes “resulted in the churches being absorbed into the state and under its direct authority to a degree unprecedented in Christian history”, and second, Lutheran pietism “tended to presuppose the spiritual irrelevance of ecclesiastical structures...(and) to see only instrumental significance in its outward order of life.”⁶⁷

In the nineteenth century these two “inheritances came together, against the backdrop of massive cultural and political change and took programmatic form in theological theories that explicitly declared the visible church an essentially secular phenomenon.”⁶⁸ As an example, Yeago quotes Adolf von Harless⁶⁹ who claimed that the only norms that apply to the ordering of the church “are those of natural law and creation order” and that “there is no communal form distinctive to the church as a community of salvation, the eschatological community”. On this basis the church should be thought of simply as a “functional delivery system” for preaching and sacramental celebration in which the heart of the believer is nourished and fortified.⁷⁰ The implication is that while this can be argued as a sort of public event it is an event that has no “public effect”. The outcome and end of these quasi-public events is that they do not “occupy their own space in the public world; they are rather an inward and private experience that wins public presence only in a secondary, indirect, and supremely ambiguous way.”⁷¹

It was this point of view that gave Emanuel Hirsch,⁷² supporter of the state church and “the most significant theological theorist of a Lutheran embrace of Nazism”⁷³ the leverage he

⁶⁶ David S. Yeago, “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson’s Ecclesiology,” in *Trinity, Time, and Church. A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 208-25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 209-10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁹ David Yeago (“The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson’s Ecclesiology”, 210) cites Adolf von Harless (1806-1879) German Lutheran theologian as “the founder of modern Lutheran theological ethics.”

⁷⁰ Yeago, “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson’s Ecclesiology,” 211.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁷² Emmanuel Hirsch (1888-1972) studied theology in Berlin and in 1914 joined the Theological Faculty at Bonn University. He was recognised for his expertise on Luther and Church History. In 1936 he became

needed when he claimed that the church had no need nor right to make any claims for its form of being within Nazi society. The church was, he said, supra-historical and not a “particular earthly community of shared destiny.”⁷⁴ In more muted tones the Erlangen theologians, Paul Althaus⁷⁵ and Werner Elert⁷⁶ said the same thing in 1933, when in support of *Gleichschaltung* they concluded “Oneness in Christ is for the Lutheran Confessions no question of outward organisation, but a question of faith.”⁷⁷ In addition, both Elert and Althaus signed the June 1934 Ansbach Memorandum attacking the Barmen Declaration, “The law...obligates us to the natural orders to which we are subject, such as family, people [Volk], race (that is blood relationship)...”⁷⁸ but not, by exclusion, the church of Jesus Christ.

“By contrast, Bonhoeffer was concerned as early as 1932 with ‘repudiation of the notion that there are divinely willed special (autonomous) spheres of life [Eigengesetzlichkeiten] that are removed from the lordship of Jesus Christ’”.⁷⁹ He later wrote that “orientation toward autonomous natural orders, or orders of creation, denies that the ‘law of Christ,’ as it is proclaimed, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, could have a relevant meaning for those orders”.⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer took the view that this theological logic, borne out of natural order theologies, sidelined the church into invisibility and it brought him into direct conflict with men like Elert, Hirsch and Althaus. *Discipleship* should be read not simply as profound devotional literature but as an ecclesiology burning with an urgent response to this very different form of ecclesiology; one that invited the invisibility of the church and its compliance with the Reich.

Professor of Systematic Theology and from 1921 until 1945 was a professor at Göttingen University. During the years of Hitler’s rule he was a National Socialist loyalist.

⁷³ Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler. Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1985), 120-97.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Yeago, “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology,” 216.

⁷⁵ Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler. Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch*, 79-119.

⁷⁶ Werner Elert (1885-1954) was a German Lutheran theologian and Professor of Church History and then Systematic Theology at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Yeago, “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology,” 217.

⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 56.f.36.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

So in his famous “The body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth”⁸¹ declaration, Bonhoeffer is deliberately making a stand over against traditional Lutheran ecclesiologies, arguing that the church “precisely in its eschatological newness as the body of Christ, claims for itself a distinct public presence, a structured social space of its own.”⁸² In this regard Bonhoeffer was following the 19th century Lutheran pastor Wilhelm Loehe⁸³ who “read the New Testament as a community-forming text whose proclamation seeks a public result, the building up of a new and sanctified people living together in a new way.” Loehe urged the parishes for which he was responsible to ground and centre their life in the Eucharist, from which everything else would then flow.⁸⁴

The background to Bonhoeffer’s claims that the Body of Christ takes up physical space on earth and that anything that takes up space is visible, is embedded in a comment and a question Bonhoeffer had asked as he began his lectures on the New Testament ahead of the summer course in 1935. “The present situation in church and theology” he began, “can be summed up in the form of the following question: Does the church take up a space within the world, and if so, what kind of space is it? This is basically the question around which the whole theological confrontation with the state revolves.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 225.

⁸² Yeago, “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson’s Ecclesiology,” 218-19.

⁸³ Wilhelm Loehe (1808-1872) a Lutheran pastor whose primary interest was that a parish ground its life in the sacrament of the eucharist believing that that was the source from which all the ministries of the people and parish would spring.

⁸⁴ Yeago, “The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson’s Ecclesiology,” 212.

⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 225. f.2.

Lebensraum – ‘a structured social space of its own’

So, what kind of space in the world is Bonhoeffer talking about? What dynamic shapes the space the church occupies? Both questions are intimately tied to the visibility of the church and Bonhoeffer provides answers in *Discipleship* which in part reflect traditional reformation depictions of the church and make significant extensions to them. The sort of space the church occupies becomes apparent:

1. As the church gathers to hear the preaching of the word which is the church's "witness to the physical event of God's revelation in Jesus Christ."⁸⁶ In the goodness of God, this preaching creates a concrete and visible church community which remains faithful to the teaching. "Christ present in the Holy Spirit"⁸⁷ constantly recreates the community of witness to Jesus. Following Luther's efforts "to cultivate the proper reading and use of Scripture as a 'means of grace'" especially in the preaching of the forgiveness of sins, absolution, and the consolation of believers,⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer attributed sacramental significance to the proclaimed and heard Word - the *Sacramentum Verbi*.⁸⁹ "Because the Word is the Christ accepting humankind, it is full of grace but also full of judgement. Either we will let ourselves be accepted and...forgiven and...borne up by Christ, or we remain unaccepted"⁹⁰ The church is shaped by and has its being in what might be described as a *proclamatory space*.
2. As the church gathers to celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper emanating "from the true humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ" and both given "solely to the church-community."⁹¹ This *liturgical space* in which the church has its being is an extremely important space since, as David Yeago notes quoting Peter

⁸⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 228.

⁸⁸ Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology. A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁸⁹ Peter Zimmerling, *Bonhoeffer Als Praktischer Theologe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006). Zimmerling's book, *Bonhoeffer als Praktischer Theologe*, collects much of the more recent German language discussion of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology as well as referring to the Finkenwalde lecture cycles. In these, attention is paid to preaching, liturgy, pastoral care and congregational nurture (Gemeindeaufbau). In regard to Bonhoeffer's "high" view of the Word and preaching, Zimmerling finds Bonhoeffer's sacramentalisation of preaching "highly problematic" (90). He places Jesus Christ and sociality at the heart of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology.

⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching. Lectures on Homiletics*, 104.

⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 228-29.

Brunner, should the state ever attempt to reach for God's glory and seek to wear the authority rightfully due to God alone the "liturgy of the church, without the least change in its order, by its sheer performance, will by inner necessity become a political declaration of war and an act of political struggle."⁹²

3. As the church-community orders the gifts given to it for service, each requiring different offices or ministries dependant on the spiritual judgement of each church-community "as it appoints its members for service...for the benefit of the church-community."⁹³ This dynamic inspires an *ordered space* where the church has its being.
4. In the space the church-community claims for the daily life of its members, its *living-space* or habitat (*Lebensraum*). This space claimed by the community that "finds its place between the word of proclamation and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper"⁹⁴ is the space where all of life is taken up "into Christ."⁹⁵ Here, believers work and rejoice, speak and admonish, show hospitality and marry, are imprisoned in the Lord, are slaves in Christ. This is the community of those whose lives are centred in Christ, this Jesus, this completely new reality.⁹⁶ It is the form and shape of the life "necessary to witness to the reality of the new age begun in Christ."⁹⁷ This dynamic inspires a *living space*, a *Lebensraum*, where the church has its being.

Collectively, this living space or *Lebensraum* has the character of a political statement and the eschatological community starts to take shape "and delineate itself in a first outline in the struggling and suffering church."⁹⁸ John Phillips suggests that this explicit delineation of a *Lebensraum* is Bonhoeffer's "attempt to give life to what could have become a static, institutionalised ecclesiology, to thrust the inner-directed and defensive Confessing

⁹² Yeago, "The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology," 222-25.

Quoting Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M.H. Bertram (St Louis: Concordia), 1969, 209.

⁹³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 230.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 232-33. In the same place, Bonhoeffer notes "that all Christian community exists between word and sacrament...and begins and ends in worship".

⁹⁵ Ibid., 234.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 229ff.

⁹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Howard Yoder," in *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*, ed. Stephen R. Spencer Timothy Larsen, and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 210.

⁹⁸ Peter Brunner quoted in Yeago, "The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology," 224.

Church, with her visible boundaries between herself and the world, out into the world.”⁹⁹ This is very likely the case since here in *Discipleship* this orthodox (reformation) delineation of the church has radical intent - to lay the groundwork for the changing shape of the church's form to assume that of the suffering servant and suffering church.

In a highly relevant reference David Yeago points to the writings of Confessing Church theologian and Bonhoeffer contemporary, Peter Brunner,¹⁰⁰ who in linking the sacrificed body of Christ with the Spirit-worked body of the church "implies that the eschatological presence is located precisely in the Spirit's gathering of a *community* centered in the eucharistic anamnesis...the eschatological new reality is present in the world as the assembly of a people, and thus, or so it would seem, as a "political" phenomenon in its own right.”¹⁰¹

In *Lebensraum*, Bonhoeffer draws attention to the living space, the structured social space of the church-community into which the believer is drawn through and by obedience to and faith in Jesus Christ; this is the same living-space in which the new ethic is practised in such a way that it gives a distinctive shape to this new Christian habitat.

Where the world despises other members of the Christian family, Christians will love and serve them. If the world does violence to them, Christians will help them and provide them relief. Where the world subjects them to dishonour and insult, Christians will sacrifice their own honor in exchange for their disgrace. Where the world seeks gain, Christians will renounce it; where it exploits, they will let go; where it oppresses, they will stoop down and lift up the oppressed. Where the world denies justice, Christians will practice compassion; where it hides behind lies, they will speak out for those who cannot speak, and testify for the truth. For the sake of brothers or sisters - be they Jew or Greek, slave or free, strong or weak, of noble or of common birth - Christians will renounce all community with the world, for they serve the community of the body of Jesus Christ. Being a part of this community, Christians cannot remain hidden from the world. They have been called out of the world and follow Christ.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 120.

¹⁰⁰ After the war, Peter Brunner (1900-1981) became Professor of Systematic Theology in Heidelberg from 1947 until his retirement in 1968.

¹⁰¹ Yeago, "The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology," 222-25.

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 237.

That Bonhoeffer takes and uses the same word used by the National Socialists in their justification for ruthless military expansion across national boundaries as of right, and infuses it with a new meaning driven by the form of Jesus Christ himself always more closely taking the form of the suffering servant, was an extremely courageous move. The two living spaces could not be more different. *Lebensraum* signifies one of the boldest spatial metaphors used by Bonhoeffer.

The notion of a nationalistic German expansion into lands that were not as populated as Germany has a long history dating back to the mediaeval period when the practice of *Ostsiedlung* or German Eastward Expansion was practiced. However it was the nineteenth century German geographer and ethnographer, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) who first used the concept of "living space" in the way that the National Socialists would later use it. Ratzel believed that a naturally healthy and vibrant species would of necessity expand to fill other spaces where they would take root and expand.

Later the idea came to be used as a slogan in Germany where it referred to the unification of the country and the conquering and take over colonies as the Germans said the French and English had already done. Adolf Hitler revived and popularised the idea in the first volume of *Mein Kampf* where "he discoursed at length on this problem of *Lebensraum* - living space - a subject which obsessed him to his dying breath."¹⁰³ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had written "Without consideration of traditions and prejudices, Germany must find the courage to gather our people and their strength for an advance along the road that will lead this people from its present restricted living space to new land and soil, and hence also free it from the danger of vanishing from the earth or of serving others as a slave nation."¹⁰⁴

Discipleship was published in November 1937. Co-incidentally, on November 5 1937, Hitler met with his Commanders-in-Chief in Berlin and explained that "he regarded the remarks he was about to make as of such importance, that, in the event of his death, they should be regarded as his last will and testament. "...The aim of German policy", he said, "was to make secure and to preserve the racial community and to enlarge it. It was therefore a question of space [*Lebensraum*]. The Germans...have the right to a greater

¹⁰³ William L Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. A History of Nazi Germany* (London: Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1960), 82.

¹⁰⁴ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 646.

living space than other peoples...Germany's future was therefore wholly conditional upon the solving of the need for space."¹⁰⁵ He then communicated his "irrevocable decision to go to war."¹⁰⁶ *Lebensraum* would be the prize and it would be found by annexing and conquering, Czechoslovakia and Austria, then Poland, and Russia. The acquisition of other territories in this way under the National Socialists became one of Germany's most important foreign policy objectives.

If conquered territory would be the prize for the German people in their quest for *Lebensraum*, the Christian *Lebensraum*, Bonhoeffer said, would be the obedient believer's prize as she or he was drawn into the church community where Christians would love and serve the world. The texture of life within this particular Christian *Lebensraum* is the texture of costly grace where obedience to Christ's call draws believers into public suffering at the very point where there is a "clash between the space the body of Christ claims and occupies in this world for worship, offices, and the civic life of its members, and the world's own claim for space."¹⁰⁷ When this happens and there are competing claims for space between two completely different understandings of *Lebensraum*, it is the form of Christ that informs the Christian in his or her search for validity and authenticity. Bonhoeffer has shown that he was not interested in laying out "the infinite possible choices of what one 'might' do, but to narrow down to the finite choice of what one 'must' do. He who lives as a contemporary of Jesus knows that this narrowing down is the price of action, just as obedience is the price of grace."¹⁰⁸

Now in the struggle for space in which they were able to feed and clothe themselves from the fruits of their own labour and with a heightened sense of apocalyptic in which the choice for Christians is to escape from the world or to go to prison, Bonhoeffer declares that "when they [the Christians] have been deprived of their last inch of space here on earth, the end will be near."¹⁰⁹ It is hard to know whether this is an historical or an eschatological pronouncement; it could be both of course, for the concept of being deprived of space on earth goes hand in hand with the concept of visibility: remove the last place where the city might stand or the light might shine, and there is no place left for any

¹⁰⁵ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. A History of Nazi Germany*, 305.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 307.

¹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 245-46.

¹⁰⁸ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 247.

witness to the truth. For those with ears to hear and minds to discern it, this could only have been a reference to the evil that was overwhelming and overtaking Germany at that very moment.

Now Bonhoeffer's articulation changes, for immediately it leads to a most significant development in Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. An already familiar motif, that of the one who stands in my place, takes on a startling new clarity: now the church itself takes on the form of the rejected, suffering servant who is the Lord of all. Starting with the Apostle Paul's injunction to "be transformed into a new form (μεταμορφωσθε) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God" (Rom 12:2), Bonhoeffer points to this form which is solely to be determined by Christ; it is in fact the form of the church. For

...the community of Christ has a 'form' that is different from that of the world. The community is called to be ever increasingly transformed into this form. It is, in fact, the form of Christ himself. He came into the world and in infinite mercy bore us and accepted us. And yet he did not become conformed to the world but was actually rejected and cast out by it. He was not of this world. If it engages the world properly, the visible church-community will always more closely assume the form of its suffering Lord.¹¹⁰

The church, like its Lord who suffered, will overcome the world, not by ridding it of evil, but by being transformed into the form of the suffering servant-Lord.

With the humiliated Christ, his church must also be humiliated. It cannot seek any visible authentication of its nature, as long as Christ has renounced doing so for himself. Nor may it, as a humiliated church, look upon itself with vain self-satisfaction, as though being humiliated were the visible proof that Christ is with it. There is no law here, and the humiliation of Christ is not a principle for the church to follow but rather a fact.¹¹¹

The church in claiming and carving out for itself a *Lebensraum* now finds itself in contestable space and is of necessity required to demonstrate a life shaped by its suffering-servant Lord. This is no principle, Bonhoeffer reminds us, but a fact.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 247.

¹¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 360.

Boundary and the validity of the Confessing Church

Boundaries, perimeters and circumferences

Bonhoeffer had already located the concrete expression of Christ in the world as the church since “The church-community, between his ascension and his second coming, is the form he takes... 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.” This is the way “in which the Christ exists who is present, exalted, and humiliated.”¹¹² Theologically this has the form of a stumbling block and practically it was also causing Bonhoeffer difficulties. For the issue of the relation between church and state that Bonhoeffer was attempting to address was now, because of the German Christians who claimed to be the true church, turning into what looked like a struggle within the church itself. John Godsey points out just how confusing these developments really were.

Until now the boundary between church and state seemed clearly defined, and one had only to guard the boundary and explain the duties of each in respect to the other. But all at once the situation changed, and the church found its clear view vis-à-vis the state clouded by treason within its own borders! The German Christians, who professed to be church but who were consciously or unconsciously manipulated by the diabolic cunning of the Nazi state, were able to confuse the issues to such an extent that the church struggle appeared to be an inner-church instead of a church-state affair.¹¹³

This raised the issue of boundary, the spatial reference now used by Bonhoeffer in a structural and theological-eschatological sense.

Bonhoeffer draws the theological shape of this church hinting at the structural and theological use of the idea of boundary; “This space [of the church-community], which has

¹¹² Ibid., 323.

¹¹³ Godsey. *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 111. Whether Bonhoeffer's theological resistance 'worked' seemed unclear to some. Matthew Hockenos, for one, in a sobering note, draws attention to what he calls "the incompatibility of Lutheran theology and political resistance." Speaking of the divisions that "racked the Confessing Church during the church struggle" and carried over into postwar Germany he writes, "The church struggle convinced them (the conservatives or the Dahlemites) either of the error in developing a theologically based political opposition to the state, or conversely, that the error was to mount a theological opposition but fail to draw the political consequences of that theology." Matthew D. Hockenos. "The Church Struggle and the Confessing Church: An Introduction to Bonhoeffer's Context." *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Volume 2, no. 1 (2007):19

its *foundation* in the presence of the incarnate Christ, is defined and delimited by *the commandments*. The proclamation of the whole incarnate Christ on one side, and the commandments on the other, are the perimeters within which the Christian lives.”¹¹⁴

In his telling of the story of The Rich Young Ruler¹¹⁵ (Matt 19: 16-22), Bonhoeffer makes it clear that the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the announcement that there is another leader who *is* the new kingdom. The Christological centre and the call to obedient discipleship defines the space where the believers find their *Lebensraum*. This call is to follow Jesus Christ while life in community with Christ comprises the boundaries, or perimeters - within which life is to be lived.

But there was a problem. While the Reformation had “set free the question of the nature of the church from the question of who belongs to it,” Bonhoeffer pointed out that Roman Catholicism and the pre-Reformation church,

had thought that the question of the nature of the church could be answered by a definition of its extent. The Reformation, and particularly the Lutheran concept, first says what the church is and leaves the question of its boundaries open...(However) the bearing of this on relations with other churches, on the boundaries of the church, was a completely secondary question.¹¹⁶

And yet how did the theological depiction of the perimeters of the community within which the Christian believer found fellowship with Christ, align with the relationship between the Confessing Church and the Reich Church? The Confessing Church had announced itself the true church at the Dahlem Synod two years earlier and declared that “the Constitution of the German Evangelical Church has been destroyed...[and that] the men who have seized Church leadership in the Reich and the states have divorced themselves from the Christian Church.”¹¹⁷ Did the Confessing Church now believe that the Reich Church stood outside the perimeter? Where was the boundary of the ‘true’ church?

¹¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 232. f.26.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69-76.

¹¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Zur Frage Nach Der Kirchengemeinschaft. On the Question of the Church Community," in *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York N.Y.: HarperOne, 1995), 159.

¹¹⁷ http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1569 (Website accessed 04 August 2010)

Not only were the issues and the questions becoming more acute, the pressures placed on those who identified themselves with the Confessing Church particularly as leaders, was becoming more grave. From 1934 onwards all ordinands for the ministry were required to give their oath of allegiance to Hitler upon ordination and a subsequent oath of service expressing personal gratitude to Hitler for saving Germany from the dangers of revolution.

Believing that the three Confessing Church synods of Augsburg in June 1935, Berlin-Steglitz in September 1935, and Bad Oeynhausen in February 1936 had blunted the positions taken at Barmen and Dahlem, Bonhoeffer and his seminarians looked for leadership, guidance and comfort on how to respond to the demand that all candidates for ordination take the civil oath to Hitler. Finding little if any guidance and facing what he now believed was a Confessing Church that had finally been skilfully subverted by state propaganda, led Bonhoeffer to believe he was facing “a pernicious obscurity.”¹¹⁸ But, it should be pointed out, the Council of Brethren maintained a determined defence of Dahlem throughout this period especially in response to the heavy handed efforts of Ludwig Müller who “dared to attempt a compulsory centralization of the southern German regional churches”¹¹⁹ resulting in the house arrest of Bishop Wurm of Württemberg and Bishop Meiser of Bavaria. These political and theological acts of defiance led to street demonstrations in support of the Bishops in Munich and Stuttgart and a renewed commitment by the Council of Brethren to “instruct the congregations that they no longer owed obedience to the Reich Church government that had violated the constitution, but must pledge themselves to whatever church emergency organizations the synod should appoint.”¹²⁰

Still, Bonhoeffer sought to address these issues including that of inter-communion with those who were German Christians or had been, or those who were close to them, in an April 1936 lecture to his students at Finkenwalde entitled “On the Question of the Church Community”.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, “Zur Frage Nach Der Kirchengemeinschaft. On the Question of the Church Community,” 162.

¹¹⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 393.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

¹²¹ Bonhoeffer, “Zur Frage Nach Der Kirchengemeinschaft. On the Question of the Church Community,” 158-67.

The lecture is uncompromising:

The Confessing Synod of Barmen has repudiated the teaching of the German Christians in its decisive points as false teaching...The Confessing Synod of Dahlem took upon itself to declare that the government of the national church has separated itself from the Christian church...At the same time it formed its own church government and claimed to represent the true Church of Jesus Christ in Germany. Since then the Confessing Church has recognized that it has the responsibility of being and the commission to be the one true Church of Jesus Christ in Germany. That is a fact of church history.¹²²

But the 1936 lecture also maintains a modest position; "The nature of the church is not determined by those who belong to it but by the Word and sacrament of Jesus Christ which, where they are effective, gather for themselves a community in accordance with the promise... Does he not know enough if he is permitted to know the gracious saving act of God."¹²³ Which in its own way leads to a sense of certainty and gratitude. Might not the church also be found somewhere else? But that was not the question. God has given it to us here. "Why then should the believer be so eager to know...where the boundaries are, where the distinctions lie?"¹²⁴ It is enough, Bonhoeffer says, to know the gracious saving activity of God and for the believers to "...thank God that they have again been given God's word and sacrament pure and entire, and that they know where the church of God is."¹²⁵

In taking this position, Bonhoeffer was maintaining an orthodox position shared by the leading Reformation theologians. For them all, it was the gospel that created the Christological centre of Reformation ecclesiology. Luther had declared, "The gospel is before bread and baptism the unique, most certain and noblest symbol of the Church because through the gospel alone the Church is conceived, formed, nourished, generated, instructed, fed, clothed, adorned, strengthened, armed and preserved - in short, the whole life and substance of the church is in the word of God."¹²⁶ In addition, all agreed that the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, rightly administered according to Christ's institution marked the true church. It was the Reformers who were not content to live with

¹²² Ibid., 161.

¹²³ Ibid., 159-60.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, ed. Peter Toon, Marshalls Theological Library (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1981), 16.

the ambiguities that this brought about between Rome and the reformation churches who ventured beyond the basic markers mentioned above. Among them were Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, John Knox in Scotland, and the radical reformers including the anabaptists who "tried to come to terms with the position of Rome, not by broadening but by narrowing the definition of the Church, tightening its circumference by making discipline essential to its very existence."¹²⁷ Seeking a repristinisation of the church the "radicals polarised the church-state relationship and, without the support and sanction of the magistrate, a strict internal discipline became imperative."¹²⁸

John Phillips suggests that when Bonhoeffer's strict form of his original thesis that identified the church as the revelation of God, or that Christ existed as the church-community, met with the practical issues of the church struggle, the boundaries of the church which had never been drawn in *Sanctorum Communio*, had to be described "boldly and concretely." As a result, Phillips suggests, of using "a strict form of his original thesis to solve the church-political problem", Bonhoeffer

foreclosed any discussion on the theme of church and state:...His interest now becomes the articulation of the revelation of Christ within the church and only within the church; his insistence upon the exclusiveness of the Body of Christ is determined by the practical demands of the Confessing Church and its struggle for existence in Germany...At this point in his development, the central theological problem for Bonhoeffer has become the conquest of a living space for his confessing Church and the articulation, within its strict boundaries, of his thinking on Christology and discipleship.¹²⁹

Bonhoeffer was attempting in the same moment, to manage three dimensions to the one problem; first there was his attempt to address, from a theological point of view, the structural boundary issues between church and state. Secondly he was being forced to address the question of where the boundary lay between the Reich Church and the Confessing Church, while in the third place he was speaking about the eschatological-theological boundaries of the church, now moving beyond the moderate position he had espoused in the "Boundaries of the Church" essay. Both structural and theological elements of the use of the boundary image inadvertently get mixed up in Bonhoeffer's writings at this stage.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 56.

¹²⁹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 116-17.

Had Bonhoeffer written himself into the trap Paul Avis refers to when he asks,

The witness of the Reformers in the matter of ecclesiology is primarily to the Christological centre, the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. But (the reformers) also had to face the question of the circumference: how do we identify the visible Church, where does it begin and end, what are the lines of demarcation, if any?¹³⁰ The development of the doctrine of the marks of the true Church...seems to reveal the failure of a rigid, purist approach to this question. Concern for the discipline and doctrinal purity, when taken to an extreme, became self-defeating and an escalating process of separation tended to diminish the Church to a mathematical point.¹³¹

This gave birth to Bonhoeffer's claim that "The question of church membership is the question of salvation. The boundaries of the church are the boundaries of salvation. Whoever knowingly cut themselves off from the Confessing Church in Germany cut themselves off from salvation. That is the recognition which has always forced itself upon the true church. That is its humble confession."¹³² This *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*¹³³ almost proved Bonhoeffer's undoing as Bethge makes clear.¹³⁴ Many, among them his close friend and colleague Hermann Sasse, sought to distance themselves from this idea described both as "the ecstatic effusion of a hitherto level headed man, contradicting everything that was essential to Luther."¹³⁵ and "...nothing more than an atrocious piece of false doctrine."¹³⁶

¹³⁰ There is an extensive literature on this issue of the demarcation of the visible church from all other objects in sociological/mathematical literature. Some of it is quite helpful. Miroslav Volf provides two footnoted references to the seminal writings of the Christian anthropologist and missiologist, Paul G. Heibert. See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 71. f.3; and Volf, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 148. f.84. Essentially, as Volf points out, it has to do with the use of the mathematical categories of "bounded", "fuzzy", and "centered" sets. Centered sets are defined by a center and the relationship of things to the center: "the focus is not on 'maintaining the boundary' but on 'reaffirming the center'." For Paul Heibert, see "The Category 'Christian' In the Mission Task." *International Review of Mission*. 72, no. 287, 1983, 421-27. Also see Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come*. (Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 205-12.

¹³¹ Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, 220-21.

¹³² Bonhoeffer, "Zur Frage Nach Der Kirchengemeinschaft. On the Question of the Church Community," 166.

¹³³ The phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is associated with St. Cyprian of Carthage (c200-258). Cyprian used it in a way not dissimilar to the way Bonhoeffer had made use of it. In commenting on the North African Decian persecution of 249-251, Cyprian had maintained that there could be no true Christian faith where there was not also a commitment to membership in the one, true church. The Barmen Declaration had made the claim that the Confessing Church was the true church in Germany; it was therefore only here that salvation could be assured. (See Badcock, *The House Where God Lives*, 43.)

¹³⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 517-26.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 522. Words of George Merz, a teacher at the School of Theology at Bethel, whom Bonhoeffer had met, at the time of the drafting of the Bethel Confession.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 523. Words of the Rhineland General Superintendent Stoltenhoff.

Bonhoeffer's lecture was offered at Finkenwalde in April 1936 and published in June in *Evangelische Theologie*, but it was not until late September that the Rhineland Council of the Confessing Church responded to the hostile criticisms saying they could "find no heretical church concept in the controversial sentence 'Whoever knowingly...' after we have placed this phrase in the light of Bonhoeffer's entire remarks." Earlier, in the same letter they had said, "Bonhoeffer's statements are based on the thesis that the call 'Here is the Church' is synonymous with the call 'Here is the Gospel.'" The Rhineland Council sees in this thesis a legitimate interpretation of the Reformation concept of the church... They pointed out that only a future synod could decide whether it "might see itself compelled...to determine the boundaries of the church-community over against those who practice and support the anticonfessional church government of the committees, just as these boundaries once had to be drawn against the German Christian church officials."¹³⁷

Bonhoeffer's other uses of the concept of 'boundary' in *Discipleship*

Towards the end of Matthew 5 Bonhoeffer asks an interesting question; "How are disciples different from nonbelievers? What does "being Christian" consist of?"¹³⁸ Bonhoeffer's answer is that what is 'Christian' is markedly different from that which had currency in the state and is of a different order. "What is Christian is what is '*peculiar*', *περισσο*ν (the "better righteousness"), the extraordinary, irregular, not self-evident... What is distinctly Christian begins with the *περισσο*ν, and that is what finally places what is natural in the proper light. When this specialness, this extraordinariness, is absent, then what is Christian is absent."¹³⁹ This specialness defines those people who live out of the Beatitudes and who love their religious, political or personal enemies. It is the willingness of those who love Jesus Christ himself and who would go to the cross in suffering and obedience. And here is the divide that Bonhoeffer is willing to acknowledge. "What is unique in Christianity is the cross, which allows Christians to step beyond the world in order to receive victory over the world. The *passio* in the love of the crucified one – that is

¹³⁷ Ibid., 523.

¹³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 143.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 144.

the ‘extraordinary’ mark of Christian existence.”¹⁴⁰ Here, life is lived on one side of the boundary or on the other. Christian life is not lived on the side of the spectacular; it is lived on the side of the extraordinary, the *περισσοῦν* and it cannot remain hidden. In answer to the largely rhetorical question “What are you *doing* that is special?” he concludes that whatever it is “it must be done visibly! Not in ethical rigour, not in the eccentricity of Christian ways of life, but in the simplicity of Christian obedience to the will of Jesus...the *περισσοῦν* is, thus, the fulfilment of the law, the keeping of the commandments. In Christ, the Crucified and his community, the “extraordinary” occurs.”¹⁴¹

But the essence of the cross is not suffering alone but suffering and rejection. “A Christianity that no longer took discipleship seriously remade the gospel into only the solace of cheap grace. Moreover, it drew no line between natural and Christian existence...only one who is bound to Christ...in discipleship stands in seriousness under the cross.”¹⁴² Even as early as *Discipleship* it now appears as if suffering becomes more and more the identifying and distinguishing mark of a follower of Christ.

In addition, in *Discipleship* the image of boundary is used in a rather straightforward way that might be called ‘descriptive’. It is used, on the whole, to refer to the outer edges of the church where important observations are to be made or significant questions asked. First, in an acutely abbreviated reference to the “expansion of Christianity and the increasing secularization of the church”, Bonhoeffer proposes that grace has, over the centuries, become a commodity of no great value. In a world that had become “Christianized; grace became the common property of a Christian world.” More recently, the Roman church in its tolerance of monasticism “kept a remnant of that original awareness”. Bonhoeffer writes, “Here on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace involves discipleship was preserved.”¹⁴³ It will be recalled that Bonhoeffer expressed just this thought to his brother Karl-Friedrich in January 1935. After saying that he, Dietrich, will be on the right track if he takes the Sermon on the Mount seriously, Bonhoeffer had written, “Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 144-45.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴² Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 46

pocus sky-high...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"¹⁴⁴

Second, in a passionate recrimination, Bonhoeffer draws attention to the devastating cost of cheap grace; the “collapse of the organised churches”, the lack of respect for preaching and the sacraments, the misuse of the liturgies of baptism and confirmation: “...we handed over what was holy to the scornful and unbelievers. We poured out rivers of grace without end, but the call to rigorously follow Christ was seldom heard.” And then the pointed question, “What happened to the insights of the ancient church, which in the baptismal teaching watched so carefully over the boundary between the church and the world, over costly grace?”¹⁴⁵ Something deeply significant has been given away and is lost.

Third, in his comments on Matt 5: 21-22 Jesus raises the issue of anger expressed towards a brother or sister. Bonhoeffer makes it clear that we are “entrusted with the well-being of ...brothers and sisters” and indicates without apology that anger has no place in the management of these relationships because anger essentially wishes the destruction or “murder” of the other. “The life of a brother or sister is a boundary for Jesus’ followers which may not be crossed. But anger [when expressed] already crosses that boundary. It is crossed even more by words bursting out of us in haste (Racha [insults], and it is crossed finally when we intentionally deride someone else (you fool).”¹⁴⁶ Here the word is used as a simple description of a line that may not be breached or passed beyond in obedience to Jesus’ words.

Fourth and finally, in his commentary on Matthew 7 under the heading “The Community of Disciples is set apart”,¹⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer refers to the narrow road which Christians walk as “citizens of two realms” and the boundary that marks it off from the broad path. There is an observable – a “clearly visible” - boundary between the community to which the

¹⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London 1933-1935*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 13 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 285.

¹⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 53-54.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 169-82.

disciples had previously belonged and the one in which they were now “bound solely to Jesus.” As the Sermon on the Mount comes to an end Bonhoeffer talks about the great separation and concludes that the boundaries of the church are not boundaries of a privilege, but those of God’s merciful selection and call.

The use of ‘middle’

In Chapter Five of *Discipleship*, “Discipleship and the Individual”, Bonhoeffer introduces the spatial referent of “middle”. “Everyone enters discipleship alone, but no one remains alone in discipleship”¹⁴⁸ he writes, “for Christ is in the middle”.¹⁴⁹ This is the space where Christ is, in order to destroy - “untie” is the word Bonhoeffer uses - the “immediate connections with the world” and to unite the disciple immediately with Christ. We do not make a decision to “follow Christ” and then make the break with everything that gives life meaning and purpose. That decision is already made by Christ, says Bonhoeffer. “No one can follow Christ without recognising and affirming that that break is already complete...(now) Christ himself” comes between a person and “the God-given orders of their natural lives” so that everything in one’s walk as a disciple happens through him. Christ becomes mediator of life and life’s experiences – or as Bonhoeffer would put it, “He is the mediator between person and reality.”¹⁵⁰ The belief that there is or can be immediacy within the world of people is a delusion. On the face of it this seems a very odd claim and Bonhoeffer will attend to it in much more detail in *Life Together*. At this stage, however, it is enough to say that if one is a disciple, one must do nothing that would edge Christ out. “God given realities exist only through Jesus Christ” and the only way to the other is through Jesus Christ which is why “intercession is the most promising way to another person, and common prayer in Christ’s name is the most genuine community.” It is also how Jesus becomes the “basis for the entirely *new community*.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 93-94.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 98.

Summary

Earlier, in *Creation and Fall*, and without any reference to Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer has used the idea of “middle” to delineate the state of anxiety people live in because they do not and cannot know about the beginning, just as they do not and cannot know about the end; as a result they live uneasily in the middle. The delusion that they might know about the beginning and the end not only represents anxiety attached to living in time and space that outdistances humankind, but it is also the *cor curvum in se* in a delusional sort of way, holding out the false promise of knowledge about the beginning and the end. As Bonhoeffer had established in *Act and Being*, it is there in the middle that Christ must meet us since it is in the middle that he breaks open the heart turned in upon itself.

In *Discipleship*, the use of “middle” reflects its earlier use in the Christology lectures. Jesus Christ “is for me...as one who is historical, manifesting himself through that presence as the centre [*Mitte*] of existence, history, and nature and as mediator [*Mittler*] who stands in our place.”¹⁵² None of that changes in *Discipleship*. One cannot be a disciple without the mediator who stands between, shaping and enlivening relationships with others within the community gathered around Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is an unforgiving document. There is no room to avoid decision or commitment. The lectures upon which it is based were delivered with passion to students at the university in Berlin and the Preachers’ Seminary in Finkenwalde. Many of the students would become leaders in the Confessing Church though increasing pressures from the state would make their decisions difficult to maintain. Bonhoeffer maintained that this was precisely the situation that the Sermon on the Mount addressed; these were violent times and his interpretation is singed with urgency and apocalyptic.

So it seems right and proper that Bonhoeffer would make it clear to his students in Berlin and Finkenwalde that this was a time for the display of extraordinary, perfect undivided love. It was clear on which side of the boundary this lay; on the side of God’s merciful selection and call to which the only response was “simple obedience”. If you desired to be one of Jesus’ disciples, there was no other way.

¹⁵² Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 76.

Rediscovering 'community in Christ the peacemaker as the reality of the church'¹⁵³

Life Together

How does a Christian community live when it is constantly threatened with “the terror of an all-powerful ideology” designed to destroy it and rob it of its unique character and message; or with the paralysing indifference of the society in which it is embedded, a situation “which do[es] not allow any decisive significance to be attached to questions about God and truth?”¹⁵⁴ How does the church live as a community and prepare for a life together, a life that will prove durable enough to bear witness to its hope in Christ’s resurrection? What precautions does it observe to mitigate the possibility of implosion or of internal division leading to schism? Its only hope, according to Bonhoeffer is by trusting “absolutely in Christ’s presence in the Word, and in the communion of saints.”¹⁵⁵

Life Together is Bonhoeffer’s interpretive reflection on the experiment at Finkenwalde where he developed a working ecclesiology crafted out of the concepts of Christian personhood and being that are established by practices unique to the community of Christ, practices that mark it off from all other visible communities.

In September 1938 Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to Göttingen, to the home of his twin sister Sabine, taking with him his friend Eberhard Bethge, with the specific intention of recording and interpreting his experience in the community of students in the Preachers’ Seminary at Finkenwalde. The house was empty for earlier that month Bonhoeffer had arranged for Sabine and her husband Gerhard Leibholz along with their two young daughters, to cross the border into Switzerland to escape from the difficult times that he knew would lie ahead for any Jews who remained in Germany.¹⁵⁶ In the four weeks he

¹⁵³ Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain*, 78.

¹⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 126.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁵⁶ Gerhard Leibholz, the husband of Dietrich’s twin sister Sabine (1906-1999), was a lawyer and popular law lecturer at the University of Göttingen. Leibholz was a baptized Christian of Jewish descent on his father’s

spent in Göttingen, Bonhoeffer committed to writing in *Life Together* “his thoughts on the nature and sustaining structures of Christian community, based on the ‘life together’ that he and his seminarians had sustained both at the seminary and in the Brothers’ House at Finkenwalde”.¹⁵⁷

The seminary at Finkenwalde had been closed by the Gestapo one year earlier; the chronology in *Life Together* suggests that the seminary was closed in October 1937, although Bethge says that the Gestapo order making the closure was dated 29 August and delivered to the seminary on 28 September 1937 at which time “the doors were sealed.” The Gestapo ordered that “the ad hoc academic institutions, study communities and the teaching, students’ and examination boards set up by the so-called Confessing church be dissolved and all theological courses and study conferences under its administration forbidden.”¹⁵⁸ The rationale was that these functions of the Confessing Church were “likely to endanger the state’s authority and welfare” and were in any case in direct contravention of the December 1935 “Fifth Decree for the Implementation of the Law for the Protection of the German Evangelical Church”.¹⁵⁹ The closure of other Preachers’ Seminaries would follow. Bonhoeffer was persuaded to write about the daily routines he established at Finkenwalde, both in the seminary and in the House of Brethren,¹⁶⁰ and he took the opportunity to make it clear that the church would need to “promote a sense of community like this if it was to have new life breathed into it.”¹⁶¹

Like *Discipleship*, *Life Together* is written with a passion that betrays the urgency of the time: the anxieties attached to the recent smuggling of his sister and her family out of the country, the Munich Agreement of September 1938, and to Bethge and Bonhoeffer’s own futures as they wondered if they would be drafted to serve in the German armed forces, and significantly, their increasing uncertainty about the ability of the Confessing Church to endure against the Third Reich.

side of the family. Following their ‘flight’ to Switzerland, the Leibholz family made their way to Oxford, England and after the war returned to Germany where Leibholz became a judge of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany and Professor in the University of Göttingen.

¹⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 584.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Bethge records the establishment of the House of Brethren, also known as the Brothers’ House, in Bethge. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 460-72.

¹⁶¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 3.

As G. B. Kelly points out in the Editor's Introduction,¹⁶² Bonhoeffer's interest in 'community' preceding his experience at Finkenwalde, had a long history. In his academic dissertations and university lectures Bonhoeffer had laid the conceptual groundwork that would guide the journey of the mind. In his personal journey he had searched for an enduring community "in which his call to the ministry and his love of God's Word would merge to bring a more meaningful sense of direction into his life", a search that would, he hoped, give an answer to the question of how "confession of faith in the presence of Jesus Christ and the community's structuring of that confessed presence (might) be integrated."¹⁶³ André Dumas observes that while *Life Together* "offers a practical and glowing report of the actual experience at Finkenwalde...the specific circumstances of that experience are never referred to, and what is read is a carefully constructed statement, rather than the intimate outpouring of a subjective experience. This emotional restraint makes (*Life Together*) one of the most solid works that has been written about brotherly communion."¹⁶⁴

Bonhoeffer's experience of intimate, robust community goes right back to the beginning. His family of origin had had a huge impact on him as a defining matrix of being and personhood; his experiences in Rome in 1924 created vivid and lasting memories of vibrant and winsome forms of Christian community; his contact with the Afro-American churches of New York's Harlem district during his year at Union Theological Seminary etched deep marks that he never forgot.¹⁶⁵ During the early 1930's while teaching in Berlin, Bonhoeffer had earned an honest reputation for providing "off-campus" weekend and holiday gatherings for and with his students where rudimentary forms of life together in Christian fellowship emerged.¹⁶⁶ He had become the consummate ecumenist and was familiar with the worship forms and spiritual practices and disciplines of his international colleagues. Twice he had planned to travel to India and stay with Mohandas Gandhi in his ashram, plans that never eventuated. In addition, Bethge identifies Bonhoeffer's academic

¹⁶² Ibid., 6-20.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁴ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 132.

¹⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 314-15.

¹⁶⁶ See Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, eds., *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Fontana Books, 1973), 59-67, and Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 208 for a reference to the "Bonhoeffer circle" of students.

interest in monastic orders and practices and his growing commitment to a personal discipline of daily quiet times and meditation.¹⁶⁷

In 1934, while still in England, Bonhoeffer had met Hardy Arnold, the son of Eberhard Arnold who in the 1920's had founded the Brüderhof Community at Rhoen in Germany. This Protestant community, influenced by the Anabaptist tradition, was "driven towards a discipleship based on communal living and pacifism as concrete obedience to the Sermon on the Mount."¹⁶⁸ Though there were differences in emphasis between the two men, Bonhoeffer was immediately attracted to the Brüderhof concept. On the brink of returning to Germany to take up his position at the Preacher's Seminary, Bonhoeffer was imagining a Christ-centered and controlled, quasi-monastic community serving the wider church where young men preparing to be pastors would rediscover community in Christ the peacemaker.

Before leaving for Germany Bonhoeffer arranged visits to a number of colleges and seminaries throughout England to learn about these various communities and their spiritual disciplines. He visited Methodist Richmond College and Spurgeon's (Baptist) College, both in London; the Cowley Fathers at the Society of St John the Evangelist at Oxford; the Woodbrooke Quaker centre in Selley Oak, Birmingham; the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham in Nottinghamshire; and Mirfield and the Community of the Resurrection in Yorkshire.¹⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer carried this information about communal living with him to Germany when he returned in the spring of 1935. It was in Finkenwalde that Bonhoeffer would have his opportunity to establish his version of the quasi-monastic community to which he had been attracted for so long.

Bonhoeffer's drive to understand community living like this can be seen as a logical derivative of his parallel interest in developing an ecclesiology for the times. He now believed even more deeply in the restoration of the church and in a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich wrote that that would come "from a new kind of monasticism, which will

¹⁶⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 461f.

¹⁶⁸ Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain*, 77.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-87.

have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ.”¹⁷⁰

Meditation and mutual confession would comprise the core activity of the community and the basic objective would not be introversion of any kind but preparation for proclamation. This would be an experiment in discipleship which would initiate a search for “a new form of ministry” and provide a refuge for pastors under increasing pressure in the community at large. “The communal life envisaged...was to take the form of a daily order of prayer, mutual exhortation, free personal confession, common theological work and a very simple communal life.”¹⁷¹

The proposal to establish a “house of brethren”¹⁷² met with the guarded approval of the Council of Brethren of the Synod of the Confessing Church in September 1935, and came to an end two years later when the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde. Bethge comments that Bonhoeffer’s dearest wish to provide not “‘the seclusion of a monastery, but a place of the deepest inward concentration for service outside’ was never to get beyond the first, rudimentary stage.”¹⁷³

The Spatial Structure of the Finkenwalde Community – a *vita communis*

Bonhoeffer’s main concern was that life at Finkenwalde would serve the proclamation of the Word of the gospel of Christ. Life together in the community which included the Brothers’ House, was to be guided by adherence to a daily routine commencing with early morning worship comprising reading from the Bible following readings from a lectio continua, singing together, and prayers of and for the community which would be followed by the breaking of bread and breakfast together. “After the first morning hour, the

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 462.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹⁷² The Brothers' House was composed of students who had completed their training for the ministry who then stayed on at Finkenwalde forming a "more tightly knit community" and acting as "leaven" for the next incoming group of students. (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18).

¹⁷³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 469.

Christian's day until evening belongs to *work*”¹⁷⁴ A brief break at the midday for lunch and prayer and in the evening, the breaking of bread and the final worship service which was to include, most significantly, the request for the mutual forgiveness of sins so “that reconciliation can be achieved and renewal of the community established.”¹⁷⁵ The sole purpose of this order of life together was to build community of a sort that would support an honest ministry and initiate the search for a new form of ministry. The ability of the leadership to manage the shape of this life together would be critical.

It has to be remembered that Bonhoeffer brought with him considerable understanding of what we today would call “group process”. Much of this understanding along with his native skills had been acquired as a result of richly endowed life experiences particularly within his family. And there was also, no doubt, a lively appreciation of his father's thoughts and ability regarding such matters. Karl Bonhoeffer, Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at the Charite Hospital in Berlin from 1912 until 1937 was a scientist of high repute and a reserved, involved and loving father.¹⁷⁶ He was not an enthusiastic supporter of Sigmund Freud's emerging ‘therapies’ and did not support a proposal to establish a Chair in Psychoanalysis at the University of Berlin in 1917 probably reflecting his “own personal feelings, temperament, and taste.”¹⁷⁷ Dietrich shared his father's caution and reserve. Clifford Green comments, “Respect for reticence was deeply embedded in Dietrich's character. Inquisitive prying into people's inner life was repugnant to him, as was promiscuous self-disclosure. Uncovering everything that exists was not, he felt, truthfulness, but cynicism.”¹⁷⁸

We should not overlook the fact that his July 1944 poem “Who am I?”,¹⁷⁹ which is an astonishing piece of self-disclosive writing, was foreshadowed months earlier by his laconic yet rather weighty comments,

I often wonder who I really am: the one always cringing in disgust, going to pieces at these hideous experiences here, or the one who whips himself into shape, who on the outside (and even to himself) appears calm, cheerful, serene,

¹⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 74.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷⁶ Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Chapter 1 “Childhood and Home” by Sabine Leibholz, 19-33.

¹⁷⁷ Clifford Green, “Two Bonhoeffers on Psychoanalysis,” in *Bonhoeffer Legacy* (Grand Rapids MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 63.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 459-60.

superior, and lets himself be applauded for this charade – or is it real? What does ‘poise’ [Haltung] mean, actually? In short, one knows less about oneself than ever and is no longer interested in it, weary with psychology and thoroughly averse to any analysis of the soul...More important matters are at stake than self-knowledge.¹⁸⁰

It was Bonhoeffer’s belief about the role of Jesus Christ as mediator between people, already made abundantly clear in *Discipleship*, that fitted perfectly with these passionately held beliefs and gave theological shape to the inter-personal functioning of the experiment at Finkenwalde. These beliefs also spoke to an issue that Bonhoeffer had raised in *Sanctorum Communio*, a decade earlier where he had written

...in our discussion thus far we have not dealt with faith as an experience, but only as something that perceives certain realities. We believe that in so doing we have done justice to the distinctive nature of the theological method. The church can in its essence be understood only as a divine act, which means, through a statement of faith; and only on that basis can it then be seen as ‘experience’...However, it is all too often forgotten today that it is not experience that makes the church...the church is a reality, which means that it is established by God, and fundamentally ‘prior’ to all experience...Church is not ‘produced’ through powerful community experiences.¹⁸¹

Do not confuse community romanticism (*Gemeinschaftsromantik*) with the community of saints (*Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*),¹⁸² he urges, and then in a passage that could have been written with Finkenwalde in mind, he asks “Where (does) faith experience the church?”¹⁸³

...it certainly does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists within the church [kirchliche Gemeinschaft]; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord’s Table, and intercede for one another in prayer. It is precisely in the context of everyday life that church is believed and experienced. The reality of the church is understood not in moments of spiritual exaltation, but within the routine and pains of daily life, and within the context of ordinary worship. Everything else merely obscures the actual state of affairs.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 221.

¹⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 277-78.

¹⁸² Ibid., 278.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 281.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 281.

Two critical forces lay beneath these mundane yet extraordinary processes: Jesus would mediate the experiences between people in the church thus ensuring the integrity of their dealings with one another, and the only purpose of the project would be that Christ be formed within the community, which as Bonhoeffer reminded Bethge, would take some time, since “one has to live in a congregation for a while to understand how ‘Christ is formed’ in it. (Gal. 4:19)”¹⁸⁵

The theological structure of the community

André Dumas suggests that where *Nachfolge* required obedient saints, *Life Together* put human beings “back into the church” by crafting a space in which Jesus, as mediator standing between, protects believers from the “damage of sheerly human immediacy.”¹⁸⁶ In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer had established the theological truth that Jesus Christ is the only originator of community and the mediator between God and humankind. “In that capacity, Christ is also the mediator between human beings themselves.”¹⁸⁷ Without Jesus’ mediating presence, everything could go badly wrong. Indeed Bonhoeffer distrusted psychology and psychotherapy and believed that all trust would be destroyed in any attempt to “psychologise or analyse people.”¹⁸⁸

In his essay “Ecclesiology”,¹⁸⁹ Stanley Grenz writes about the church as “a people imbued with a particular ‘constitutive narrative’,” providing them with the interpretive framework through which they find their identity in Christ. It is this framework that mediates the meaning they find in their personal and communal stories.¹⁹⁰ This is what Clifford Green is hinting at in his broad brush comments when he writes about the life at Finkenwalde and says that by “mediation”, Bonhoeffer is not referring to the “mediator in a dispute” but “the way that our beliefs, images, [and] stereotypes mediate our experience – how they profoundly shape the way we perceive and relate to other people and groups.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 475. (Letter to Eberhard Bethge July 16, 1944).

¹⁸⁶ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 132, 34.

¹⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 127. (Editor’s Afterword to the German Edition).

¹⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 221. f.18.

¹⁸⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, “Ecclesiology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁹¹ Green, “Human Sociality and Christian Community,” 126. There can be little doubt about Bonhoeffer’s position on Jesus Christ as mediator within the new community. The most unequivocal statements have already appeared in *Discipleship*: “No human way leads from person to person. The most loving sensitivity, the most thoughtful psychology, the most natural openness do not really reach the other person - there are no

There can be no dispute over the assertion that life experience is mediated to us in some way. Indeed, today it is fashionable for ‘life coaches’ and other trainers to insist that we see the world through “our own particular set of lenses”. Always the implication is that the other person’s lenses will give them a different view of the world, and that if we forget that or ignore it, we will never appreciate or understand whatever it is they may be thinking, feeling, saying or doing. But to say that Bonhoeffer is not thinking of Christ as we might think of a “mediator in a dispute” is to deny Bonhoeffer the power and strength of the extremely elegant theological and pragmatic position he established amongst the Finkenwalde seminarians.

Bonhoeffer knew only too well that any number of people have the ability to create conflict amongst themselves based either on their different views of the shared world they inhabit or on the basis of their generally unacknowledged and undeclared needs which will be very different for two different people. Groups of people run the same risk and can quickly bring about dysfunctional outcomes. Bonhoeffer was insistent that members of the community recognise that Jesus Christ stand between each of them as mediator. This is precisely the point about the way in which he portrays Christ’s presence as he writes about the high risks that sheer human immediacy poses for durable Christian community, the sort of immediacy that “seeks the complete intimate fusion of I and You”,¹⁹² or alternatively seeks some sort of spiritual “high” through some form of community romanticism (*Gemeinschaftsromantik*).

It is important to draw attention to the use of *Du* in this context; in commenting on the use of *Ich-Du* to describe a relationship that has matured into one demonstrating a certain depth of intimacy, the editors comment that “When it refers to the relationship God has with us and we with God and to a relationship people have with one another, ‘You’

psychic immediacies. Christ stands between them. The way to one's neighbour leads only through Christ. That is why intercession is the most promising way to another person, and common prayer in Christ's name is the most genuine community." 96. Again, "...it is precisely this same mediator (Jesus) who makes us into individuals, who becomes the basis for entirely *new community*. He stands in the center between the other person and me." 98.

¹⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 41.

connotes the other as personal limit, boundary, or challenge to the self-centered ego.”¹⁹³ As we have already seen, Bonhoeffer, concerned about the potential damage of the dominating ego within a relationship, even one “demonstrating a certain depth of intimacy”, is concerned to ensure that ethicality and responsivity towards the other takes precedence over any form of intimacy. The ethical nature of relationships is more important than intimacy.

Not only is Bonhoeffer’s depiction of Christ “standing between” believers in the Christian community known as the church, a theologically accurate portrayal of the place Christ occupies between men and women, and with God in the event of redemption, it is also a spatially accurate way to describe the position of the One who reminds us that unless we pass our humanity through the prism of light and truth that he is, our relationships in community - even as small as two person communities – run the risk of collapsing the oft-times fragile new order, established by Christ. Not only is Christ the Redeemer, but as Mediator he is also the healer of relationships. Thought of as a spatial configuration, Christ standing between us in the Christian community provides comfort and consolation for the believer and protection from the potentially destructive damage of immediacy.

So exactly how does Christ stand between us? Bonhoeffer spells this out in some detail in “Confession and the Lord’s Supper”.¹⁹⁴ In the first place Christ stands between us figuratively or theologically; believers construct and receive Christ’s presence as if he were there. Concretely, Christ stands there in the presence of the other, in the shape and form of the sister and/or brother in Christ who is Christ to us. Bonhoeffer insists that those who believe in Christ were still destined to remain sinners and that in Christ’s presence all

¹⁹³ Ibid., 41. f.19. Green in *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 108-150; interprets Bonhoeffer's construction of the soteriological problem as one of human power embedded and embodied in a person's ego and collectively in society. He suggests that it was in relation to Bonhoeffer's struggle with his own powerful ego that his conversion "from the phraseological to the real" occurred. I agree with this interpretation and believe that Green's description of the 'ego' referring to the activities of the "unified and conscious self...(that) contribute to autonomy, competence, and mastery in personal life" (109) is accurate, concise and helpful. Green itemizes these functions as "rational analysis and organisation of the natural world and the human social environment, as in science, technology, social and personal planning; deliberate willing towards specified goals; reflection on past and present experience, and mental projection of future activities; calculating the consequences of behaviour; conscious regulation of emotional and instinctual self-expression; problem solving; intellectual activities throughout the range of human experience; synthesizing perceptions and data; conscious decision-making, judgement, and evaluation." 109.

¹⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 108-18.

pretense is ended. Only by remembering at all times that the community of saints is also the community of sinners may we be made, by Christ, into the “community of faith, and in that community Christ made the other Christian to be grace for us. Now each stands in Christ’s place. In the presence of another Christian I no longer need to pretend...Other Christians stand before us as the sign of God’s truth and grace. They have been given to us to help us...When I go to another believer to confess, I am going to God.”¹⁹⁵

In commenting on Luther’s understanding of confession, Oswald Bayer puts the matter simply:

‘Confession embraces two parts. First, that one confesses one’s sins; the other, that one hears the absolution or forgiveness from the one who hears the confession, as if one receives it from God himself and as one does not indeed doubt, but truly believes that his sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven’. In this way, when a human being assures me of the forgiveness of sins in the name of God, God himself has forgiven me in that very act and at that very moment. The human word is not just an indication of the divine word, but it is actually the Word of God.¹⁹⁶

Such a belief sustains mutual confession which Bonhoeffer promoted cautiously at first, since the members of the community felt “embarrassed and resentful” and extremely uncertain about it.¹⁹⁷ Enormous benefits flow from the practice however. According to Bonhoeffer, confessing sins in this way leads to a breakthrough to the genuine community of the cross since it strikes at the root of all sin which is pride; it leads to a breakthrough to new life since “confession is conversion”, and it leads to a breakthrough to assurance since, unless we are confessing our sins to one another, we are living only in a cycle of delusory self-forgiveness which the other believer breaks wide open.¹⁹⁸ Luther’s Large Catechism puts the asymmetrical nature and shape of this sacred transaction well: “Absolution as a work of God is ‘surpassingly grand’. Therefore we should ‘keep the two parts clearly separate. We should set little value on our work (‘when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration of my soul’) but exalt and magnify God’s Word.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation*, 270.

¹⁹⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 465.

¹⁹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 111-14.

¹⁹⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation*, 270. f.65.

So Christians come to each other and live in each other's presence only through Jesus Christ; "He is our peace, (Eph. 2:14) (and) in him, broken and divided humanity has become one",²⁰⁰ which is a great blessing for without Christ the way into any sort of community is blocked by our egos. Christ has opened up the way to God and, as importantly, the way to one another. The 'rule' within the body is that what God did and does for us, we now owe to others, for "Christ as *between* is the source of community."²⁰¹ Charles Marsh refers to this meeting of the other, only as the person that he or she already is in Christ, as a meeting of "faithful togetherness". This meeting, mediated by Jesus is one in which "Jesus Christ discloses far more than the simple dialogical meeting of I and other; rather, he actively refigures the self in faith such that openness to, and life for, the other become the new ontological description of being-in Christ."²⁰² It is Jesus himself who actively gives us into genuine community.

The basis of the Christian community then is determined by what people are in terms of Christ, since it cannot be constituted on the basis of what people are in themselves – even in their inwardness and piety as Christians. This is far too precarious a basis on which to be the church. "We have one another...through Christ, but through Christ we really do *have* one another", which very neatly "dismisses at the outset every unhappy desire for something more." Bonhoeffer shrewdly observes that "those who want more than what Christ has established between us do not want Christian community. They are looking for some extraordinary experiences of community that were denied them elsewhere."²⁰³

On this basis Bonhoeffer elaborates two arguments both of which need to be affirmed from the very beginning: "*First, Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; second, Christian community is a spiritual [pneumatische] and not a psychic [psychische] reality.*"²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 33.

²⁰¹ Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 76.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 34.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

As to the first,

Christian community is a gift of God to which we have no claim...(it is) not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.²⁰⁵

No one is to hold on to the dream of living their lives in community on the basis of a “wishful image”, since this will only lead to “great disillusionment”. There is an inevitability about this pain however and

a community that cannot bear and cannot survive such disillusionment, clinging instead to its idealized image, when that should be done away with, loses at the same time the promise of a durable Christian community. Sooner or later it is bound to collapse. Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive.²⁰⁶

True Christian community works not as we “live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.”²⁰⁷ We have no claim to this gift of Christian community, but can only be thankful that we are graced with the possibility of being a participant in it. This “forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ” then makes possible the role of the church as the community of truth and justice. In *Performing the Faith*, Stanley Hauerwas argues that “the church gives no gift to the worlds in which it finds itself more politically important than the formation of a people constituted by the virtues necessary to endure the struggle to hear and speak truthfully to one another.”²⁰⁸ Here the church assumes the shape of a truth-telling community; the only basis, Hauerwas argues, upon which justice and peace can rest. Further, this justice and peace is sanctification which “properly understood, is the church’s politics.”²⁰⁹ In arguing that Christians can only participate in the “church’s politics” within a visible Church community, Hauerwas, like Bonhoeffer, disposes of the idea that sanctification is merely a

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 38.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁰⁸ Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith. Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, 15.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 44.

personal process. It is in fact a corporate process; “the holiness of the church is necessary for the redemption of the world”.²¹⁰

As to the second argument, Bonhoeffer argues that because Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a “spiritual and not a psychic [or human] reality”²¹¹. It is worth noting the numerous ways in which Bonhoeffer makes this point both about the wholesome and the distorted nature of what is called “Christian community”. He draws the distinction between spiritual reality, the basis of which is “the clear, manifest Word of God in Jesus Christ”, and psychic (emotional or ‘human’) reality which is a darker, more impenetrable reality surging off the back of the self-centered human soul. In a clear and psychologically accurate way Bonhoeffer points out that “the basis of spiritual community is truth; the basis of emotional community is desire”.²¹² He also uses the contrasting words, “agape” and “eros”, to bring further clarity to his argument.²¹³ In a footnote the Editor suggests that “Bonhoeffer packs...all the negative aspects of *psyche*, *sarx* and *eros* that are the legacy of one’s fallen nature” into the word *seelisch* meaning “emotional and self-centered” as opposed to the agapeic love mediated by one’s faith in Jesus Christ which the word ‘spiritual’ [*geistlich*] suggests.²¹⁴ Bonhoeffer goes on to suggest that “within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, an “immediate” relationship of one to another”, whereas in the “self-centered community there exists a profound, elemental emotional desire for community...a yearning for immediate union with other flesh...[which] seeks the complete intimate fusion of I and You...[and] forc[es] the other into one’s own sphere of power and influence.” This behaviour can only spell disaster in that it breaches the boundary between I and You and brings about the “non-mediated community of souls in a distorted form...One has been overpowered by something, but not won over”.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 38.

²¹² Ibid., 39.

²¹³ Ibid., 40.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 39. f.14.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 40-42.

On the other hand spiritual love, that is neither self-centered nor self-serving, knows that it has no direct access to the other person because Christ stands between me and others and since spiritual love is bound to the word of Jesus Christ alone, we should not “long for unmediated community” with anyone. The reason for this is that, left to our own devices in self-serving love, notice that it might still be called “love”, we will construct an image of the other, “about who they are and what they should become.” When ‘spiritual love’ shapes the believer’s behaviour in community, not only will it “respect the other as the boundary that Christ establishes between us; and it will find full community with the other in the Christ who alone binds us together.”²¹⁶

Bonhoeffer concludes with the recognition that “spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by the *truth*” set over against the basis of the human community of spirit which is desire.

The existence of any Christian communal life essentially depends on whether or not it succeeds at the right time in promoting the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God’s reality, between spiritual and emotional community. The life and death of a Christian community is decided by its ability to reach sober clarity on these points as soon as possible. In other words a life together under the Word will stay healthy only when it does not form itself into a movement, an order, a society, a *collegium pietatis*, but instead understands itself as being part of the one, holy, universal, Christian church, sharing through its deeds and suffering in the hardships and struggles and promise of the whole church.²¹⁷

Paradoxically it seems, mediated space between believers, protects from manipulation and potential destruction of ecclesial community.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

Summary

So what can be said about the church depicted in *Discipleship* and *Life Together* in summary?

United by common convictions and sentiments, Bonhoeffer and the future young pastors of the Confessing Church in the seminary at Finkenwalde developed an understanding of discipleship that burst the boundaries of Christian life built around the much less demanding notion of “acquiring faith” or even “having faith”. Discipleship of this sort grounded in the Sermon on the Mount and empowered by the instincts and wisdom of the early church that had “watched so carefully over the boundary between church and the world”²¹⁸ called the community at Finkenwalde into nothing less than costly grace. And within itself the community acquired a theological shape that shunned the quest for human immediacy in favour of the mediated encounter between persons which, Bonhoeffer believed, would protect its health and vitality and in conforming it to Christ give birth to a robust and enduring community. This community that existed only on the basis of God’s word spoken in judgement and grace found its life-force and energy in this word; it was what Bonhoeffer identified as “an alien righteousness” [‘fremde Gerechtigkeit’], a righteousness that comes from outside of us (*extra nos*).²¹⁹ There was never any suggestion that the local worshipping congregation should take the same shape as the Finkenwalde community but it must be agreed that the picture of this particular community pointed to a shape that might not be unlike that of a local church community. At the least, it could be informed by the same theological shape and a goodly sharing of the same practices.

In both *Discipleship* and *Life Together* boundaries are drawn without apology; if grace is to be deeply valued, a boundary will mark the difference between a life of sin and a new life of holiness. This boundary will be drawn and marked by the gracious call and cross of Jesus Christ. This new form of life set firmly upon the call of Jesus Christ to which a form of obedient response is the only possible response, will be marked by a radical discontinuity with the old form of life. The gathering of those who follow Jesus will become the church community whose boundary is not privileged but drawn by God’s

²¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 54.

²¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

merciful selection and call. This church-community will take great care to recover the passion of the early church, which in its baptismal teaching watched so carefully over the boundary between church and world reflecting its awareness of the costliness of grace.

The Christians who are this church-community embody the *περισσον*, the “better righteousness”, which defines them in the world. For this is the church-community that lives its life in the increasingly chaotic and evil world that is the Germany of the Third Reich. It will vie with the state for space in this world and it will be visible or else it will not be the church of Jesus Christ. It will define its own *Lebensraum* and structure its own social space to mirror the life of Jesus as the believers learn to live from the inside out of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

It was in the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome on the Monday afternoon of Easter 1924 that Bonhoeffer, then 18 years old, watched the huge crowds attending confession. “It is very touching to see that for many of these people confession has not become an obligation, but a necessity...for those people who are religiously astute, it is the concretization of the idea of the church that is fulfilled in confession and absolution.”²²⁰ And then, several days later when revisiting the Basilica he announced that he would “probably come to this church more often to observe the life of the church rather than to look at it from an artistic point of view.”²²¹ As far as we know, he did not return to the Basilica, but it is interesting to note that on both visits he recorded his impressions about the confession.

Confession was to be one of the practices of this new community characterised by behaviours that were unique to this particular community of people called Christian. Critically central to the style of life in this new community was the place of Jesus Christ, his active and ongoing role as mediator of all transactions amongst the people and between the people and their God would guarantee the wholesomeness, robustness and longevity of the community but much more importantly establish it as the community of the God who creates and cares. For this reason the shape of this community will more and more assume

²²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 89.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

the form of Christ himself and as it “engages the world properly it will more closely assume the form of its suffering Lord.”²²²

The spatial descriptors do some very solid work here shaping the church-community theologically and structurally. From now on Bonhoeffer will be confronted increasingly by another reality, his life lived in the “worldly [weltlich] sector”.²²³ This will not happen immediately but following his return from New York in July 1939 and his increasing commitment to the *Abwehr*, the way Bonhoeffer depicted the church during his time at Finkenwalde will intensify the costliness of the form of the Suffering Lord and Servant of the church. Cheap grace would have no place in what was to follow.

²²² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 247-48.

²²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 329.

Chapter Four

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spatially structured ecclesiology in the *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*

The Church – our life in this world

Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5 1943, and in November, while still detained in the military interrogation prison at Tegel in Berlin, wrote to Eberhard Bethge expressing his regret at not having completed *Ethics*, parts of which he imagines might already have been confiscated. He also confesses his relief that he had at least told Bethge, “the most important things. Even if you were not to remember it any longer, it would nevertheless resurface in some way indirectly.” And then, almost as if to devalue the importance of what he has just said, he confides, “Furthermore, my thoughts were, of course, still incomplete.”¹

Opinions about the *Ethics* range from Clifford J. Green's reference to the work as "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's magnum opus",² to Ernst Feil who refers to the *Ethics* as "this fragmentary work."³ A magnum opus in the making, fragmentary or incomplete, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* marks a significant, if not radical, move away from an ethic based on principle, driven by the two wholly inappropriate questions; “How can I be good?” and “How can I do something good?”⁴ questions based on the premise that “the self and the world are the ultimate realities.”⁵ If ethical enquiry proceeds on this basis, Bonhoeffer argues, ethical

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 181 (Letter of November 18 1943, to Eberhard Bethge).

² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 1.

³ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 141.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 47

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

reflection has the goal “that I be good, and that the world - by my action – becomes good. If it turns out, however, that these realities, myself, and the world, are themselves embedded in a wholly other ultimate reality, namely, the reality of God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, then the ethical problem takes on a whole new aspect.”⁶ Turning his back on the notion that we must or should become good, or that the world must or should become ‘good’ by our efforts, Bonhoeffer described the ultimate importance of the ethical task as that in which “the reality of God show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality.”⁷ The starting point of any ethical concern will then be “that God be known as the good [das Gute], even at the risk that I and the world are revealed as not good, but as bad through and through.”⁸

Bonhoeffer’s return to Germany in 1939

By mid-1939 Bonhoeffer’s American colleagues and friends, amongst them Reinhold Niebuhr, had initiated a plan to ‘rescue’ Bonhoeffer and bring him to the United States. They were concerned about what they regarded as the growing risk to Bonhoeffer’s life and wanted to put him beyond the reach of the National Socialists. Although Bonhoeffer did not understand it at the beginning, he was to work on four different projects; 1) work for the summer conferences of the Student Christian Movement; 2) lecture at Union Theological Seminary during the summer sessions in July and August; 3) provide courses of lectures at various colleges and universities to be arranged by Paul Lehmann; and 4) to be employed by the Federal Council of Churches for three years to work with German Christian refugees in New York. Bonhoeffer believed that this last assignment would prevent him from ever returning to Germany - at least during the time of the National Socialists.

In early June he travelled to New York but after a stay of less than two months, during which he was deeply troubled by his departure from Germany, turned his back on the plans to live and work in the United States and, only a matter of weeks before Hitler’s forces

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 48.

invaded Poland, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in July 1939. By the autumn of 1940⁹ he was beginning to work on the manuscripts that were to take form as the *Ethics*.

This work was spread over two and a half years from the autumn of 1940 until the early months of 1943. The *Ethics* fragments were written in different locations, often whilst awaiting the next *Abwehr* courier assignment: at Klein-Krössin in Pomerania, at the Benedictine monastery in Ettal in the south of Germany where he was able to give unbroken time to his project during the winter of 1940-1941, at Friedrichsbrunn, the Bonhoeffer family's summer home in the Harz mountains of Lower Saxony to the west of Berlin, and in the family home in Berlin.

Throughout this period, other, significant events were shaping Bonhoeffer's life. Germany went to war on September 01 1939 when it invaded Poland, triggering the declaration of war against Germany by England and France. Since August of 1940, Bonhoeffer had been forbidden by the Reich Central Security Office to deliver any public speeches or sermons on the grounds that he was regarded as a potential subversive, a charge Bonhoeffer had contested without success.¹⁰ And since March of 1941 he had been prohibited by the Reich Writers' Guild from printing and publishing and from "any activity as a writer".¹¹

Now he was required to register with the police in Schlawe, his "official place of residence" in Pomerania.¹² And following a communication from the Council of Brethren of the Old Prussian Union in November 1940 in which they expressed their desire that Bonhoeffer "...proceed with academic work..."¹³ it seems that his work on behalf of the Confessing Church dried up.¹⁴ It was at this time, a time that Phillips calls an "enforced isolation from the church", that the "themes which the church struggle had caused to be set aside" were re-awoken. "This distance from the Confessing Church, imposed from without, provided Bonhoeffer with the opportunity to take a different perspective on theology and the task of the theologian than that of the Confessing Church apologist. In his search for a meaning for his work, he was thrown back upon himself and a new circle of associates."¹⁵

⁹ Ibid., 441.

¹⁰ Ibid., 452.

¹¹ Ibid., 456.

¹² Ibid., 452.

¹³ Ibid., 453.

¹⁴ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 130.

¹⁵ Ibid.

This allowed Bonhoeffer a “return to much of his liberal, humanitarian, middle-class past...[and] the freedom to encounter men of every background, rank, and conviction...cheerfully, imaginatively, and without doctrinaire exclusiveness.”¹⁶

Because of his travels under cover of his work for the *Abwehr* throughout the period from October 1940, often in circumstances in which he was greatly imperilled,¹⁷ and his arrest and imprisonment in 1943, the *Ethics* was not published as Bonhoeffer had planned. Instead, after the war, Eberhard Bethge edited the manuscripts and the first German edition was published in 1949 as the “first substantial posthumous Bonhoeffer monograph...indicat(ing) the priority Bethge gave to the work, and the importance he believed it had for Bonhoeffer.”¹⁸ It is interesting to note, moreover, that throughout his imprisonment “(Bonhoeffer’s) theological priority was finishing his *Ethics*.”¹⁹

The *Ethics* fragments portray Bonhoeffer's emerging interest in a Christian contribution to what was becoming a highly ambiguous situation. He was, by now, becoming more and more focussed on the question about how he might contribute to bringing peace to Germany and contributing to an answer as to how this might happen. He was also part of the conspiracy team, but he could only fully participate in the plot to end Hitler’s life if he truly believed that in belonging to Christ he was at the same time completely in the world. His “exposure” to the world was forcing some major questions upon him which he was unable and unwilling to evade; in a letter to Eberhard Bethge he writes,

My recent activity, which has largely been in the worldly [weltlich] sector, gives me much to think about...I sense how an opposition to all that is ‘religious’ is growing in me...I am not religious by nature. But I must constantly think of God, of Christ; authenticity, life, freedom, and mercy mean a great deal to me. It is only that the religious clothes they wear make me so uncomfortable...I believe that I am on the verge of some kind of breakthrough, I am letting things take their own course and do not resist. This is the sense in which I also understand my present activity in the worldly sector. Please

¹⁶ Ibid., 130-31.

¹⁷ In an intriguing paragraph on pp 419-420 in the Afterword to the *Ethics*, the editors draw attention to the difficulties under which Bonhoeffer worked as “a person under suspicion...this particular feature of the *Ethics* manuscripts was rarely recognised by reviewers and scholars of the book that Bethge edited after the end of the war.”

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 26.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 579. Editor's Afterword to the German Edition.

forgive these confessions; it is the fault of this long train ride. We really need to speak again about these things at leisure.²⁰

By 1940 Bonhoeffer could see that the churches as presently constituted could not possibly contribute to any hope of bringing in a peace that would endure. He was also aware that the churches had no way of thinking and talking about ethics that would withstand the stern conceptual battles that lay ahead, especially since the church was now contending with the threat of the Third Reich which was now giving full vent to its ferociously demonic intent; a situation that Rasmussen describes as the "*mastery that knows no limits as undertaken by autonomous humans in the name of freedom without constraint*."²¹

Clifford J. Green proposes that Bonhoeffer had two main concerns and contexts in mind when writing the *Ethics* manuscripts: "...first, ethics for the post war time of peace; second, the ethics of tyrannicide and coup...he wrote as a theologian of the church to help the Christian community think in new ways about the relationship of the church to society and about the public responsibilities of Christians...The second impulse for Bonhoeffer's work on his *Ethics* arose from his position as a theologian and pastor in the conspiracy to get rid of Hitler and National Socialism."²² And while, as Bethge points out, it is Bonhoeffer's rigorous logic that brings together "the Christological approach and the concrete structure of the world", there was a pragmatic, more immediate function in the writing of the *Ethics* as well; "The goal of the chapters he was writing...was not simply to argue logically but to free people for action", though if anyone was to look here for details and justifications about any particular course they would be disappointed, as it was a question of "liberation and awakening responsibility...".²³

Bonhoeffer set out to craft an approach to ethics in the fervent hope that humanity's original falling away from God would not be replicated on an even grander scale in the search for the knowledge of good and evil that, he believed, would inevitably follow the conclusion of the war and would almost certainly have given direction to the post war reconstruction of Europe and Germany in particular. "*Ethics* is above all a book about new life. Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in 1939 not because he wanted to die but because he

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945*, 329.

²¹ Rasmussen, "The Ethics of Responsible Action," 213. Bonhoeffer's analysis of the dynamics that lead eventually to the movement "that knew no limits" - National Socialism - is found in the fragment "Heritage and Decay", *Ethics* 103-33.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 10-11.

²³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 721.

wanted to participate in the renewal of German life after the war. In very large parts of *Ethics* it seems that his sights are set not on whether we will live through this time but on how we will live after it."²⁴

The *Ethics*, a different starting point for ethics

Bonhoeffer's ethical enquiry begins with a recognition of the same dynamics he had acknowledged in *Creation and Fall*. In words reminiscent of the earlier text, he writes

The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection...For Christian ethics, the mere possibility of knowing about good and evil is already a falling away from the origin [Ursprung]. Living in the origin, human beings know nothing but God alone....Knowledge about good and evil points to the prior disunion and estrangement [Entzweiung] from this origin. In knowing about good and evil, human beings understand themselves not within the reality of being defined by the origin, but from their own possibilities, namely, to be either good or evil. They now know themselves beside and outside of God, which means they now know nothing but themselves, and God not at all...Human beings can know about good and evil only in opposition to God.²⁵

The “falling away from the origin”, interpreted by Bonhoeffer here as humankind no longer defined solely as the creature in grateful relationship to the Creator God but rather as creature defined without reference to God and solely from within their own possibilities, and the story of humanity seeking to know good and evil, is at the heart of the *Creation and Fall* text. It points towards the deep ruptures within God’s created order, especially those within the community of persons.

The implications for any attempt to articulate a Christian ethic is immense; from the outset anyone seeking to express such an ethic “must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: “How can I be good?” and “How can I do something good? Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question; What is the will of God? This demand is radical precisely because it presupposes a decision about ultimate reality, that is, a decision of faith...”²⁶

²⁴ Robin W. Lovin, "Bonhoeffer for the Twenty-First Century," Public Broadcasting Service. www.pbs.org/wnet/religionand.week923/essay.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 299-300. In "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World"

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

The “decision of faith” refers to Bonhoeffer’s conviction that Christology lies at the heart of a Christian ethic since, in faith, it is in Christ that the reality of God and the reality of the world come together.

The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ. The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world.²⁷

By starting here, Bonhoeffer seeks to avoid the casuistry of an ethic based on so called timeless principles, radically repositioning ethics instead as “the interplay between God’s reality and the world’s reality within the believing, knowing, acting human being.”²⁸ In addition, because human beings “are living and mortal creatures in a finite and fragile world”, ethical discourse must be located in time and space observing a particularity in order to be credible. “The ethical...has its particular time and its particular place,” he wrote,²⁹ and in a critique of the logic that what someone believes ought to be the case, over against what actually is the case, Bonhoeffer offers some of his most potent observations. The origin of good lies in the reality of God, he writes, as “the ultimate reality beyond and in all that exists” and in the “reality of the existing world”. The reality of God is not just one other idea in the pantheon of ideas; this is because “*in Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world.*”³⁰ And if there are questions to be asked about the reality of God and the reality of this world, the answers are to be found solely in the name Jesus Christ, for it is in this name that “God and the world are enclosed. From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus.”³¹

And then, perhaps, the most important step in Bonhoeffer’s logic:

All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions. All thinking about the good that plays off what ought to be against what is, or what is against what ought to be, is overcome where the good has become reality, namely, in Jesus Christ...(hence)...The irreconcilable opposition of ought and

²⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁸ Ibid., 409. "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition".

²⁹ Ibid., 365.

³⁰ Ibid., 54.

³¹ Ibid., 54.

is finds reconciliation in Christ, that is, in ultimate reality. To participate in this reality is the true meaning of the question concerning the good.³²

The logic is compelling. Look nowhere else but to Jesus Christ as the person and the place where God and the world find their reconciliation, and perhaps more importantly, the ultimate form or shape of the good. What ought to be now becomes inconsequential since what is, is located right here in Jesus Christ in its fullness. To do what is good is to take the form of Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer wrote the *Ethics* fragments at the time of his increasing involvement with loyal people in the conspiracy, men and women who lived “upright in the unsteady space between lost certainties and unknown futures,”³³ responsible people who tried to make their whole lives an answer to the question and call of God. Bonhoeffer’s observation that the “huge masquerade of evil [that was the Third Reich] has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion”,³⁴ left him with no alternative than to construct a commitment to ethical enquiry that derives solely from the reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ...“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.”³⁵

The form of the church in the *Ethics*

It is tempting to think carelessly about the church in the *Ethics* since church qua church is not Bonhoeffer’s main concern here. Bonhoeffer insists however on the need for a lively relationship between the church and the world in which it is embedded. A resolution of this relationship between church and world is found in what the Roman Catholic scholar, William Kuhns, calls, “Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of a church to the world”, in which Bonhoeffer attempts “a new understanding of the church, of Christian ethics, and perhaps above all, of the individual Christian’s self-understanding.”³⁶

³² Ibid., 54-55.

³³ Rasmussen, "The Ethics of Responsible Action," 206-25.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 38.

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 55.

³⁶ William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), 138.

Bonhoeffer's attempt to redraw the church's approach to ethics was a typically bold step and one that he did not take lightly. The First World War had effectively shattered the widely shared optimism in the inevitable progress of society. During the early years of his university study Bonhoeffer had come to believe that the traditional connection between church and state would have to change, and his growing commitment to the "new" dialectical theology made this even clearer since, at its heart, was the unequivocal declaration that Jesus Christ was the disclosure of God and Lord of all. That Bonhoeffer believed the church's form would need to change becomes clearer as his own journey that had assumed growing urgency during the years at Finkenwalde continued to unfold.

However, throughout the *Ethics* the shape and form the church would eventually assume is only hinted at. Some years later in the letter written from prison, to Eberhard and Renate Bethge's infant son, Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger, at the time of the boy's baptism in May 1944, Bonhoeffer approaches the issue of the changing "form of the church".

You are being baptised today as a Christian. All those great and ancient words of the Christian proclamation will be pronounced over you...without your understanding any of it...we too are being thrown back all the way to the beginnings of our understanding. What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore...By the time you grow up, the form of the church will have changed considerably. It is still being melted and remolded, and every attempt to help it develop prematurely into a powerful organisation will only delay its conversion³⁷ [Umkehr] and purification. It is not for us to predict the day - but the day will come - when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus's language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power - the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God's kingdom is drawing near.³⁸

Bonhoeffer could not have written a more succinct or moving summary of his intention in writing the *Ethics* fragments. The fragments are his attempt to demonstrate what it means to "live in Christ and follow Christ" and to attest "the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind."

³⁷ "Conversion" could also be translated as "transformation".

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 389-90. "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge".

In similar fashion, Philip Ziegler, in his article “Dietrich Bonhoeffer – An Ethics of God’s Apocalypse?”³⁹ argues that the *Ethics* represents a boldly repeating series of iterations of the “one event that the Reformation has called the justification of the sinner by grace alone.”⁴⁰ In Bonhoeffer’s hands, Ziegler writes, “this doctrine *does* bespeak ‘the onset of something radically new’ rather than offer mere consolation and ‘rescue in the face of recurring failure.’ Its role in Bonhoeffer’s theological ethics is to republish with dogmatic density the form and force of Paul’s apocalyptic gospel.”⁴¹

The local form that incarnates “the language of a new righteousness and truth”, and that “bespeaks the onset of something radically new” is the form of Christ in his body, the church, and Kuhns argues that alongside Bonhoeffer’s concerns as a theologian, the threefold influence of “the apathy of Christians, which reflected the need for searching renewal; the hope of a new form of the church; and the inspiration of a secular resistance...gave...the search for a vital Church-world doctrine a fresh imperative.”⁴²

Are there two realms?

Bonhoeffer contemplates the church by way of a consideration of the two realms, shaped as they were by Augustine’s City of God, and Martin Luther’s Two Kingdoms (Regiments). For Luther, the Christian lives in two kingdoms, where as a member of the church she or he is committed to the values of the Gospel where love and non-violence prevails, while as a member of civil society where the rule of law is necessary, the Christian has a part to play as prince or magistrate or subject, in a world where coercion is necessary. Not surprisingly, Bonhoeffer’s starting point is the disclosure of God in Jesus Christ.

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 has 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

³⁹ Ziegler, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An Ethics of God’s Apocalypse?,” 579-94.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 146.

⁴¹ Ziegler, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An Ethics of God’s Apocalypse?,” 588.

⁴² Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 140-41.

characterised solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name. In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17).⁴³

This means that one cannot be immersed in Jesus Christ without at the same time being immersed in the world of which he was and is a part. There is only one world or one realm and the Christian, while not subsumed into the “world”, carries into the world the form of Jesus Christ.

But standing “like a Colossus obstructing our way” is the idea of “two realms [Räume] (that) bump against each other: one divine, holy, supernatural, and Christian; the other worldly, profane, natural and unChristian.”⁴⁴ And, as long as this is the case “we are left with only the following options. Giving up on reality as a whole, either we place ourselves in one of the two realms wanting Christ without the world or the world without Christ – and in both cases we deceive ourselves. Or we try to stand in the two realms at the same time, thereby becoming people in eternal conflict...”⁴⁵ This view of the two realms peaked, according to Bonhoeffer, for the first time in the High Middle Ages when the natural or profane realm was subordinated to the realm of grace, and then again in the pseudo-Reformation thought of the post-Reformation.

The problem with two realms of course was that it allowed post-Reformation German theology to build an edifice on the belief that “there are divinely willed, special spheres of life which are removed from the Lordship of Jesus Christ, which need not hear his word”.⁴⁶ Werner Elert and Paul Althaus were amongst those who signed the Ansbach Memorandum in June 1934 in a direct attack on the Barmen Declaration of May of that year, which had made it clear that no areas of life were to be regarded as removed from the lordship of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 54.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, 161.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, See 56 f.36 where the Ansbach signatories had declared that they were obligated “to the natural orders to which we are subject, such as family, people [Volk], race (that is, blood relationship)”. To the contrary, Barmen had declared the evangelical truth that “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death”.

Bonhoeffer regarded such two kingdoms thinking as the product of “*Volkstum*-theology and thus able to establish contact with the *völkisch* thinking of the National Socialists and the German Christians they controlled”,⁴⁸ as intent only on relieving the church of its responsibility to counter the state.⁴⁹ Thus, Bonhoeffer had written,

...there are not two realms, but only *the one realm of the Christ-reality [Christuswirklichkeit]*, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united...The New Testament is concerned only with the realization [Wirklichwerden] of the Christ-reality in the contemporary world that it already embraces, owns and inhabits. There are not two competing realms standing side by side and battling over the borderline, as if this question of boundaries was always the decisive one. Rather, the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ. History moves only from this center and towards this center.⁵⁰

“Wishing to leave thinking in realms behind” him, Bonhoeffer moved to a delineation of the church, beginning with a question, “Is not the church of Jesus Christ such a realm that is divided from the realm of the world?”⁵¹ In asking this question, Bonhoeffer points in the direction that his writing would eventually take him; towards the difficulty of articulating an understanding of the church in a world in which God is being displaced as reality.

Now Bonhoeffer makes an intriguing claim “Without a doubt there are statements about the church in the New Testament that use spatial analogies; one thinks of the church described as a temple, a building, a house, and also as a body. It is clear from this that where the church is to be described as the visible church-community of God on earth, spatial images cannot be avoided.”⁵² And then calling on an earlier theme from Finkenwalde days, Bonhoeffer states once again that the church “occupies a certain space in the world that is determined by its worship, its order, and its congregational life, and this very fact is the point of departure for thinking of realms in general”⁵³ This assertion has already been heard before. In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer had made it plain that the church makes a claim for space in the world; now he suggests that if it does not, it runs the risk of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 417. “Editors’ Afterword to the German Edition”.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 417-18. Bonhoeffer regarded this abhorrent distortion of Lutheran thinking as “pseudo-Lutheran” or “pseudo-Reformation.”.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁵¹ Ibid., 62.

⁵² Ibid., 62.

⁵³ Ibid.

spiritualizing Christ and "devaluing itself into a purely spiritual entity"⁵⁴ and if that should happen the fact of God's revelation in the world would be deprived of its power. For those who would be faithful and obedient in their response to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the church "defines a space within which this faith and obedience is at least not made impossible." In defining such a space, Bonhoeffer is defining - "negatively" he concedes - the boundaries "of an order within which it is possible to believe in and render obedience to Jesus Christ."⁵⁵ Only in this environment is ethical reflection likely to reflect a deep commitment to Christ in whom God and the world are come together.

Now Bonhoeffer embarks on what is perhaps his most exhilarating presentation of the church in the *Ethics*. This "space" requires a theological explanation which he provides, once again calling attention to the space Jesus Christ took up within the world when in the stable at Bethlehem, on the cross in Jerusalem, and in the (local) church

It is intrinsic to God's revelation in Jesus Christ that it occupied space in the world. It would, however, be fundamentally wrong simply to explain this space empirically. When God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world – even space in a stable because "there was no other place in the inn" - God embraces the whole reality of the world in this narrow space and reveals its ultimate foundation. So also the church of Jesus Christ is the place [Ort] - that is, the space [Raum] – in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed. This space of the church does not, therefore, exist just for itself, but its existence is already always something that reaches far beyond it. This is because it is not the space of a cult that would have to fight for its existence in the world. Rather, the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ...The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God. It is not true that the church intends to or must spread its space out over the space of the world. It 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"...⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 360.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 63-64.

This rather long quote provides us with some of Bonhoeffer's most concise delineations of the church and some significant shifts from his earlier exposition in *Discipleship*. In a "narrow" space, sometimes without room to move but still with enough space to demonstrate love in its fullness, the church, like its Lord, bears witness to the foundation of all reality in Christ. Again, drawing on spatial terminology, Bonhoeffer locates the church in the *Raum* where "the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed", a dramatic and demanding mandate that leaves little, if any, room for argument about the churches' mission and ministry. However, unlike the claim in *Discipleship* that the church's *Lebensraum* is contestable space within the world, here the *Raum* is only the amount of space the church needs "to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ and to the world's reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ", and is only to be defended "for the [sake of the] salvation of the world." Here the "world" is not cryptically ciphered as "enemy territory", or as a space to be contested, as *Discipleship* might suggest, but as the very object of God's judgement and love, to be valued and loved by Christ's body.

But perhaps the most important shift that has happened here is that Bonhoeffer has redefined the church as the community of Christ responsible for the world since the church requires 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. This was something he was able to claim because of his belief that "the relation of the church to the world is determined entirely by the relation of God to the world."⁵⁷

Then, in what appears to be a major conceptual shift, Bonhoeffer insists that "this belonging together of God and world that is grounded in Christ" does not permit "static spatial boundaries" to exist in our thinking about church and world, since it is precisely the premising of these static boundaries that mistakenly encourages the misguided attempt to invoke thinking about the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the *zwei Reiche-Lehre*; nor does it remove the difference between church-community and world even though the church-community still maintains its particularity and its peculiarity from the world in which it exists.

⁵⁷ Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 142.

So, if to be ethical is to take part in the “reality of the fulfilled will of God” who is Jesus Christ, then a person’s way into this reality, without being torn apart by conflicting demands inherited from the ‘old’ ethic, driven as it is by the fruitless search for the meaning of good and evil, can only be through faith in Jesus Christ ““in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Col. 2:9; 1:19), ‘through whom everything is reconciled, whether on earth or in heaven’ (Col:20), whose body, that is, the church-community, is the fullness of the One who fills all in all (Eph. 1:23). Faith in this Jesus Christ is the single source of all good.”⁵⁸ The church-community then, takes up space in the world; one that might be called a salvific space in that it is only to be defended “for the (sake of the) salvation of the world”. But still the question remains, what is the form of the church within this space?

The church as the form of Christ

For our purposes, the fragment, *Ethics as Formation* is most important. The second of the thirteen *Ethics*’ manuscripts, it was written in an attempt to make sense of the fact that by 1940 the intellectual elite, as representatives of the respected ethical traditions within Germany, found themselves unable “to withstand the enticements and threats, deceptions and distortions, of National Socialist reality”,⁵⁹ an unbearable situation Bonhoeffer described as “...the raw material of tragedy.”⁶⁰ In these circumstances, who will stand firm and remain upright?

Bonhoeffer’s reply is uncompromising: only those whose lives are formed in the image of Jesus Christ. It was his deep conviction that in the resurrection of Jesus, new life shines even in a world wracked by cynicism, despair and death. This new life takes its form only as we are “drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, *by being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen*” taking Gal 4:9 (“until Christ is formed in you”) as his reference point.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 75.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 421.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁶¹ Ibid., 93.

Put simply, this is what being human means; the strength and resilience of such a formation in Christ lies in its alignment with the cruciform and resurrection realities of Jesus. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer had pursued a similar idea when describing the true life of Jesus Christ in believers when he wrote:

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'.⁶²

So human beings take on the form of the "incarnate, crucified, and transfigured Christ" as Jesus Christ moulds them into His form; in becoming conformed to His form they assume the form of being which is simply and truly human. However,

He who bore the form of *the* human being can only take form in a small flock; this is Christ's church. 'Formation' means therefore in the first place Jesus Christ taking form in Christ's church. Here it is the very form of Jesus Christ that takes form. The New Testament, in deep and clear indication of the matter itself, calls the church the body of Christ. The body is the form...the church now bears the form that in truth is meant for all people...the church is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form. It is solely the form of Christ that matters, not any form besides Christ's own. The church is the human being who has become human, has been judged, and has been awaked to new life in Christ. Therefore essentially its first concern is not with the so-called religious functions of human beings, but with the existence in the world of whole human beings in all their relationships...The starting point of Christian ethics is the body of Christ, the form of Christ in the form of the church...*The church is the place where Jesus Christ's taking form is proclaimed and where it happens.* The Christian ethic stands in the service of this proclamation and this event.⁶³

It would not have escaped the attention of Bonhoeffer's readers that his use of the idea of formation and conformation (and in particular *Gleichgestaltung*) "Jesus Christ taking form in Christ's church", contrasted sharply with, and called into judgement at the same time, the Reich's programme of *Gleichschaltung* which forced a conformity by "forcing into line" those whose lives and organisations were outside the parameters of National Socialist intentions.

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 287.

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 96-102.

In his book *The Form of Christ in the World*, John Phillips proposes that Bonhoeffer's interest in formation and conformation, which Phillips calls "two elusive formulations",⁶⁴ represents a first look at the difficulty Bonhoeffer was beginning to have with the terminology he had lived with and used creatively for so long: "Christ existing as church-community". "Can there be an unrestricted movement", Phillips asks, "of (Bonhoeffer's) thinking into worldliness if he retains his spatial language?"⁶⁵ For too long it seems, Christ has been confined to a particular space, namely that of the church, which up until now has stood against the world. By using the formulations of 'formation' and 'conformation' with and to the form of the Incarnate one, Phillips suggests, Bonhoeffer "seeks to free his Christology from his ecclesiology..."⁶⁶ so that Christ is no longer tied too closely with the idea of church, particularly a church that Bonhoeffer now believed had failed the German people. By breaking the overly close link that Bonhoeffer has persisted with, perhaps for too long Phillips suggests, Bonhoeffer is able to explore other areas freed now from the restrictions of his ecclesiology which has served its purpose but is now generally unhelpful. Phillips puts it like this:

When [Bonhoeffer's] association with the Hitler resistance and the enforced isolation from the church on the eve of the war reawakened interest in the themes which the church struggle had caused him to set aside, Bonhoeffer attempted to rework his theory in a way that might escape the restrictiveness of his ecclesiology. He remained certain that revelation must be stated concretely and therefore in a spatial manner, but he now attempted to make the spatial language more flexible, to release it from the Christo-ecclesiology of his earlier thought and therefore from the strict boundaries of the church struggle, and to formulate it in terms of his second, more dynamic Christology. These various experiments were collected as the *Ethics*. Finally, in the prison letters, Bonhoeffer's new understanding of the meaning of history caused him to turn away altogether from the attempt to locate in the world an empiric-revelational 'space' for Christ.⁶⁷

Phillips believes that Bonhoeffer was finding his language of ecclesiology where "Christ exists as church-community" increasingly "unservicable and even embarrassing".⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 137.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

In a slightly different way and commenting on the same apparent shift, Eberhard Bethge notes Bonhoeffer's use of the notion of "Christocentric conformity" as a key step change in his theological development: "...the church is (now) regarded as a part of the reconciled world and this...provides a much more positive relation between the church and the world than existed in *Discipleship*. There the world was merely the location of faith's first step; now, in *Ethics*, Christ's lordship creates historical responsibilities."⁶⁹

Both Phillips and Bethge seem to hint, with some relief, that finally Bonhoeffer has escaped from what Phillips at least, seems to regard as some sort of ecclesiological straightjacket. But whether this is what has really happened seems to me doubtful.

Bonhoeffer, it should not be forgotten, had made it clear to everyone who was listening at the time, that he would re-form the church if things were as bad as they were being painted. Recall the comment of his siblings that the church was "a poor, feeble, boring, petty and bourgeois institution" and Bonhoeffer's crisp reply: "In that case I shall reform it!"⁷⁰ What was happening in the *Ethics* was no more and no less than the reformer going about the task with a conviction that, in the event the church could not re-form itself, it would never be able to contribute to post-war reconstruction; more importantly, it would not bear a prophetic word of God. He was redefining and redescribing the church yet again: in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, he had attempted a redefinition of the church against the prevailing philosophical views of the day, especially German Idealism; in *Discipleship* it had been the Reich and the Reich Church against which he had passionately argued the lordship of Jesus Christ and a costly grace; now in the *Ethics*, he was redefining the church for the world.

Phillips' claim is that Bonhoeffer was now beginning to imagine, if not to see clearly, that his attempt to "locate in the world an empiric-revelational 'space' for Christ" was ill conceived, and in the end, unnecessary. In addition, Phillips suggests that Bonhoeffer's commitment to a concretion of revelation in the form of "Christ existing as church-community" was proving embarrassing. This claim makes little sense; Bonhoeffer never conceded that God's free word of address to humankind was not identifiable in some way and, as we shall see, even in the *Letters and Papers*, the church stood firm at the end in

⁶⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 718.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

Bonhoeffer's thought and practice. The question of course is, how is Jesus Christ contemporary and concrete in the empirical, visible church?

The 'responsible life' and the *Stellvertreter*

Like a continuous thread, Bonhoeffer's unwavering commitment to the *Stellvertreter*, links *Sanctorum Communio*⁷¹ and the *Ethics*, (as well as the *Letters and Papers from Prison*) together. As the German crisis worsened, the *Stellvertreter* became more visible in Bonhoeffer's writing as the shape of the church in the form of its suffering Lord, a proposal that had appeared as early as 1937 in *Discipleship* where he had written,

...the community of Christ has a 'form' that is different from that of the world. The community is called to be ever increasingly transformed into this form. It is, in fact, the form of Christ himself. He came into the world and in infinite mercy bore us and accepted us. And yet he did not become conformed to the world but was actually rejected and cast out by it. He was not of this world. If it engages the world properly, the visible church-community will always more closely assume the form of its suffering Lord.⁷²

Now, in the *Ethics*, the *Stellvertreter* becomes the inspiration for the "Responsible Life",⁷³ a life based on "vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]"⁷⁴ It has its foundation in "Jesus - the life, our life - the Son of God who became human, (and) lived as our vicarious representative...His entire living, acting, and suffering was vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]."⁷⁵ The verb *stellen* with its meaning "to (take a) stand for", or "to take a position on behalf of", attached to *vertretung* which refers to the representative or replacement other, leads directly to "Christ the *Stellvertreter* (as) the love of God for humanity...Christ's *Stellvertretung* is his loving-action-for-humanity."⁷⁶

However, gathering around the divine word...[the church] also now constitute[s] a corporate entity [Gemeinwesen], a body in its own right...the church as a corporate entity cannot be separated from the office of proclamation...Thus the church-community, precisely by seeking to be merely

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 145ff.

⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 247-48.

⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, "History and Good [2]" 246-98.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁷⁶ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 56.

an instrument and a means to an end, has in fact become the goal and center of all that God is doing with the world. The concept of vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung] defines this dual relationship most clearly. The Christian community stands in the place in which the whole world should stand. In this respect it serves the world as vicarious representative; it is there for the world's sake. On the other hand, the place where the church-community stands is the place where the world fulfils its own destiny; the church-community is the 'new creation,' the 'new creature,' the goal of God's ways on earth.⁷⁷

In her paper "From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly: Forgiveness in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer",⁷⁸ Lori Hale tracks the explicit shift in Bonhoeffer's thinking from the primary mode of "witness" as the exhortation to "love your enemies", to that of the structure and necessity of living the responsible Christian life "in which one lives with and for others, includ(ing), necessarily, the readiness to take on guilt."⁷⁹

Hale regards *Kristallnacht* on 9 November 1938 and Bonhoeffer's brief return to the United States in June 1939, as the two events that drove this major shift in this thinking. Bonhoeffer's anger about *Kristallnacht*, when Jewish businesses, homes and synagogues throughout Germany were ransacked and burned was, Hale suggests, directed not only at the Reich, but "especially at those in the church, leaders and pastors who kept silent."⁸⁰ In addition, Bonhoeffer's decision to return to Germany from the USA was driven by his belief that if he did not share the tribulations of his people during the years of the Reich, he had no right to share in the rebuilding of Germany after the war. "Bonhoeffer returned to Germany with a new understanding that his profound freedom as a Christian carried with it an equally profound sense of responsibility." But this was no casual sense of responsibility but one tied very specifically to "conformation, being drawn into the form of Christ in the world...and is predicated on the understanding that the one taking such action does not presume to be Christ, but responds to Christ's own participation in church, world, and humanity."⁸¹ Jesus as the ultimately non-formulaic person, is the "responsible person par excellence."⁸²

⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 403-05.

⁷⁸ Lori Brandt Hale, "From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly: Forgiveness in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.," *Word and World* 27, Number 1, no. Winter 2007 (2007): 79-87.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 86.

Bonhoeffer was now living and working in situations of increasing uncertainty and ambiguity. He had moved from the relative certainty that the “loving one’s enemies” precept had provided him to “an acceptance of the uncertain, the incomplete, and the provisional” where his “embrace of righteous action...rooted in his understanding that righteous or responsible action corresponded with reality” now gave form and shape to his life.⁸³ This was the firm belief that “...*action in accordance with Christ is action in accord with reality*” and it would now become his guiding precept.⁸⁴ Now, more than ever before, his belief that ethics was tied to and located in a concrete time and place became important. Hale concludes her observations by saying that in embracing fully the paradox of the profound gift of God’s forgiveness offered to both victim and perpetrator at the same time, that is for example to the Jew and to Hitler, Bonhoeffer freed himself to act responsibly “on behalf of those who were suffering, who were victims, who were voiceless”,⁸⁵ although it does need to be acknowledged that Bonhoeffer retained a rigorous and absolute condemnation of Hitler throughout his life.

The collapse of the labyrinth and liberation from imprisonment in one’s own ego

Beyond the claim that the church occupies space in the world, heard earlier in *Discipleship*, and that this space assumes the form of Jesus Christ himself, the *Ethics* draws attention to two spatial metaphors; one, the “labyrinth”, not mentioned by Bonhoeffer in his earlier writings; the second, the “abyss” which has already appeared in *Creation and Fall*.

Both spatial metaphors are mentioned briefly at the beginning of “Ultimate and Penultimate Things”⁸⁶ and are not referred to again, but vividly link a person’s past with the hope of an altogether different way of life in the future, one into which the word of

⁸³ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 229.

⁸⁵ Hale, “From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly: Forgiveness in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 87.

⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 146-70

God has burst. This is a world in which a person, liberated by Jesus Christ, is torn out of imprisonment in her or his own ego.⁸⁷

Bonhoeffer is talking about the justification of the sinner by grace alone, the word of God that is to be heard as God's final word to humanity. This, it should be noted, is "a *qualitatively* ultimate word."⁸⁸ The metaphors are used in a paragraph that could almost be described as a hopeless case of mixed metaphors! Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer makes a telling point:

The dark tunnel of human life, which was barred within and without and was disappearing ever more deeply into an abyss from which there is no exit, is powerfully torn open; the word of God bursts in. In this saving light, people recognise God and their neighbors for the first time. The labyrinth of their previous lives collapses. They become free for God and for one another. They realize that there is a God who loves and accepts them, that alongside them stand others whom God loves equally, and that there is a future with the triune God and God's church-community.⁸⁹

The abyss represents territory of "primeval depth"⁹⁰ where there are few, if any, boundaries; it is the world in which humankind has given up its creatureliness, and in which life is lived in slavery to the eternal quest to know good from evil. On this quest, one drops blindly into infinitely endless space, into a bottomless abyss. Humankind is no longer held safely as the creature as it had been intended.⁹¹

The labyrinth⁹² is the space where there is no perspective and people lose their bearings because they cannot "see" beyond their immediate place in life, the very situation that Bonhoeffer described at the commencement of "Ethics as Formation". The bright future that Bonhoeffer imagines, is lived out in the presence of the triune God and within the church-community; saved from the terrors of the abyss and the confusions of the labyrinth, life is lived in freedom for God and "neighbours for the first time". Sociality expressed in community is re-created and rediscovered. This free word of God that can never be forced

⁸⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 76-77.

⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 120.

⁹² Note that the "pictorial figure of the labyrinth is in Calvin's writings frequently employed as a symbol of human frustration and confusion." John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Philadelphia. : The Westminster Press. 1960. Book I, Chap 5, 12. 64 f.36. See also the contrasting uses of abyss and labyrinth in William J. Bouwsma. *John Calvin. A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. 45-48.

“involves a complete break with everything penultimate, with all that has gone before...”⁹³
Such is the importance of this ultimate word of God’s grace that justifies a sinner.

Everything before the ultimate is penultimate; both are to be valued as part of God’s own world so as not to avoid the life in front of us with both its great and base moments, since it is in the midst of this very life that a way is to be prepared for the word. “Every valley is to be exalted, every mountain and hill shall be filled, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth”. (Luke 3: 4-6). The way is to be prepared for the coming of the ultimate, that is, Christ who ‘will break the doors of bronze and shatter the bars of iron.’ (Ps. 107:16). Nothing that comes before the ultimate word of God is to be avoided or evaded. This world in which we live is to be taken seriously, and even though the penultimate is completely superseded by the ultimate, it still remains in existence

The “relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate is resolved only in Christ”⁹⁴ whose incarnation blesses the penultimate, whose crucifixion makes a new beginning by justification possible, and whose resurrection as life giving word guarantees the qualitatively ultimate word. This ultimate word which is not a culmination but a “complete break with the penultimate”⁹⁵ guarantees God’s new life that “breaks ever more powerfully into earthly life and creates space for itself within it.”⁹⁶ Bonhoeffer’s use of the phrase “resurrection as life giving word guaranteeing the qualitatively ultimate word” points to the language of discontinuous, second order change.⁹⁷ Discontinuity is the key to the ultimate and to transformation. The resurrection of Christ offers truly profound second order change possibilities, as it provides a way out of a system while at the same time changing and transforming the system itself. Jesus’ resurrection which is the ultimate word of God, is the

⁹³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 149.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 151.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁷ Second order change transcends a given system or frame of reference and has been addressed within the social sciences by Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch in their book *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. (New York NY: W.W.Norton & Company Inc., 1974). Using the Theory of Groups, and more importantly the Theory of Logical Types, to provide a way of thinking about second order change, they observed the difference in type between two sorts of change; on the one hand, for example, changes in the engine speed of a machine, and, on the other hand, changes in the way it functions that occur as a result of a change, a transformation in the way it is designed. “The distinction is fundamental and must on no account be slighted,” says W. R. Ashby. Ashby in his book, *Design for a Brain. The Origin of Adaptive Behaviour*, (New York NY: John Wiley, 1954) describes two different types of change: “one that occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged, known as first order change, and by contrast the discontinuous or transformational change that “provides a way out of a system”, change “whose occurrence changes the system itself - known as second order change.”

ultimate discontinuous change that deconstructs life as we know it; life lived within the confines of the penultimate and in the very same moment, reconstructing new life lived beyond and transcending the constraints of the penultimate.

Summary

Philip Ziegler proposes that “in draft upon draft of that manuscript (*Ethics*), Bonhoeffer is working out a theological ethic whose intent is to conform to the contours of Paul’s apocalyptic gospel.”⁹⁸ Reviewing “recent reconsideration of pauline apocalyptic”, Ziegler concludes that

in Paul’s gospel “revelation” (*apocalypsis*) denotes God’s redemptive invasion of the fallen order of things such that reality itself is decisively re-made in the event. God’s advent in Christ utterly disrupts and displaces previous patterns of thought and action and gives rise to new ones that better comport with the reality of a world actively reconciled to God...the gospel of inescapable judgement and inordinate forgiveness constitutes the world anew...⁹⁹

The basic question then, he insists, is “What has *paraenesis* to do with *apocalypsis*?”¹⁰⁰ or “What has advice or exhortation to do with God’s disclosure or revelation”? with an unspoken answer that suggests, “Very little, if anything at all.”

If revelation is both an “event that *initiates*, even as it *discloses*, a new state of affairs”, a telling *and* a reconciliation that puts to rights the “radical discontinuity between human captivity to sin and the gift of a restored relationship with God”,¹⁰¹ then the implications for Christian ethics is profound. In his suggestion that the Christian should not bother herself or himself with what is good or what one might do that is good, but rather be concerned about how God’s reality and the world’s reality in Jesus Christ might play out in the particularities of the life of a believing, knowing and acting person, Bonhoeffer radicalised ethical enquiry in a way that placed it firmly inside the mystery of God’s “inescapable judgement and inordinate forgiveness”.

For in knowing Christ they of course come to know and acknowledge their election [Erwählung] by God; they themselves no longer stand between good

⁹⁸ Ziegler, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An Ethics of God’s Apocalypse?,” 580.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 580.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 580. The paraphrase of a question asked by Wayne Meeks “Apocalyptic Discourse and Strategies of Goodness” *Journal of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2000) 462, quoted by Ziegler.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 581.

and evil as those who are choosing Wählende],...Instead, as those who are chosen [Erwählte] and thus no longer able to choose at all, having chosen already in being chosen, they stand in the freedom and unity of doing the will of God. Thus they are filled with a new knowledge in which the knowledge of good and evil has been overcome. They are filled with the knowledge of God, yet no longer as those who have become like God, but as those who bear the image of God. They now no longer know anything but "Jesus Christ the crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2); and in Christ they know all things.¹⁰²

Eberhard Bethge notes that by September 1940, "Europe's new master had put himself beyond good and evil, and whoever thought in terms of conventional ethics would have nothing to set against him."¹⁰³ Over against this reality, Bonhoeffer had placed the reality of God and the world met in Jesus Christ, and had attempted a major re-alignment in thinking about how Christians in Germany might behave if they were to be formed in the image of Christ and contribute to a rebuilding of the country; he had made them guardians of a new way of doing ethics. Suspecting however that by now the church in Germany did not have the ability to contribute credibly to any post war reconstruction that could be taken seriously, he develops his ideas in innovative ways that, by their construction and implication, would almost certainly not have been understood by many during the war years. As it turned out it was left to others to interpret and implement them.

At the heart of the reconstruction of the ethical enterprise is the answer to the question that is asked in the fragment "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World". The question is, "What is new that has arrived in Jesus"? And the answer is that "He lives and acts not out of knowledge of good and evil, but out of the will of God. There is only *one* will of God. In it the origin has been regained."¹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer's understanding of ethics grounded on and in reconciliation "sees the world of disunion and irresolvable conflicts overcome. Such an understanding of ethics asserts in the sense of the New Testament the promise that human life and action do not have to be problematical, tormented, dark; instead, they have something self-evident, joyous, certain, and clear."¹⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer's commentary on Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees,¹⁰⁶ for example, is not only a scathing attack on all rule based systems that Bonhoeffer decries, but a liberating essay on the joyous nature of freedom from the internal censor we each carry within us.

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 316-17.

¹⁰³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 718.

¹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 313.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 429 - 30.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, See 309-15.

In the light of the church-world thought of the *Ethics*, it becomes clear that the Church took on for Bonhoeffer not simply a fresh doctrinal formulation, but an entirely new meaning. The traditional notions of the Church, as a fortress of the faithful protesting against the world's onslaughts, as a gathering of Christians to pray and share in a "religious" experience, or even as the place where the Word is preached and sacraments offered to men, - all these interpretations lacked the one life-giving power: bearing Christ's commitment to the world. Bonhoeffer turned the idea of the church inside out. In doing so, he restored to it much of the vitality and social concern absent from ecclesiology for centuries.¹⁰⁷

At an earlier time – Edwin Robertson places it in August 1936 – Bonhoeffer had addressed the issue of the church in a way that already points forward to the *Ethics*;

According to the witness of the New Testament, the church is the city on the hill. Today it has to venture to live 'outside' in its own life in simple obedience. It has to discover grace in leaving everything, to receive it back again a hundred-fold *here*. It has to define its limits. It has to sever heresy from its body. It has to make itself distinct and to be a community which hears the Apocalypse. It has to testify to its alien nature and to resist the false principle of inner-worldliness. Inner-worldliness is a comfort, but not a principle or a programme. Friendship between the church and the world is not normal, but abnormal. The community *must* suffer like Christ, without wonderment. The cross stands *visibly* over the community. This is the proclamation of the whole Christ, witness to the whole presentation of the message.¹⁰⁸

There can be no mistaking the punctuated urgency of the Finkenwalde years, nor the prophetic hints about the way he might speak of the church in the prison letters. But when Bonhoeffer makes the assertion that "the church has to make itself distinct and to be a community which hears the Apocalypse"¹⁰⁹ there can be no avoiding the re-described ethics of the *Ethics*. If Ziegler is right, and I believe he is, Bonhoeffer's radicalised ethical enquiry placed squarely as it is inside the mystery of God's "inescapable judgement and inordinate forgiveness", leaves the church no option but to have nothing more to do with any enquiry that seeks to know what is good, and give itself only to being formed in the image of Jesus Christ who will be its shape and form as the shape of the cross comes to stand over against the community.

¹⁰⁷ Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 156.

¹⁰⁸ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords. Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, 324-25.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 326. Quoted by Ziegler "Dietrich Bonhoeffer - An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?", 582.

The church in *Letters and Papers from Prison*

‘Solitary life in the invisible community’¹¹⁰

By Christmas 1942, Bonhoeffer was confronting a problem: had there “ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?”¹¹¹ Faced with such a perplexing question yet buoyed by the ability to look “beyond all these existing alternatives for the source of (our) strength”, Bonhoeffer searched for signs within the church that might bring hope to the nation.

The confident theological constructions that delineated the church-community, crafted by the young student-theologian and found in *Sanctorum Communio* and the later, *Discipleship*, are gone. In their place are the less structured, though nonetheless firmly held, statements of the *Ethics*. And now the musings of *Letters & Papers from Prison* which point towards a much less complicated church, “stripped-down” and uncluttered, but one that would require believers to be enduringly faithful to Jesus Christ; a church about which few clues are offered as to its contours let alone its shape. What the church must *be* now comes to the fore. And though not the case, the quest for shape and form now appears to give way to a more urgent search for being.

According to John de Gruchy, the *Letters* provide a view of Bonhoeffer’s “attempt to engage critically both neoorthodoxy as represented by Barth and liberal Protestantism as represented by Harnack, in an attempt to restate the meaning of Christ for today.”¹¹² This conversation with his mentors from university days aimed to make sense of the question that lay at the heart of almost everything Bonhoeffer thought about; how is Jesus Christ the Lord of all, to be announced to people who had discarded a religious view of the world, accepted by most of them prior to the War, but one that was now no longer taken seriously by the majority.

¹¹⁰ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 198.

¹¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 38.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 22-23. Editor's Introduction.

Letters and Papers from Prison are in no way systematic; they are the disclosures of a man, torn out of his family and church, now required to make sense of life and faith *in extremis*. Bonhoeffer's own comments are interesting. The *Letters* were a forum in which he hoped he could sharpen and extend his own thinking in conversation with his friend Eberhard Bethge, who was the "only (person) with whom I venture to think aloud like this, hoping it will clarify my thoughts."¹¹³ Bonhoeffer also confided to Bethge that "One can write some things in a more natural and lively way in a letter than in a book, and in letters I often have better ideas than when I'm writing for myself."¹¹⁴

Did Bonhoeffer ever write systematically? André Dumas thinks not. "[Bonhoeffer] was a man for whom even the undeniable continuity of his vocabulary did not offer clear indication of the basic consistency of his thought...[and] there was a lack of systematization and balance which, while providing an intriguing stimulus to thought, was also a disconcerting invitation to talk nonsense."¹¹⁵ And Charles Marsh has observed that "...Bonhoeffer's discourse is a broken one, fragmented by time, contingency, and death. There are fractures in his thought, unrepaired by logic, refracted in the uneven texture of his literature. Bonhoeffer did not lack confidence; his confidence lacked the leisure of solitude and time...System was subverted...by the untalliable particularity of life, even though his life retained coherence and his thought continuity."¹¹⁶ Yet even this is fraught since it comes with more questions than answers as André Dumas notes: "What role could the church play in this new world where it would be neither state church nor a persecuted church, but only marginal. Bonhoeffer offers no agenda for this, and gives only a few brief hints."¹¹⁷

What was this "new world" Dumas is speaking about? It was the "world of organisation, without religion, metaphysics or ideology...an unstructured world, technologically capable but psychologically and spiritually fragile." While its "organisation might save it from natural disasters...the same organisation was condemning it to an inner emptiness. The abundance of its means was hiding the nihilism of its ends."¹¹⁸ Where was the church,

¹¹³ Ibid., 457.

¹¹⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 861.

¹¹⁵ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 237-39.

¹¹⁶ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 33.

¹¹⁷ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 291.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 291.f

Bonhoeffer was asking, that could contribute to life and at the same time withstand this state of affairs?

Bonhoeffer was arrested in Berlin on 5 April 1943 and was held in Berlin's Tegel Military Interrogation Prison until 8 October 1944. The indictment brought against "Pastor Dietrich *Bonhoeffer*, born February 4, 1906, in Breslau, Protestant, single, no previous criminal record, provisionally held since April 5, 1943, in the Berlin-Tegel Military Detention Center"¹¹⁹ notates his KV (*kriegsverwendungsfähig* = "fit for wartime service") classification and specified the following;

He is reasonably suspected in Berlin and in other places because of two separate actions:

- a) of having undertaken in 1939-40 to evade for a time the fulfilling of military service through measures based on deceit;
- b) of having undertaken in 1942 to keep others from fulfilling military service entirely, partially, or for a time, by other ways and means.¹²⁰

The only comfort that Bonhoeffer could find and comment on about the indictment, prepared by Manfred Roeder, a "fanatically loyal National Socialist"¹²¹ and prosecutor for the military High Court, was that Roeder had "been forced to content himself with an utterly ridiculous indictment that will garner him little prestige."¹²² Bonhoeffer would remain in Tegel for eighteen months.

Following the discovery of the "Zossen files" in the offices of the Military Intelligence Office in Zossen¹²³ south of Berlin towards the end of September 1944, which contained deeply incriminating information against members of the resistance group whose planned assassination of Hitler on 20 July 1944 (Operation Valkyrie) had failed, Bonhoeffer was transferred from Tegel Prison to the Gestapo Prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin. In February 1945 he was sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp and after being moved from there to Regensburg, then to Schönberg, was finally taken to Flossenbürg where he

¹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945*, 435.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 435. Bethge details the issues surrounding Bonhoeffer's military exemption and the events leading to the arrest (Bonhoeffer, *A Biography*. 780-87).

¹²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 583.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 582.

¹²³ See "Notes by Christine von Dohnanyi 1945-1946" in Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*. 935-41.

was executed on 9 April 1945, almost two years to the day after first being arrested in Berlin.

Bonhoeffer's first letter from Tegel Prison is dated 14 April 1943, while the last is sent from the Gestapo prison dated 17 January 1945. After that there is nothing.

A space-occupying church

As recently as the *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer had been insisting that the church “occupies a certain space in the world that is determined by its worship, its order, and its congregational life.”¹²⁴ This assertion heard as early as *Sanctorum Communio* and as recently as *Discipleship* and *Life Together*; was Bonhoeffer's way of avoiding the possibility that the church would spiritualise Christ and “devalue itself into a purely spiritual entity.”¹²⁵

But this space-occupying-church, while it does not become any less important to Bonhoeffer, starts to move out of the foreground and rather more into the background in the *Letters and Papers*. Understandably perhaps, since Bonhoeffer is now separated from almost everything that had given substance to his life within the Body of Christ. Now he was sustained by his memories and his imagination in the Spirit; along with his Bible, his lectionary and his hymnody from which he drank deeply, especially from the hymns of Paul Gerhardt. As important for his intellectual sustenance were his books, now more literary than theological, with which he was regularly supplied once he had established trustworthy supply lines into Tegel Prison. Equally as important were the distribution lines out of the prison that allowed him continuing contact with family and a very few close friends making possible the collection of letters that have become *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Initially, Bonhoeffer's references to the ‘church’ make it clear that while not alone, he does feel cut off from the people who matter to him. Two months after his imprisonment began he wrote, “Today is Ascension Day, that is, a great day of joy for all who are able to

¹²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

believe that Christ rules the world and our lives. My thoughts travel to all of you, to the church and the worship services from which I have been separated for so long now...”¹²⁶

Several weeks later on the Day of Pentecost, in spite of his isolation, it is clear that the eschatological nature of the church is real, for the communion of saints is close at hand.

Now, after all, still separated, we celebrate Pentecost, the church festival that is in a special way a celebration of community. When the church bells rang this morning, I felt a great longing to be in a worship service. But then I did what John did on Patmos and celebrated such a good worship service on my own that I didn't feel the loneliness at all, for each and every one of you was a part of it, as well as the congregations in which I have celebrated Pentecost in the past.¹²⁷

It is in this same letter that his musings at Pentecost take him to Babel and the strange gift of tongues which caused confusion and misunderstanding. This, he says “is to end and be overcome by the language of God, which each human being understands and through which alone people are also able to understand one another again, and that the church is where this is to take place...”¹²⁸

In a letter to Eberhard Bethge on Remembrance Sunday, Bonhoeffer mentions “...two things yet that may seem peculiar to you: 1. I very much miss table fellowship with you...”¹²⁹ 2. I have quite spontaneously experienced Luther's instruction to ‘bless oneself with the cross’ at morning and evening prayer as a help. There is something objective about it for which a person here particularly longs. Don't be alarmed! I will definitely not come out of here as a ‘homo religious’.”¹³⁰

Then, in a letter to Eberhard and Renate Bethge¹³¹ in a reflection on ‘friendship’ he wonders “whether - it almost seems so today – it is only from the concept of the church that we can regain the understanding of the sphere of freedom (art, education, friendship, play). This means that ‘aesthetic existence’ (Kierkegaard) is not to be banished from the

¹²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 98 (Letter to his parents dated 04 June 1943).

¹²⁷ Ibid., 104. (Letter to his parents, dated Pentecost 1943, June 14).

¹²⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹²⁹ The mention of table fellowship is a reference to the close companionship he had enjoyed with Bethge and the students at Finkenwalde.

¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 189.

¹³¹ Eberhard Bethge, his lifelong confidant, married Renate Schleicher, the daughter of Bonhoeffer's oldest sister Ursula (born 1902) and her husband Rudiger Schleicher. Rudiger Schleicher, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law was shot by the Germans on 23 April 1945 at the same time as Klaus Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer's older brother (1901-1945).

church's sphere; rather, it is precisely within the church that it would be founded anew",¹³² a comment aimed at refreshing the stale air that he has noticed within the Confessing Church.

Though in prison, it is clear that the bonds of kinship with his own family and his extended family of the faithful, hold him into the family of the body of Christ. Yet one senses the disappointment that Bonhoeffer was dealing with in regard to German Christianity and the Confessing Church. From his writings it seems clear that he believed the Confessing Church had retreated. It was stagnant, the air inside was stale. "The church must come out of its stagnation",¹³³ he writes to Bethge.

We must also get back into the fresh air of intellectual discourse with the world. We also have to risk saying controversial things, if that will stir up discussion of the important issues in life...How I need your help! But if we do have to be deprived of clarifying conversation, at least we are not deprived of prayer, which alone allows us to begin and do this kind of work.¹³⁴

Bonhoeffer had offered a clue about how this might happen and interestingly, it seems to have been overlooked. It also has significant spatial dimensions though it is of course offered as a theological insight. Archimedes had declared *δοξ μοι που στω και κινησω την γην* – "Give me the point [outside of earth] where I can stand and I will move the earth." The "point" on which one might stand is Christ's resurrection. "Easter?" he had written to Bethge,

Our thoughts are more about dying than about death. We're more concerned about how we shall face dying than about conquering death. Socrates mastered the art of dying, Christ overcame death as *ἑσχατος ἐχθρός* (1 Cor. 15:26). Being able to face dying doesn't yet mean we can face death. It's possible for a human being to manage dying, but overcoming death means resurrection. It is not through the *ars moriendi* but through Christ's resurrection that a new and cleansing wind can blow through our present world. This is the answer to the *δοξ μοι που στω και κινησω την γην*. If a few people really believed this and were guided by it in their earthly actions a great deal would change. To live in the light of the resurrection – that is what Easter means.¹³⁵

¹³² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 268.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 498.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 498-99.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 333. f.26, f.27, f.28.

The stagnating air will be cleansed away as a new and cleansing wind blows through the church. This is the wind of the Spirit and will only happen “through Christ’s resurrection”. This is the “place outside the earth” on which one must stand if the earth is to be moved and “if a few people really believed this and were guided by it...a great deal would change”.

But will this church have a shape?

It is clear that Bonhoeffer has not given up on the church nor has he turned his back on it. But as the correspondence above demonstrates, his involvement in the future of the church is now taking another, deeply personal turn.

The question remains however: will this church have a shape and will it be recognizable *qua church*? About this Bonhoeffer cannot yet be sure; the almost strident confidence of *Sanctorum Communio* is now gone, and although he never withdrew any of the conceptual constructions he placed on the church in his earlier writings, he is reluctant to be too certain.

In “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge”,¹³⁶ he writes,

Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking and organising must be born anew, out of that prayer and action. By the time you grow up, the form of the church will have changed considerably. It is still being melted and remolded, and every attempt to help it develop prematurely into a powerful organisation again will only delay its conversion [Umkehr] and purification...the day will come – when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed....Until then the Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one, but there will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time.¹³⁷

While this could be read as a pessimistic statement, it should be seen as a realistic assessment of a church that must become very different if it was to offer anything of substance to the nation. For Bonhoeffer can, it seems, envisage a time when “people will

¹³⁶ Ibid., 383-90.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 389-90.

once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed”.

Then, as if to reflect the major concerns of *Letters and Papers*, the way in which humanity-come-of-age will imagine God and position him in relation to themselves, he wonders about the “new language, perhaps quite nonreligious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus’ language...the language of a new righteousness and truth”¹³⁸ that will be used in the proclamation of the word. As to the shape or space in the world out of which this language emanates and the shape or space in the world that this language describes and represents, there can be no knowing at this time.

‘Outline for a Book’¹³⁹

Sometime in August 1944 Bonhoeffer jotted down in short-hand fashion his thoughts about an essay he would like to write sometime in the future. “I would like to write an essay”, he wrote, “- not more than one hundred pages in length – with three chapters.....”¹⁴⁰

The outline, captured in jottings, spells out his hope. In a first chapter entitled “Taking Stock of Christianity”...“I would describe...

¶(c) The Protestant church: pietism as a final attempt to preserve Protestant Christianity as religion; Lutheran orthodoxy, the attempt to save the church as an institution of salvation; Confessing Church: revelation theology; a δός μοι ποῦ στῶ standing against the world; with regard to it, an ‘objective’ interest in Christianity. The arts, the sciences in search of their origin. Generally in the Confessing Church: standing up for the ‘cause’ of the church, and so on, but little personal faith in Christ. ‘Jesus’ disappears from view. Sociologically: no impact of the broader masses; a matter for the lower and upper-middle classes. Heavily burdened by difficult, traditional ideas. Decisive: Church defending itself. No risk taking for others.¹⁴¹

Some of the persistent themes of *Letters and Papers* are apparent here in scratch form: the pointless attempt to “maintain Protestant Christianity as religion” which finally leads him to demolish the religious a priori¹⁴² rather than simply arguing against it as he had done earlier in his career; again the hopeless attempt “to save the church as an institution of

¹³⁸ Ibid., 390.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 499-504.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 499.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 500.

¹⁴² Ibid., 362-63.

salvation”; and yet again the tragedy of a church heavily burdened by difficult, and traditional ideas, leading to the church taking a defensive stance as it seeks its own self-preservation.

But there is still nothing that gives any clue to Bonhoeffer’s thinking about the shape of the church. Nor does he get any closer in his statements about ‘the church’ that form his proposals for ‘Chapter 3’ of his essay-book;

¶*Chapter 3:*

¶*Conclusions:* The church is church only when it is there for others. As a first step it must give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the freewill offerings of the congregations and perhaps be engaged in some secular vocation [Beruf]. The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community - not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling [Beruf] what a life with Christ is, what it means “to be there for others.” In particular, *our* church will have to confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy, and illusionism as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment. It will have to see that it does not underestimate the significance of the human “example” (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul’s writings); the church’s word gains weight and power not through concepts but by example.¹⁴³

And in concluding he wrote that he hoped that in attempting to express certain things simply and clearly he might be of some service for the future of the church.

These are Bonhoeffer’s pared-down thoughts on what the church will need to do in order to regain credibility. Vested interests and doctrinal orthodoxy which get in the way of a genuine witness to obedient faith are to be divested. Proclamation is much more modest and translates into the life lived in Christ which by its example will speak to men and women of every calling about what it means to live in Christ and to exist for others. This is not proclamation in a triumphal tradition but a much more modest proclamation born of suffering service, even death perhaps, that might compel men and women to observe and ask, “What does this life mean”? It is this modesty and perseverance that is more likely to protect the genuine identity of the church. This more modest proclamation that Bonhoeffer proposed as a “qualified silence of the Church for the sake of her speaking with greater

¹⁴³ Ibid., 503-04.

authority later on” would actually require a strong ‘churchly’ identity “capable of bearing the incognito of ‘participation in the powerlessness of God in the world’.”¹⁴⁴

Is it possible that this *is* now the ‘shape’ of the church? It is worth noting in passing, that this is not a new theme for Bonhoeffer for as early as *Sanctorum Communio* he had written

Christians can and ought to act like Christ; they ought to bear 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.’ This is what Luther then calls ‘being changed into one another through love’.¹⁴⁵

In spite of his own angst borne out of prolonged separation from family and friends, Bonhoeffer remained confident about this church because it is preserved by God. In the last but one letter (saved in the *Letters and Papers* collection) that he wrote to Eberhard Bethge in August 1944, he can say in reference to the Bible reading for the day; "For in Christ every one of God's promises is a ‘Yes’. For this reason it is through him that we say the ‘Amen’ to the glory of God." (2 Cor. 1:20),

God does not fulfil all our wishes but does keep all his promises. This means God remains Lord of the earth, preserves the church, renews our faith again and again, never gives us more than we can bear to endure, makes us rejoice in his presence and help, hears our prayers and leads us on the best and straightest path to God. By doing all these things unfailingly, God elicits our praise.¹⁴⁶

Questions...and still more questions

Eberhard Bethge recognizes Bonhoeffer’s letters of 30 April and 5 May 1944 as “the first two great theological letters”¹⁴⁷ written from prison. A ‘new’ theme emerged out of the April letter that was “expressed many times in the form of a question or central idea.”¹⁴⁸ Bethge was, of course, referring to Bonhoeffer’s often quoted, recurring and

¹⁴⁴ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, 76.

¹⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 178-79. The quote from Luther is from his 1519 treatise, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods".

¹⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 511.

¹⁴⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 860. The other 'theological letters' were written on May 29, June 8, and July 16, 18 and 21.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 863.

increasingly important question: “What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?”¹⁴⁹

Who Christ is and how he meets us and defines us is always the critical question, summarized briefly in a later letter to Bethge, “Let me just quickly state, once again, the issue that concerns me: the claim [Inanspruchnahme] of Jesus Christ on the world that has come of age.”¹⁵⁰ If ‘religion’ is dead and gone, then what is the place of a church? What is the point of a sermon? Does the liturgy make sense any longer? What does a “Christian life” mean in a “religionless” world? How do we even speak of God if we abandon ideas of metaphysics, a sense of inwardness and so on? “How do we speak...in a worldly way about God?”¹⁵¹ But if one were to ask yet another question “How can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well?”¹⁵² these other questions are suddenly turned into an enormous challenge that potentially has the power to turn everything upside down.

Still question follows question. Bonhoeffer knew that the continuing search for clarity about Christian identity in a world that was being blown to pieces by the weapons of war and the apparent dearth of imagination and foresight of the philosophers, the churches and the theologians, was becoming more and more difficult. In a world where God was no longer needed to fill the gaps in humanity’s expanding knowledge and understanding about the world and in which God was being pushed towards the outer edges, the question had to be, is it possible any longer to reclaim an identity that would be compelling within the church for the world. Jesus the Word would be in the centre – but how to conceive of this and proclaim it in a way that was credible? To which Bonhoeffer’s indirect and short answer, about which he was becoming increasingly certain was; “The church is church only when it is there for others.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 362. In passing it is interesting to note that he was equally as puzzled by another question: “Why doesn’t this war provoke a ‘religious’ reaction like all the previous ones”?

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 451.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 364.

¹⁵² Ibid., 363.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 503.

He was becoming more certain about some other issues as well. As John de Gruchy points out in the “editor’s Introduction” to *Letters and Papers*:

...that biblical faith is focussed not on redemption from the earth but on its sustainability, not on withdrawal from the world but on engagement with its life, not on asceticism but on a genuine appreciation of the body and sexuality, not on private piety but on engagement with the world. In fact, the more he read the Scriptures, the more he discovered that the God of religion was not the God of the Bible. God, Bonhoeffer provocatively insisted, wanted us to live ‘before God’ yet as people who can live without God. This, then, called for a ‘non-religious’ interpretation of Christian faith.¹⁵⁴

But still, as always it seems, for Bonhoeffer there was another question; “How do we go about being “religionless-worldly” Christians, how can we be εκ-κλησια, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world? Christ would then no longer be the object of religion, but something else entirely, truly lord of the world. But what does that mean?”¹⁵⁵

As Bethge points out, “This lordship is undoubted. Bonhoeffer is not defending a lost lordship and certainly not any lost positions. Indeed, he wants to give up ‘positions’ in order that he can learn to understand anew how the suffering and powerless Christ becomes the defining, liberating, and creative center of this world.” In commenting on the fact that Bonhoeffer’s commitment never ceased to be exactly how the church might confront humanity with God at a person’s strongest point, Bethge notes that Bonhoeffer always “framed his call to maturity within the theme of the presence of Christ”, and that the “dedication of oneself to Jesus of Nazareth and his presence is in no way diminished or done away with, as difficult as it might be to spell out.”¹⁵⁶

And so Bonhoeffer returns to a belief he has held firmly since the beginning; the lordship of Christ is demonstrated and exercised “always and solely through powerlessness, service and the cross”¹⁵⁷ which is an unequivocal pointer towards the form of the church in the *Prison Letters*.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 364.

¹⁵⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 865.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

The place of the boundary

Still Bonhoeffer's life is defined by the questions that continue to invade his thoughts and occupy his mind. Many of them remained unanswered; for Bonhoeffer, with a keen eye to the way he functions, rather ruefully I suspect, says of himself, "...I'd be glad if I could answer them myself. It's all still at a very early stage, and as usual I'm guided more by my instinct for responding to questions that may arise than being already clear about them."¹⁵⁸

Bonhoeffer then returns to the notion of "boundary" but this time it is not in search of a spatial metaphor that might give shape and meaning to the church, as he had done in *Sanctorum Communio*. Now, it is with a mind to making it clear where the church is to be *found* and how it will "talk" about its God.

Religious people, he says, often speak of God in lazy ways. They speak of him "where human knowledge is at an end (or sometimes when they're too lazy to think further), or when human strength fails. Actually, it's a *deus ex machina* that they're always bringing on the scene, either to appear to solve insoluble problems or to provide strength when human powers fail, thus always exploiting human weakness or human limitations."¹⁵⁹ These boundaries are ones that limit God, as if he could be limited, and when people talk or behave like this and insist on these boundaries of limitation, what necessity or 'space' is there left for God? For Bonhoeffer, talk of human boundaries, is now becoming "a dubious proposition...(for) it always seems to me that we leave room for God only out of anxiety."¹⁶⁰

I'd like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weaknesses but in strength, thus not in death and guilt but in human life and human goodness. When I reach my limits, it seems to me better not to say anything and to leave what can't be solved unsolved. Belief in the resurrection *is not* the "solution" to the problem of death...God is the beyond in the midst of our lives. The church stands not at the point where human powers fail, at the boundaries, but in the center of the village.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 425.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 366.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 366-67.

Bonhoeffer can see it happening; people pushing the boundaries further out, especially when they are strong and healthy, thus leaving less and less unclaimed space for God, pushing God out beyond the boundaries of their lives and so out of the world and out of their worlds. Find a way, he pleads with the church, to acknowledge God as in the centre. For the Gospel is historical and it is this worldly:

It is said to be decisive that in Christianity the hope of the resurrection is proclaimed, and that in this way a genuine religion of redemption has come into being. Now the emphasis is on that which is beyond death's boundary. And precisely here is where I see the error and the danger. Redemption now means being redeemed out of sorrows, hardships, anxieties, and longings, out of sin and death, in a better life beyond. But should this really be the essence of the proclamation of Christ in the Gospels and Paul? I dispute this. The Christian hope of resurrection is different from the mythological in that it refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way, and more sharply than the OT. Unlike believers in the redemption myths, Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity. Like Christ (My God...why have you forsaken me?), they have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and only when they do this is the Crucified and Risen One with them, and they are crucified and resurrected with Christ. This worldliness must not be abolished ahead of its time; on this, NT and OT are united. Redemption myths arise from human experience of boundaries. But Christ takes hold of human beings in the midst of their lives.¹⁶²

It can now be said, that while Bonhoeffer may not be saying a great deal about the shape of the church, he is, by implication, saying a great deal about the way it must now proclaim and argue its "cause". Its gospel is now clearly contestable in that it stands over against other "gospels". Unlike the others, it calls if not commands, men and women to worldliness, for it is in this world that Christian believers are crucified and resurrected with Christ; there is no "ultimate escape route" out of our earthly tasks and difficulties into a place called "eternity". Bonhoeffer takes and uses the idea of 'boundary' to reclaim the belief that God lives in the centre *and* not beyond the boundary to where he has been pushed and exiled, far too often by men and women who either believe they no longer need God or those who 'lazily' try to find a place for God somewhere between the centre and the boundary but always at the risk that he may be moved even further out from the centre of life. It was Bonhoeffer's unwavering belief in the "crucified Christ who enabled, judged

¹⁶² Ibid., 447-48.

and renewed 'true worldliness', 'genuine this-worldliness', and 'coming of age'¹⁶³ that gave the category of this world and the idea of worldliness its theological dimensions. For Bonhoeffer, the notion of God in the midst of life within the very boundaries humans use to exclude God and the notion of "this-worldliness", was shaped and characterised "by discipline...and the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection."¹⁶⁴

But, still we ask, what of the church?

It is not unreasonable to imagine that the years following Bonhoeffer's return from the USA in July 1939, his commitment to the *Ethics* throughout the early 1940s, his involvement in the resistance, and finally his imprisonment from April 1943, initiated both a new impetus and a new shape to his thinking that took him into places he had never been before. He would not have been able to ignore the earthiness, or the utter complexities of the world that was the resistance to Hitler. Nor could he ignore his undoubted disillusionment about his own church. Any contribution it might make would be made only after it had attended to its own metanoia that leads to an identification with Christ in his sufferings and therefore to a different way of being the church-community in the world, and thus to its re-formation. As to the form and shape of the church, Bonhoeffer had little to say.

Of more concern now to Bonhoeffer, was how the church might say whatever it was it had to say to a world that was able to manage, quite well it seemed, without God or even the idea of God to save it from despair and disintegration. But had Bonhoeffer started to lose sight of the *sanctorum communio*? Or was he starting to think that a church that might contribute usefully to Germany's problems must be conceived of in such a different way that it would probably not be recognizable to most people who were now sitting in the pews and imagined themselves Christians, whether of the Reich Church, pietist, enthusiast or Confessing Church variety? It is clear from the *Letters and Papers* that Bonhoeffer never gave away his hope that God would renew the church somehow. He was becoming less certain however about what that might look like or about how the Word was to be proclaimed in and to this 'world come of age'? In Bonhoeffer's efforts to "plumb the

¹⁶³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, See 867.

¹⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 541.

depths of the meaning of God's promiseity", it can safely be said that his foremost interest was "the worldly shape of God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ".¹⁶⁵ Without ever forsaking or discarding his original maxim - "Christ existing as community" - it became increasingly difficult to see the shape of this community.

There is no doubt that in spite of anguished questions addressed to Bethge throughout the letters, Bonhoeffer held firmly to the belief expressed in *Ethics* that the church of Jesus Christ is the place and occupies the space in the world where the sovereignty of Jesus Christ is demonstrated and announced with vigour and conviction. It is the place of reconciliation and the place where Christians testify to the fact that the foundation of all reality is to be found in Jesus Christ. He is insistent throughout that this is the very community in which, because of their presence "brother and sister break the 'circle of self-deception'" in such a way that God's presence in the world is confirmed to us and at the same time our faith is assured since it "is attested in the very presence of the other."¹⁶⁶ If there is one thing that we can say with confidence about *Letters and Papers* it is that any form of self-deception and pretence, and any attempt to increase the power, wealth, and prestige of the church could be of no value and would take the church nowhere.

It is important to note how closely at this stage of his life, "church" and "Jesus Christ" were linked. So much so that Rasmussen can write in the "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition" of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Berlin: 1932-1933* that the Christology lectures of 1933 were still having a huge effect on Bonhoeffer's work into the 1940s when the two themes of "Christ and the world that has come of age"¹⁶⁷ and "...what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?"¹⁶⁸ meet together.

...Bonhoeffer's Christology was not only the theological ground for his critique of National Socialism; it was the basis for his efforts to find a way beyond the present crisis and beyond the church as well as within it. When, in the face of Nazi ideology and community, the church collapsed as the place where 'Christ may take form among us today and here', Bonhoeffer's Christology led him to the conspiracy as the other viable community open for the exercise of vicarious representative action and genuine responsibility.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 428.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 362.

¹⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 38.

Arkandisziplin – The secret discipline

Bonhoeffer's advocacy of the *Arkandisziplin*, or secret discipline, underlines his belief that the church needs to become much more discreet and careful in the way it protects the realities that sustain its life. In his book *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, Edward Yarnold traces the origins of the discipline of secrecy, and notes that "It is a natural instinct to be reticent about something one holds precious. Publicity cheapens; *omne ignotum pro magnifico*. In the publication of everything we hold sacred, there has been a loss, not only for ourselves, but perhaps also for non-Christians, but the loss is irreparable. There is no way in which secrecy can be re-established."¹⁷⁰ But Bonhoeffer can hardly have been thinking about the secret discipline in this way. Surely something much more than the loss of significance and meaning through a breach in secrecy was at stake here.

It will be recalled that when Bonhoeffer established the Brothers' House at Finkenwalde, he made it clear that this was not to be regarded as a form of monastic seclusion, "but a place of the deepest inward concentration for service outside."¹⁷¹ The secret discipline serves a similar function; it protects the identity of the church and the relationship between God's word and God's world, for "wherever propaganda is made for the Gospel, there the relationship between God's word and God's world is not evident."¹⁷² By propaganda Bonhoeffer meant the "noise" that is made by those whose lives no longer embody the connection between the truth of the Word and the Word itself. The "arcane tact"¹⁷³ and respectful silence towards the world and towards the word that Bonhoeffer was proposing may have been too much to ask of a "church of the word' that is continually speaking".¹⁷⁴ But as Dumas has picturesquely pointed out, "...the secret discipline is the opponent of dogmatic glibness – that religious wine that intoxicates theological speech by releasing it from the need to verify its conclusions in terms of the unique reality of a God involved in the world."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation. The Origins of the Rite* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 54. The phrase *omne ignotum pro magnifico* is translated as "everything unknown is (taken as) grand".

¹⁷¹ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 201.

¹⁷² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 882.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 200.

There are two direct references to the arcane discipline in the *Letters*. In the letter of April 30, wondering what “ritual and prayer” mean in a religionless situation, Bonhoeffer asks “Is this where the “arcane discipline” [Arkandisziplin], or the difference (which you’ve heard about from me before) between the penultimate and the ultimate, have new significance?”¹⁷⁶ Then a few days later on May 5, after commenting on Barth’s “positivist doctrine of revelation”, Bonhoeffer writes, “There are degrees of cognition and degrees of significance. That means an ‘arcane discipline’ must be reestablished, through which the mysteries of the Christian faith are sheltered against profanation.”¹⁷⁷ It was the function of the secret discipline it seems, to guard the heart of the church from the inappropriateness of confessional utterance in a hostile or disinterested environment, so protecting the church from the world’s contempt. Thus the *arcanum* has a boundary function in these circumstances - to defend and protect the inner integrity of the church.

It is the opinion of John de Gruchy that in the April 30 letter, the “arcane discipline” is related primarily to “worship and prayer as a means of protecting Christian identity when engaged in ‘worldly’ and ‘righteous’ action”, but that in the May 5 letter, Bonhoeffer is relating its role as “protection against the profanation of the ‘mysteries of Christian faith’, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. Such ‘mysteries of faith’ are not for public consumption but are to be preserved within the life of the church through the ‘arcane discipline’.”¹⁷⁸

So it is that

These are ‘hidden’ (the literal meaning of ‘arcane’), as it were, in the church’s liturgical life (sacraments, prayer and creed), rather than thrust upon the world in a ‘take it or leave it’ way that profanes them. The preservation of the mysteries is essential to the life of the church as it engages in ‘worldly’ action and seeks to be the ‘church for others’.¹⁷⁹

Bonhoeffer’s thinking has taken him into places where tidy theological constructions are becoming very difficult to make and tensions abound.

¹⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 365.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 373.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 373. f.13.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 32.

Recapitulation and the discipline

In a 1943 Advent letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer wrote:

In recent weeks this line has been running through my head over and over: ‘Calm your hearts, dear friends; / whatever plagues you, / whatever fails you, / I will restore it all.’¹⁸⁰ What does that mean, “I will restore it all”? Nothing is lost; in Christ all things are taken up, preserved, albeit in transfigured form, transparent, clear, liberated from the torment of self-serving demands. Christ brings all this back, indeed, as God intended, without being distorted by sin. The doctrine originating in Eph. 1:10 of the restoration of all things, ἀνακεφαλαιωσις – re-capitulatio (Irenaeus), is a magnificent and consummately consoling thought.¹⁸¹

Charles Marsh comments;

Specific to Irenaeus is the notion of ‘recapitulation’...in which the whole of creation is conceived to be re-constituted, ‘gathered together, included and comprised’ in Christ. When Irenaeus uses the term *recapitulation* he intends to denote that the entire scope of creation is gathered up into the Incarnation of God; consequently, creation as such must be understood as a preparation for reuniting the fellowship of God with humanity.¹⁸²

Bonhoeffer “gives voice in an extraordinarily clear way to the mysterious heart of grace, that it is not we who shall take creation back to its original glory, and thus it is not we who shape and reshape the real in the image of ourselves, but it is Christ who shall ‘give it back to us’.”¹⁸³ Marsh suggests however that in making such expansive claims, Bonhoeffer has pushed “the theme of recapitulation in Christ to such a point that the difference between Christ and world is jeopardised.”¹⁸⁴

Be that as it may, this is precisely the point that Bethge makes when he wonders about the purpose and value of the arcane discipline which Bonhoeffer himself has said is to be employed to protect the mysteries of the Christian faith “against profanation.” Surely God taking the creation back to its original glory is one of the mysteries and if the church is to give away the discipline, which protects not only the customs that defined the early church but also the mysteries as “creative events of the Holy Spirit”,¹⁸⁵ does not this “abandon the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 229. f.16. This is from a hymn of Paul Gerhardt's.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 229-30.

¹⁸² Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 104.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 105.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁸⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 882.

ground already won? Does not the arcane discipline reconjure up the boundaries that were finally supposed to have been removed? No one can deny that *arcanum* ('mystery') separates and that *disciplina* distinguishes."¹⁸⁶

Bethge puts the problem down to Bonhoeffer's insistence on "the impossibility of thinking in two spheres", but concludes that

there is probably no way of constructing a safeguard against a new boundary, unless the safeguard would come from the real and present Christ himself, who is our sole concern in dealing with the *arcanum*...In the *arcanum* Christ takes everyone who really encounters him by the shoulder, turning them around to face their fellow human beings and the world. There is no other safeguard against the assertion of two static realms and the law of a boundary that confers privilege.¹⁸⁷

If the *arcanum* and the worldliness that Bonhoeffer promoted inform and correct each other, the boundary that separates and distinguishes disciples from those who would profane the mysteries of God will continue to legitimise the Gospel. But if they do not mutually correct each other, "they become meaningless and banal. Arcane discipline without worldliness is a ghetto, and worldliness without arcane discipline is nothing more than a boulevard. In isolation, arcane discipline becomes liturgical monasticism and nonreligious interpretation an intellectual game."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 883.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 883.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 884.

What actually happens to the church in *Letters and Papers from Prison*?

It is not easy at a first reading of the *Letters and Papers* to understand exactly what happened to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church towards the end. But one thing is clear; however he conceptualized the church towards the end of his life, he never abandoned it.

André Dumas captures this most succinctly;

Surely few men have been as deeply aware as Bonhoeffer of the paralysis, isolation and religious unreality of the church. Few men have been as pained as he at the bourgeois mediocrity of its architecture, its uninviting language and its bland activities, none of which suggest to the world that reality could be embodied within the church in a responsible and representative way. Let us not therefore imagine a Bonhoeffer who nursed illusions about the empirical church or who, disappointed by the state church, transferred his dream to the future of a "non-religious", non-parochial, non-institutional church, a kind of "incognito" church immersed in the world and at last making common cause with it...No - to the very end, Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology remained empirical, but his reality became the non-religious world. He did not abandon the church in order to rejoin the world, but...believed that God brings the church to fulfilment *in* the world and the world to fulfilment *through* the church...¹⁸⁹

Early in August of 1944, two months before he was transferred from Tegel Military Prison to the Reich Central Security Office Prison, Bonhoeffer produced his "Outline for a Book". From then until the final published letter, one from his parents dated February 28, 1945, only seven of his own letters remain.¹⁹⁰ We could reasonably conclude that his "Outline for a Book" represents a "final" position on the matters about which he writes. The most interesting thing that catches one's attention is that here, at the end, the church is absolutely central to the task of interpreting and making Christ, in whom there is so "little personal faith" known; faith which is understood, not as pietism which Bonhoeffer regarded as "a final attempt to preserve Protestant Christianity as religion",¹⁹¹ but as participation "in this being of Jesus". There will be no "attempt to save the church as an

¹⁸⁹ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 94-95.

¹⁹⁰ There are five letters to Eberhard Bethge dated August 10, 11, 14; an undated one to which Bethge assigns the date, Aug 21 and the last one dated "the 23rd" (possibly of August). There is one to his mother Paula dated December 28 1944, and one to his parents dated January 17 1945. There are also some poems written during this time.

¹⁹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 500.

institution of salvation”¹⁹² and “‘God’ as a working hypothesis, as a stopgap for our embarrassments”, will have no place in this church.¹⁹³ This is the church that is “church only when it is there for others...(it) must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community – not dominating but helping and serving.”¹⁹⁴ And perhaps, most startlingly when we recall the commitment Bonhoeffer has already made to the practice of the secret discipline, “...(the church) must tell people in every calling [Beruf] what a life with Christ is, what it means “to be there for others.”¹⁹⁵ With no reference to the shape of this church, except that it should become leaner and less encumbered as it divests itself of its property, Bonhoeffer continues to urge the church to “tell people...what a life with Christ is...”¹⁹⁶

So the church still has something important to announce and the church cannot be done away with. As to why that might be, the answer seems straightforward; whatever the shape and form of the church, it is here and only here that the form and content of the Gospel lock together in embodied witness. It should also be noted, that here, in the announcement as to what a life with Christ is and that it means being there for others, Bonhoeffer remains faithful to the Christological core and communal structure formula that had characterised his theology from the beginning. It can now be proposed that the formerly important claim for a revelational space for God in the world in Christ, while never rescinded, is now transformed into the urgent insistence of the gospel of the reality of the living Christ’s presence within the communal life of those who are there for each other. “(The church) will have to see that it does not underestimate the significance of the human ‘example’ (which had its origin in the humanity of Jesus...); the church’s word gains weight and power not through concepts but by example”,¹⁹⁷ an issue that Bonhoeffer had already addressed while at Finkenwalde.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Ibid., 500.

¹⁹³ In the prison letter of June 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer proposed that human autonomy meant “(the) discovery of the laws by which the world lives and manages its affairs in science, in society and government, in art, ethics, and religion”. He went on to say to Bethge that “human beings have learned to manage all important issues by themselves, without recourse to ‘Working hypothesis: God’...in the last hundred years or so this has also become increasingly true of religious questions; it’s become evident that everything gets along without ‘God’ and does so just as well as before.” (*Bonhoeffer. Letters and Papers from Prison*, 425-426)

¹⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 500-01.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 503.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 503-04.

¹⁹⁸ The theological roots of Bonhoeffer's interest in the importance of Christian example, lie in his reading of Augustine who linked “gift” and “example”, (Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 503 f.31) and in his understanding of Luther: “The chief message and basis of the gospel is that you accept Christ and

Assessment

At the risk of an overly simplistic conclusion, it seems that the German Protestant Church took two broad directions following the installation of Hitler as Chancellor and then as Führer, and the rise of the National Socialist government in the early 1930s until its demise in 1945. The “German Christians” sought to shape the church on the unitary model of the Reich, encouraged and persuaded by the power of the Party and the force of *Gleichschaltung*. In contrast, the Confessing Church with the witness of Scripture and the Confessions behind it, sought to maintain a testimony to the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ as Lord of all, putting itself on a course for being offside with the State which was by now running amok with unbridled power.

Neither attempt succeeded particularly well. Which raises the question, “What shape does the Church take in such situations; what are the options that lie between conformism and martyrdom, if any? Throughout these years, Bonhoeffer stayed focussed on providing the theological leadership necessary to keep the Church re-forming itself in increasingly ambiguous and dangerous situations. In addition to the perilous situation he placed himself in as a result of his commitment to the conspiracy, his reading, and thinking, and writing were intended to give intellectual leadership to a church desperately in need of ways to re-imagine and re-construct itself in the situation that it now found itself in.

It is not possible to read *Letters and Papers* without noticing that the spatial metaphors used by Bonhoeffer up until *Discipleship* to give theological depiction, form and shape to the Church are absent. Theological shape and meaning now emerge out of the way the Church is being asked to live its life. This major shift is foreshadowed as early as *Life Together* where, in the Afterword, the editors draw attention to the difference between a Christian community living by the “discipline of the secret”, - the sort Bonhoeffer has been describing – and, one interested only in protecting its own life and its own piety.

The dual purpose of the community’s work on behalf of the world [*Stellvertretung*] consists of its being, on the one hand, the goal of all God’s ways, and, on the other hand, its standing in the place where the world should

recognise him as a gift and present given to you by God and your very own, before you grasp him as the example.” (Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 503 f.31. and Bonhoeffer. *Discipleship*, “The Image of Christ”, 281-288.)

be standing. The church is thus completely led into the community and discipleship of the Lord 'who was the Christ precisely because he was there totally for the sake of the world and not for himself'.¹⁹⁹

This is, of course, the sentiment that finds its fullest and most robust expression in *Letters and Papers* in the maxim "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others."

So, what has happened here? Bethge puzzles over the same question and tentatively suggests that "Being seems to have entered function, and yet they are not the same. Bonhoeffer was never interested merely in what had to be achieved, and how it was to be done..."²⁰⁰ Another way of asking this question is: "Has (theological) form been folded into function"? Bethge's conclusion is that "Bonhoeffer's thinking and speaking must not be deprived of their dialectical tensions, as if the being and function of the Church had now become one for him."²⁰¹

John Phillips deals with the same issue in typically abrupt fashion. Bonhoeffer must not be interpreted, he suggests, in any way that might lead us "to the conservative restoration Bonhoeffer feared. The place and purpose of the church and her liturgy would have had to await the construction of a new ecclesiology which would deal with the problem of revelation – and Bonhoeffer has not left enough evidence behind to serve even as the roughest sketch of that ecclesiology."²⁰² And then, as if a note of caution: we would be wise not to move ahead with the thought – "illusion" he calls it – that Bonhoeffer's "thoughts on non-religious Christianity represents no ultimate threat to the nature and structure of the church."²⁰³

And if that is the case, then some incisive, if not radical, thinking will need to happen, if we would seek to understand Bonhoeffer's unfinished ecclesiology. For it is almost certainly this unsettling thought that elicited Bethge's comment about Bonhoeffer's "unfinished ecclesiology":

It is a disturbing thing for the church that, at the end of his theological activity, Bonhoeffer did not give a completed ecclesiology that we could hold on to, but left this, of all things, entirely open... This difficulty is not only due to the fact

¹⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 139. "Editors' Afterword" and quoting from the *Ethics*, 301.

²⁰⁰ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, 74.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰² Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 231.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

that Bonhoeffer did not write more than a tiny fragment on the subject, he himself saw that it would be an arduous undertaking to give a theological account of the nature of the church, its liturgy and communal life, on the basis of his new ideas. He viewed his suggestions on 'arcane discipline' and its 'consequences' only as pointing in a certain direction.²⁰⁴

That 'certain direction' however was never articulated in detail and it seems that Joachim von Soosten's observation, made in the Afterword to the German Edition of *Sanctorum Communio*, is indeed an accurate comment. There, von Soosten had observed that "From its very beginning, Bonhoeffer's theology is informed by the conviction that the truth which is believed must have a concrete locus within the reality of the world. This is the leitmotif which he is to pursue throughout his entire life, and which in turn will always remain an unsettling issue for him...God's church is where the divine will becomes concrete, visible, and comprehensible."²⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer's struggle to make sense of this never ceases, not even at the end, in the *Letters and Papers*.

For there, almost at the very end, we can see yet again Bonhoeffer's continuing fascination with the notion of space. Ecclesiology, it seems, has not been totally collapsed into Christology. Spatiality is not denied but is again asserted. In drawing attention to the "crucial distinction" between Christianity and all religions, he writes:

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 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.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887.

²⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 291-92.

²⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 479-80 (July 16 1945 letter to Eberhard Bethge). The word "ground" is translated "space" in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Enlarged Edition. (New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone, 1997).

At the end

On Low Sunday April 8 1945²⁰⁷, in the schoolhouse in Schönberg a small group of prisoners, some of whom would be executed the next morning, celebrated the Sunday after Easter. They held a church service and Bonhoeffer spoke from the texts “With his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5) and “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). At the end, on the very edge of being stripped of life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer bore witness to life in Christ. This was no ghetto. This was no boulevard. It was no intellectual game. At the end, it was God the creating Father, Jesus Christ the centre of resurrected life and all reality, and the sanctifying Holy Spirit facing the cold heart of a Reich that was already dead. And Bonhoeffer’s confidence in the God who does not abandon his covenantal community of people, the church, never wavered.

²⁰⁷ Also known as Quasimodo Sunday.

Chapter Five

What could it mean to say that “The church is Christ existing as church-community”?

Is this a question without a clear answer?

It will be recalled that John Phillips argued that by the time Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in 1939, he was committed to taking his hitherto unwavering belief in the need to speak about revelation “concretely and therefore in a spatial manner” in a different direction. Now, according to Phillips, Bonhoeffer “attempted to make the spatial language more flexible, (and) to release it from the Christo-ecclesiology of his earlier thought”.¹ By the time of the prison letters, “...Bonhoeffer’s new understanding of the meaning of history caused him to turn away altogether from the attempt to locate in the world an empiric-revelational ‘space’ for Christ.”² The boundary between church and world that once defined the limits of the concrete revelation of God in Christ which had been so important and defended so vigorously during the years of *Discipleship*, would now need to be revised. We should recall Phillips’ note of caution; it would be unwise to move ahead with any illusion that Bonhoeffer’s development of non-religious Christianity represented no threat to the nature and structure of the church. Indeed Phillips believes that what Bonhoeffer feared was a form of “conservative restoration”. So while it is tempting to think that the apparent change that took place in Bonhoeffer’s theological thinking and writing in the *Ethics* and *The Letters and Papers* might demonstrate continuity with a valued past now in need of a major overhaul and reconfiguration, one must wonder at the same time, if things were that straightforward.

¹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer’s Christology*, 111.

² *Ibid.*, 111.

This was the problem that worried Eberhard Bethge. In June 1944, while still in Berlin and before leaving for Italy where he had been drafted to serve in the German army, Bethge had written to Bonhoeffer asking “How do we Protestants escape the actual surrender of ‘ground’ [Raum]³ from generation to generation, or along the line (to put it roughly) from Barth to Bultmann to Bonhoeffer, a surrender that has *in fact* made enormous progress over against the liberal period, despite all the fresh starts and restitutions?”⁴ To which Bonhoeffer replied, “Now to your question of whether the church has any ‘ground’ left to stand on, or whether it is losing it altogether...I’ll stop here and write more tomorrow.”⁵ Bonhoeffer did write more the next day but never addressed Bethge’s question. It remains unanswered.

Eberhard Bethge wrote the foreword to William Kuhns’ 1967 book, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. In it, he says that Kuhns’ Roman Catholic approach to Bonhoeffer “...draws its understanding largely from Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, an aspect of his thought clearly outlined in the earlier writings, but tantalizingly unfinished in the later works.”⁶

But by the time Bethge writes his monumental Bonhoeffer biography, he is far less sanguine. Now Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology was not “tantalizingly unfinished” but unfinished and failed “at the end”.

It is a disturbing thing for the church that, at the end of his theological activity, Bonhoeffer did not give a completed ecclesiology that we could hold to, but left this, of all things, entirely open. The theologians of the church feel the lack of this, and canon lawyers immediately pick up on the suggestions that are impossible for a *Völkirche*.⁷

And Bethge was prepared to say more:

But Bonhoeffer failed not only in terms of practical ecclesiology, that is, with regard to the structure of the church after 1945, but also in his theological

³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 413. See editor’s footnote, f.18. While “‘Raum’ can be translated as ‘room’, ‘space’, ‘sphere’, or ‘ground’...‘ground’ is an appropriate translation here as Bethge is ‘referring to the extent to which liberal Protestantism has ‘given ground’ as a result of critical scholarship.”

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 413. (Bethge’s letter of June 03, 1944 to Bonhoeffer).

⁵ Ibid., 431. (Letter of June 09, 1944 to Bethge).

⁶ Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ix.

⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887.

treatise on the doctrine of the church, with which he began his theological career so passionately and which ended with unsettled questions. At the end Bonhoeffer arrived at a stage that was highly critical of the church. His ecclesiology seemed almost entirely absorbed within the *theologia crucis*...For him everything depended on the *theologia crucis*, but the only form in which he knew this was in its urging us toward the concrete fellowship of those who share Christ's sufferings in the world.⁸

Considered carefully, and taking into account his close and affectionate relationship with Bonhoeffer, Bethge's comprehensive 'catalogue of disappointments' is astonishing: Bonhoeffer failed to give guidance on a practical ecclesiology; he failed to provide a theological statement on the doctrine of the church; his ecclesiology was uncompleted and left entirely open with unsettled questions which troubled the theologians and canon lawyers; not only had he failed to leave a coherent ecclesiology that 'we could hold to' but Bonhoeffer had also become highly critical of the church. And what had Bethge meant when he said that Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology "seemed almost entirely absorbed within the *theologia crucis*"? Bethge proposes, by implication, that the completion of an ecclesiology "to which we could hold" would have been a fitting conclusion to Bonhoeffer's career. But, it might be wondered, is there ever such a simple trajectory for anyone's career, let alone their life?

Although one can appreciate the desperate need for a certainty and clarity that would have carried the German church through the post-war period, Bonhoeffer provided no clear road-map. Is it possible that Bethge's disappointment that Bonhoeffer had not produced "a completed ecclesiology that we could hold to" also contains within it a measure of failed imagination on the part of those who followed, something that would have been entirely understandable under the circumstances. For if failures of imagination do not precede corporate decline, they certainly accompany it and the possibility of a failure of imagination fuelled by the sheer weariness of life lived within a nation at war with itself and its enemies cannot be overlooked.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology did not fail at the end.

⁸ Ibid., 887-88.

‘Christus als Gemeinde existierend’

In an attempt to make sense of the situation that Bethge alludes to, John Phillips argues that by the time the *Ethics* and the *Letters and Papers* were written, Bonhoeffer could no longer use ecclesiology “as a vantage point”⁹ for the development of his thinking and he wonders if “ecclesiology remain(s) the best path into the *Ethics* and prison letters?”¹⁰ Since he believes that none of Bonhoeffer’s thinking post 1940 uncovers any new ecclesiological discoveries, his answer must be a clear “No”. Indeed, he says as much when he writes, “There are so many problems bound up with any attempt to see Bonhoeffer’s theological progression as a logical and inexorable movement from ecclesiological beginnings to mature ecclesiological (or anti-ecclesiological) conclusions that ecclesiology simply has no usefulness as a basic interpretive principle for understanding the *whole* of his theology.”¹¹

John Phillips has tracked the gradual “disappearance” of Bonhoeffer’s signature axiom, *Christus als Gemeinde existierend*, which it is true, is hardly used after the 1933 summer lectures on Christology, though he did use a form of the language and the concept that he had used in his two dissertations, throughout *Discipleship* and *Life Together*.

The fact that Bonhoeffer does not use the phrase *Christus als Gemeinde existierend* in the later writings now deserves some attention, since the unequivocal concreteness and spatiality to which Bonhoeffer’s axiomatic phrase points, to the place where Christ is present, is of significance in this study.

We begin with Joachim von Soosten’s comment that “in the debate over Bonhoeffer’s dissertation, this phrase has almost taken on a life of its own; consequently, its original meaning in Bonhoeffer has been almost totally obscured”.¹² Bonhoeffer’s first use of the subsequently controversial axiom, appears in the context of his development of the idea of the two great *Kollektivpersonen*, Adam and Jesus, around whom the acts of God in creation, fall and redemption revolve.

The structure of humanity-in-Adam is unique because it is both composed of many isolated individuals and yet is one, as the humanity that has sinned as a

⁹ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer’s Christology*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 295.

whole. It is 'Adam', a collective person, who can only be superseded by the collective person 'Christ existing as church-community'... 'The humanity of sin' is one, *though consisting of nothing but individuals. It is a collective person, yet infinitely fragmented.*¹³

Bonhoeffer insists that the free word of God addresses the individual and the collective person in the very same moment.¹⁴

Bonhoeffer's own interpretation of *Christus als Gemeinde existierend* is extremely important at this point. The following words from *Act and Being* speak powerfully to the issue.

...the Protestant idea of the church is conceived in personal terms - that is, God reveals the divine self in the church as person. The community of faith is God's final revelation as 'Christ existing as community [Gemeinde]', ordained for the end time of the world until the return of Christ.¹⁵ Here Christ has come in the closest proximity to humanity. Here Christ has given Christ's own self to the new humanity in Christ so that the person of Christ draws together in itself all whom Christ has won, binding and committing Christ to them and them to one another. The 'church' is, therefore, not a human community [Gemeinschaft] to which Christ then comes or not, nor is it a gathering of such persons as those who (as individuals) seek Christ or think they have Christ and now wish to cultivate this common 'possession'. The church is rather the community of faith created by and founded upon Christ, in which Christ is revealed as the δεύτερος ανθρωπος, as the new human, or rather, as the new humanity itself.¹⁶

The theological rationale is not complicated; Christ is in the church as the new human, or rather, as the new humanity itself.

There was a second issue that Bonhoeffer was addressing in his development and use of the phrase "*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*". It was not unrelated, and emerges in reference to the vicarious representative action of Christ that finds its expression in the church's unique social form. As von Soosten points out in the Editor's Afterword to the German edition of *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer was determined to reclaim the uniqueness of the sanctorum communio.

¹³ Ibid., 121.

¹⁴ Ibid., 118-20.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer's own footnote at this point reads, "The tension between 'Christ existing as community' and the heavenly Christ, whom we await, persists"...which was the substance of Bonhoeffer's second Graduation Thesis.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 112.

The '*sanctorum communio*' is the community based on Christ's vicarious representative [stellvertretendes] suffering on our behalf, and it consists of Christians on earth who in turn stand up for-each-other [füreinander-eintreten].¹⁷ The marks of the church [Kirche], if understood comprehensively, always imply the sociality of the church-community [Gemeinde]. 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. *The social dimension of the concept of the church is, thus, not an external addition to this concept, but an original, constitutive element.* This also implies then that all fundamental Christian concepts are fully understandable 'only in reference to sociality,' as Bonhoeffer, seemingly stating the self-evident, writes in his preface. In so doing, Bonhoeffer places the concept of the '*sanctorum communio*' back into the tradition of the Reformation from which it had become detached, because the question of the concrete social form of the church had been disconnected from the theological task of defining the marks of Christ's church.¹⁸ [My emphasis]

The axiom turns out to be a highly condensed and enriched theological statement about the sociality of revelation. That that this is so becomes clear when Bonhoeffer writes, "The church is the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence of God. The New Testament knows a form of revelation, 'Christ existing as church-community'."¹⁹ Here we see Bonhoeffer's understanding of the social character of revelation; the church is not to be confused with the concept of religious community since the church is of a different order entirely²⁰ since it is that part of humanity in which Christ has taken shape and form: the church is the renewed form of humanity.

Then, with an eye to the problems he had created for himself by ignoring sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Marx,²¹ Bonhoeffer seeks to place the church 'back into' the arena of empirical study, by calling again on the concept of the collective person, while at the same time pointing toward the uniqueness of the church by underlining the role of the Spirit.

¹⁷ It should also be remembered that Bonhoeffer regarded Christ's vicarious representative action as the "structural principle of the Christian church-community; this makes it possible for members of the church-community to be actively-with-one-another [Miteinander] and for-one-another [Füreinander]". This fact gives "Christian basic-relations their substantive uniqueness." Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Sanctorum Communio*, 294

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 294.

¹⁹ Ibid., 140-41.

²⁰ Ibid., 211. "The body of Christ is a real presence in history, and at the same time the norm for its own history".

²¹ Berger, "Sociology and Ecclesiology," 58-59.

Finally, sociologists will have definitive proof that the church is a community when they consider that, like any other genuine community, it is an ethical collective person...Its uniqueness becomes apparent, however, only where it is understood as the community and church of God that is based upon and brought about by the Spirit, in which capacity it is 'Christ existing as church-community', the presence of Christ.²²

The axiom (*Die Kirche ist) Christus als Gemeinde existierend* is Bonhoeffer's theological affirmation that captures his unrelenting insistence that Jesus Christ, God's utterly free disclosure of Himself to humankind, be located concretely in time and space and firmly establishes Christ at the very centre of the community of renewed humanity known as the church.

Thus von Soosten can comment;

[The] original meaning [of the phrase] in Bonhoeffer has been almost totally obscured. To understand it one must keep two points in mind. On the one hand, *Bonhoeffer can conceive of Christ 'existing as church-community' precisely because he defines Christ's vicariously representative action [Stellvertretung] as the structural principle shaping the life of the church-community.* On the other hand, Christ can only become present and actualised within the witness of the church-community because the 'unity of the church as a structure [is] established 'before' any knowing and willing of the members; it is not ideal, but real'.²³ [My emphasis]

Stellvertretung lies at the heart of Bonhoeffer's theology; there can be no argument about this. Here, it can be seen at the heart of his ecclesiology as well providing the theological rationale for "*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*". *Stellvertretung* is the "structural principle that shapes the life of the church-community" making it possible "for members of the church-community to be actively-with-one-another [Miteinander] and for-one-another [Füreinander]",²⁴ the essential shaper of life in the Finkenwalde community as portrayed in *Life Together*. By linking his Christology with his empirical ecclesiology in such a cohesive and dramatic way, Bonhoeffer could never have undone the relationship. His ecclesiology did not fail at the end precisely because of this link.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 260.

²³ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

It is in *Sanctorum Communio* that the axiom “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*” is used most extensively. But the phrase does find expression elsewhere. The issues to which the axiom points, appear in three of Bonhoeffer’s Graduation Theses:

2. “The identification of ‘being in Christ’ and ‘being in the church-community’ are in Paul in unresolved contradiction with his concept of Christ in heaven.”
5. “There is no sociological concept of the church that is not theologically based.”
6. “The church is to be understood as Christ ‘existing as church-community’ and as a collective person.”²⁵

Bonhoeffer uses the phrase again in his Inaugural Lecture delivered at Berlin University, on July 31, 1930, this time followed by some very important pointers to a view of Christian personhood.

...Christ exists among us as church-community, as church in the hiddenness of historicity. The church is the hidden Christ among us. Hence the human being is never alone; instead he exists only through the church-community that brings Christ, a community incorporating the human being, drawing that person into its life. The person in Christ is the person in the church-community; wherever that person is, there is the church-community. But because that person as an individual is simultaneously wholly a member of the church-community, only here is the continuity of that person’s existence in Christ guaranteed.

Hence the human being can understand himself no longer from within himself but rather from within the Christ who exists as church-community, from within his word that supports the church-community and without which that church-community does not exist. But because this word affects his existence and as the word of the church-community simultaneously founds the continuity of the person’s being [Sein], the human being can understand himself only in direct relation to that word. People of the children of God, ‘children of mercy’ (Luther);...²⁶

Then in his 1933 lectures on Christology, under the heading “The Form [Gestalt] of Christ”, Bonhoeffer draws out an understanding of ‘Christ as Word’, ‘Christ as Sacrament’, and ‘Christ as Church-Community’ when he writes: “The presence of Christ as Word and sacrament is related to Christ as church-community, just as reality is related to form. Christ is the church-community by virtue of his being *pro me*. He takes action as

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 440.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 407.

the new humanity. The church-community, between his ascension and his second coming, is the form he takes.”²⁷

By the end of the 1933 Christology lectures, the phrase “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*”, virtually disappears from Bonhoeffer’s writings. Bonhoeffer draws on the ideas embedded in the axiom when, in *Discipleship*, he writes about the Body of Christ²⁸ making it clear that the concept of the body of Christ “must be understood not in the context of the Hellenistic usage of this image, but against the background of the Old Testament prophecy about the temple”,²⁹ which turned out to be a mere shadow of the body of Christ, who himself became the spiritual temple “in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, filling and sanctifying the hearts of the believers. (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). [This] temple of God is the holy church-community in Jesus Christ. The body of Christ is the living temple of God and of the new humanity.”³⁰ The new human being, understood as a collective person, “is the church-community, the body of Christ, or Christ himself. Through the Holy Spirit, the crucified and risen Christ exists as the church-community [Gemeinde], as the ‘new human being’.”³¹

Finally, the use of the concept in the *Ethics* points in the direction that would become more apparent in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

When the New Testament transfers the concept of the body of Christ to the church-community, this is in no way an expression that the church-community is first and foremost set apart from the world. On the contrary, in line with New Testament statements about God becoming flesh in Christ, it expresses just this – that in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne, and that the church-community of believers is to make this known to the world by word and life. This means not being separated from the world, but calling the world into the community [Gemeinschaft] of the body of Christ to which the world in truth already belongs... The church community is separated from the world only by this: it believes in the reality of being accepted by God – a reality that belongs to the whole world – and in affirming this as valid for itself it witnesses that it is valid for the entire world...

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 323.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 213-24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 219-20.

This belonging together of God and world together that is grounded in Christ does not allow static spatial boundaries, *nor does it remove the difference between church-community and world*. This leads to the question of how to think about this difference without falling back into spatial images.³²

This significant statement points towards the importance of the eschatological in Bonhoeffer's thought while giving little or no credence to Phillips' earlier comment about Bonhoeffer's increasing disinterest in claiming a specific revelational 'space' for Christ in the world. Bonhoeffer is not about to give away the difference between church-community and world, a position which appears to controvert Bethge's belief that Bonhoeffer's "ecclesiology seemed almost entirely absorbed within the *theologia crucis*".³³

The church as the body of Christ

This is by no means the end of the matter however, for in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer develops the 'Major Themes in the New Testament View of the Church',³⁴ and struggles with some of the enduring difficulties involved in the crafting of any ecclesiology: eg., the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church, the relationship between Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the church, as well as the relationship between the local Christian congregation (*Lokalgemeinde*) or individual congregation (*Einzelgemeinde*) – the empirical church or concrete form of the whole church - and the communion of saints, the *Sanctorum Communio*.³⁵

³² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67-68. Emphasis is mine.

³³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887-88.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 134-41, and in particular, the lengthy and detailed f.29, 35-39 which appeared in the dissertation typescript of *Sanctorum Communio*.

³⁵ The words that Bonhoeffer uses to describe the sociological dimension of the empirical church are: *Gemeinschaft* (community), *Gesellschaft* (society), *Herrschaftsverband* (association of authentic rule), and *Genossenschaftsverband* (co-operative association). *Sanctorum Communio*, 14. In addition there are a cluster of words and phrases that Bonhoeffer uses throughout *Sanctorum Communio*: "a church-community [*Gemeinde*] of saints or a community [*Gemeinschaft*] of saints..." (123). In a footnote, Bonhoeffer makes the point that "sanctorum communio ought to be understood both in a personal sense (community [*Gemeinschaft*] of saints) and a sacramental sense (community [*Gemeinschaft*] of the sacrament)" f.1 (123); *Volksgemeinde*, used to render *ekklesia*, "gathering and assembly of the people" (135); "the church community as a whole [*Gesamtgemeinde*]" (135); "the local Christian community [*Lokalgemeinde*]" (135); "the individual congregation [*Einzelgemeinde*] is the concrete form of the whole church-community [*Gesamtgemeinde*] of God...it is 'the manifestation of the whole church [*Gesamtkirche*] in a specific place'." (135); *Gemeinde der Liebe* [community-of-love], i.e., the disciples (150); "the church (is) the new 'collective life [*Gesamtleben*] established by Christ." (after Schleiermacher, 153); an "individual's (real) living-

The church-community, elected in Christ “from eternity” exists through the work of Christ who is antecedent to his church, and is the expression in time and space of “what has already been accomplished in Christ.” The death of Christ establishes the new humanity that lives in Christ, and so it can be said that the redemption of the human race is real in Christ. It can be inferred from this that Bonhoeffer believed the work of redemption was complete in Christ, thus fending off any suggestion that the church has a necessary role in bringing Christ’s work of salvation to completion, though Bonhoeffer would never have denied that Christ works presently through the church. Thus in a footnote, the editors of *Sanctorum Communio*, comment on Bonhoeffer's use of words indicating the completeness of Christ’s work of redemption.

By ‘completed’ (*vollendet*) Bonhoeffer means that the church, as established by God in Christ, is eternally and at all times complete, consummated, and fulfilled; this corresponds to his idea that in Christ the church is *realisiert*, realised. He also holds that the church is 'actualised' in time by the Holy Spirit, i.e., it grows in history and thus the *vollendete Kirche* takes on empirical form. No single word in German or English fully captures the meaning Bonhoeffer intends. In using ‘completed’ for *vollendet* we mean to convey both the eschatological character of the church (as ‘consummated’ would express) and to indicate that it is not the result of a temporal process, but it is a divine reality.³⁶

Drawing on verses from throughout the Pauline epistles, Bonhoeffer asserts that Christ is the foundation, cornerstone and pioneer of a new humanity and that the church for which he laid down his life is the body of Christ, and that individuals are members of this body, as of Christ himself.

But what does the image of the church as the body of Christ mean? In answer, Bonhoeffer replies that, if it is to be taken seriously as he supposes Paul means it to be taken, it “intends to identify Christ and the church” leading directly to the assertions that “Christ himself is the church-community” and that “‘to be in Christ’ is synonymous with ‘to be in

community [*Lebensgemeinschaft*] with Christ. (after Schleiermacher, f.18 159-160); community of love [*Liebesgemeinschaft*] (172); church-of-the-people [*Volkskirche*] (219); voluntary church [*Freiwilligkeitskirche*] (219); universal church [*allgemeine Kirche*] "the church that comprises all individual congregations" (quoting Zwingli, after Wycliffe. 223); missionary church [*Missionkirche*] (241); and community of saints [*Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*] (278).

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 139. f.31.

the church-community”³⁷ This close identification of Christ and the church is to be thought of in a robust and unsentimental way and there are to be no mystical associations attached to it. One point, however, remains unclear to Bonhoeffer; “namely why the direct identification between Christ and ecclesia is made so rarely (1 Cor. 1:13; 12:12; 6:15; Col 3:11; Rom 13:14), and why quite often the collective personality of the church and Christ are thought of as being in some kind of relation, and therefore as not identical.”³⁸ He regards Karl Schmidt’s³⁹ suggestion that “when the church-community is incorporated into Christ...it really fuses with him and merges into him”⁴⁰ as totally unsatisfactory. And after having noted that “the collective person [Gesamtperson] of the church-community can be conceived of only in Christ, that is, in his person,” Bonhoeffer acknowledges that even “Paul does not want to make the complete identification, because for him also Christ is with God. He has ascended into heaven.”⁴¹

The problem of the relationship between Christ and His church becomes even more acute if

we include the indispensable *notion of pneuma* [spirit]. For in the creation of the church-community the Holy Spirit evidently is at work as a personal agent. The Spirit establishes community and is presumably also the principle of unity...The church-community is the body of Christ, but only under the gathering and unifying work of the Holy Spirit. Thus the identification between Christ and church-community is further complicated; and yet it has to be made, and it is made.⁴²

In drawing attention to the social significance of Christ and to Christ’s real presence, both of which he calls “decisive”, Bonhoeffer can say that “the church is the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence of God.” He frankly admits to the “doctrinal difficulties involved here” and urges us to think “of a form of revelation that may be called ‘Christ existing as church-community’.” This he suggests is the only way of making sense

³⁷ Ibid., 137. f.29.

³⁸ Ibid., 137. f.29.

³⁹ Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1891-1956) was an assistant to Adolf Deissmann in Berlin where he taught in New Testament from 1918-1921 and then held appointments in Jena and Bonn. He was deposed by the National Socialists in 1933 and from 1935 -1953 was Professor of New Testament at Basel. He was a "co-founder of the so called form-critical method. http://www.kirchenlexikon.de/s/s1/schmidt_k_l.shtml (accessed 06/01/2011)

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 137. f. 29.

⁴¹ Ibid., 137. f.29.

⁴² Ibid., 138-39. f.29.

of Paul's clear assertions, made in the indicative, that "You are the body of Christ" even when he is speaking to and about a local congregation troubled by an incestuous person in its midst. (1 Cor 5:6). It is the church militant, and not the church triumphant, that lives in brokenness, which allows Bonhoeffer to propose that the theological meaning of Paul's assertion that "'You are the body of Christ' is not exhausted in the description of empirical facts...rather the meaning is contained in the hard *contradiction between actuality and the reality of human holiness*."⁴³

An Interpretation

The church with a Christological core and a communal structure

What can be said then about "*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*", this axiomatic, spatially-oriented phrase that played such an important part in Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology?

It was Reinhold Seeberg, Bonhoeffer's dissertation supervisor, who had introduced him to the idea that people were characterised by sociality and mutuality. Taking and using these concepts hermeneutically, Bonhoeffer believed that "he could describe both the worldly and the transcendent nature of revelation."⁴⁴ Then, by taking G.W. F. Hegel's phrase "Gott als Gemeinde existierend",⁴⁵ and transforming it in a "Christological-social"⁴⁶ way, he crafted a succinct theological axiom that permitted him to establish the truth that

The church is neither a religious society made up of individuals worried about 'sociological self-affirmation,' as Troeltsch puts it; nor is it simply a John the Baptist preaching the event of the Word, as the early Barth put it; nor, once again, is it the holy and infallible mediator of salvation, as Catholicism puts it. Rather, according to Bonhoeffer's now classic phrase, the church is the body of Christ as collective person, 'Christ existing as the church.' Overflowing from the heart of God, the church is reality as restructured in Jesus Christ...The

⁴³ Ibid., 138. f. 29.

⁴⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 83.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83

⁴⁶ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 52. f. 91.

nature of the church is connected to the fulfilment of (Jesus') revelation. Its necessity is found in that reality.⁴⁷

This highly compressed theological statement, "*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*", secured Bonhoeffer's commitment to pursue his search for the truth of God, "informed by the conviction that the truth which is believed must have a concrete locus within the reality of the world".⁴⁸ In doing this, as Charles Marsh notes, Bonhoeffer describes "the circumference of revelation's new social space".⁴⁹ This is an important comment since it casts the axiom as a framework within which Bonhoeffer develops his understanding of the church as the expression of sociality that represents God's revelation in Christ in the world in a concrete fashion.

Bonhoeffer draws heavily on Luther's close link between "the Christological basis and the social structure of the church-community"⁵⁰ and Joachim von Soosten comments: "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."⁵¹ Eberhard Bethge has also reported that Regin(ald) Prenter⁵² has "shown that Bonhoeffer never regarded his formula of "Christ existing as church-community" as being true in reverse."⁵³ von Soosten's comment is a reminder that "(The church is) Christ existing as church-community" is potentially a very confusing idea.

Bethge regards the phrase as a "preliminary organisation of [Bonhoeffer's] ideas" that would serve "as a barrier against metaphysical speculation and a transcendental evaporation of the idea of God".⁵⁴ As far as I can be sure, Bonhoeffer never abandoned his

⁴⁷ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 91.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 291.

⁴⁹ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 56.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 293. Editor's Afterword.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵² Regin(ald) Prenter (1907-1990) was a Danish Lutheran Priest active in the resistance against the Nazis. Following the war from 1945 until 1972 he was Professor of Dogmatics at Aarhus University in Denmark.

⁵³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 84.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

cardinal axiom, this “preliminary organisation of ideas”, even though the phrase slips out of regular usage after the Christology lectures of 1933. Bethge recounts that Bonhoeffer’s early critics believed that Bonhoeffer was carried away by his “discovery” of this taut axiom, and allowed “the difference between Christ and community (to) disappear to the point that the two were identified with one another, and that with his critical function of eschatology he also dispelled the provisional character of the church, losing sight of its ‘historicity’.”⁵⁵

Bonhoeffer’s alleged merging and fusing of the boundaries between Christ and church is the dilemma that lies at the heart of the debate. How are we to regard the “human, historical society” called ‘the church’ which has its foundation outside of time in the gracious electing and choosing of the triune God without, on the one hand, distancing and thereby disconnecting God from human social space and time, or on the other, undermining the uniqueness and sufficiency of the work of the triune God by suggesting that the church – that transformed form of common life together in which the Spirit is Lord - in some way participates in Christ’s work to bring it to completion.⁵⁶ As Christopher Holmes has asked, “Does Bonhoeffer’s three-fold form of the present Christ⁵⁷ leave any room for the necessary distinction between Christ and the church?”⁵⁸

Charles Marsh⁵⁹ approaches the phrase “*Christ existing as church-community*” from the point of view of the social significance of Christ and of Christ’s real presence and suggests that it is “taken to be the source of both the *difference* of the unique person and the *continuity* of their basic relations in the church. ‘In Christ this tension between being

⁵⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁶ John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 55.

⁵⁷ The reference is to Bonhoeffer’s Christology lectures and his three fold articulation of “The Form [Gestalt] of Christ”, as Word, Sacrament, and Church-Community. (See Bonhoeffer. Berlin 1932-1933. 315-325.)

⁵⁸ Holmes, “Wholly Human and Wholly Divine, Humiliated and Exalted: Some Reformed Explorations in Bonhoeffer’s Christology Lectures,” See the elaboration of the question at pages 218 - 22 (“Critical remarks in relation to Bonhoeffer’s Account of ‘The Center’”).

⁵⁹ On the whole, Charles Marsh seems unworried by the phrase itself. He notes that Bonhoeffer regards the doctrine (of recapitulation) originating in Eph. 1:10 of the restoration of all things, ἀνακεφαλαιώσις – recapitulatio (Irenaeus), is “a magnificent and consummately consoling thought” while also noting that the doctrine “gives voice in an extraordinarily clear way to the mysterious heart of grace, that it is not we who shall take creation back to its original glory, and thus it is not we who shape and reshape the real in the image of ourselves, but it is Christ who shall ‘give it back to us’.” But, asks Marsh, “does (Bonhoeffer) not push the theme of recapitulation in Christ to such a point that the difference between Christ and world is jeopardised?” (Marsh. *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 105. Marsh quotes from Bonhoeffer’s December 19, 1943 prison letter.)

isolated and being bound to others is really abolished'...because Christ is the origin both of the difference of persons and of their life together."⁶⁰ In an earlier comment Marsh had noted that "the event of revelation does not coerce a distinction between God's identity and God's presence; Christ as community demonstrates the refiguration of both. What it means for God to be God is that Jesus Christ is the source of life together. God's being is in God's becoming for us in Jesus Christ; God's aseity is interpreted by God's promiseity."⁶¹

John Webster also contributes to the debate when he refers to that diverse collection of approaches to ecclesiology and the sacraments generally known as communion ecclesiologies. His concern lies with this group of ecclesiologies that

characteristically stress the continuity between the action of God and the action of the church, in a manner which can easily jeopardize our sense of the freedom and perfection of God's work. With undue emphasis placed on the church as agent we are required to regard the church as an actualization of or a sharing in the divine presence and action, rather than as a testimony to that presence and action.⁶²

Such communion ecclesiologies are "heavily invested in a theology of the ontological union between Christ and the body of the church." They are "characteristically insecure (even casual) about identifying Christological boundaries: it is not possible to determine the point at which Jesus stops and the church begins...the result is an account of Christ and the church as co-constitutive, even, perhaps, of Christ as ecclesially constituted, and so having no substantial subjectivity proper to him".⁶³ So in order to make the point about the creaturely nature of the church, Webster generates an account of the church "as differentiated, asymmetrical fellowship with God."⁶⁴ However even Webster is cautious lest in attempting to counteract the "tendencies of social trinitarian ecclesiologies", an ecclesiology is spiritualised "in the sense that we lose sight of the Church as human historical society", or dualised "in the sense that it polarises God and the human

⁶⁰ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 74.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² Webster, *Holiness*, 55.

⁶³ John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," in *Confessing God. Essays in Christian Dogmatics 2* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 163-64.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

community and renders God as a purely transcendent reality, unrelated to human social space and time.”⁶⁵ Both these possibilities were of deep concern to Bonhoeffer.

In returning to John Phillips’ treatment of Bonhoeffer’s signature axiom, “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*”, it is unsettling and disappointing that, at the end, he simply seems to let it go. Phillips summarises his book as his attempt at following “the path of Bonhoeffer’s theology from his early ‘Christ existing as the church’ to the breaking down of the limitations of his ecclesiological doctrine of revelation and of Christ in the *Ethics*, and to the final affirmation of the this-sidedness of Christ and the Christian life in a world come of age.”⁶⁶ But for Phillips to suggest that Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* and his time in prison was given to the “breaking down of the limitations of his ecclesiological doctrine of revelation” seems to miss the point. For it was never Bonhoeffer’s intention that the phrase “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*”, was to be “a theological device to explain the nature of the church.”⁶⁷

Geffrey Kelly makes this very clear in the Editor’s Foreword of *Life Together*. It was the Luther scholar, Karl Holl, who had pointed out to the young Bonhoeffer that “if Luther’s theology of church was to have any meaning in the light of God’s Word, then confession of faith in the presence of Jesus Christ and the community’s structuring of that confessed presence had to be integrated.”⁶⁸ Thus the phrase “Christ existing as church-community”, rather than being a theological artefact to “explain the nature of the church” emerged from Bonhoeffer’s deeply held belief that the manner in which the church structured its confession of Christ’s presence was the most significant project in which the church could ever be immersed.

Some difficult questions

I mentioned earlier that in writing any ecclesiology there are a series of enduring, difficult questions that must be acknowledged; these should now be directed to Bonhoeffer’s work. So, in what way does Bonhoeffer distinguish between Christ and the church when it is acknowledged that the connection between ecclesiology and Christology

⁶⁵ Webster, *Holiness*, 56.

⁶⁶ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 245.

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

can be taken to the point where the two may become indistinguishable. What is the place of eschatology in the preservation of such a distinction? Does Bonhoeffer protect and preserve the creaturely integrity of the church community? And if we are to consider the local church, in what sense can Christ be said to be “Lord of the Church”? Where is Christ now and what is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the risen and ascended Christ?

Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology and Eschatology

Did Bonhoeffer distinguish between Christ and the church and did eschatology play any role in the preservation of the distinction? The answer to both questions has to be “Yes”! However the matter is not quite that straightforward, for as Bethge has already pointed out, Bonhoeffer’s early critics believed that he allowed “the difference between Christ and community (to) disappear...(and) that, with his critical function of eschatology he also dispelled the provisional character of the church, losing sight of its ‘historicity’.”⁶⁹ It is difficult to know just how it might be said of Bonhoeffer that he failed to appreciate the humanity and historicity – the “provisional character” - of the church. But if one started from the other end and claimed that Bonhoeffer had constructed his ecclesiology in such a way that the church is, in some way, swallowed up by Christ, then it could be seen more clearly that the contingent or provisional character of the church is erased and eclipsed by Christ thus making it difficult if not impossible to claim that there was any church over which Christ might be said to be Lord. On the other hand, Bethge makes the point that Bonhoeffer’s theology - and by implication his ecclesiology – was often accused “of neglecting the eschatological element” and quotes Martin Honecker writing in 1963:

In all Bonhoeffer’s writings, the eschatological dimension is noticeably reticent; the body of Christ exists in the world and is not on the path to its future. Beside the unfolding of the historical Christ event and the reference of faith to the current reality of the church, the hope in the coming of the Kingdom of God as the overcoming of the current church dialectic between *peccatorum communio* and *sanctorum communio* withdraws.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 84.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

Bethge believes that Bonhoeffer's reticence in referring to the eschatological dimension, particularly during the final years "was because of his sure, instinctive opposition to using it as a false refuge in that desperate situation".⁷¹

This is not the whole picture however, for in the Introduction to *Creation and Fall*, written after Hitler had been installed as Chancellor of the Reich, Bonhoeffer engages in a passionate affirmation of his commitment to an eschatological view of the world;

The Church of Christ witnesses to the end of all things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end...The new is the real end of the old; the new, however, is Christ. Christ is the end of the old. Not the continuation, not the goal, the completion in line with the old, but the end and therefore the new. The church speaks within the old world about the new world. And because it is surer of the new world than of anything else, it sees the old world only in the light of the new world.⁷²

While these words stand as Bonhoeffer's announcement about the way in which he understands and is about to interpret Genesis 1- 4:1⁷³ in particular, they stand also as his commitment to an eschatology that has not been collapsed into history nor one that "merely created a theological version of modern utopian progressivism".⁷⁴ They represent and perhaps even anticipate the thinking of the "now" and "not yet" theologians who would follow Bonhoeffer; those who did not "regard the coming kingdom of God or new creation as simply the outcome of the process of history itself."⁷⁵

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Bonhoeffer lived with the tension of what Bethge calls the "the eschatological majesty of revelation and the relevance of the real world"⁷⁶ since both were anchored deeply in his being. "Would these two poles attract or repel each other?", Bethge asks immediately prior to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor. "Eschatology had undoubtedly grown in intensity, but reality too had become more vivid."⁷⁷ How to manage the humanity and historicity of the church in space and time while maintaining a grounded belief in the gracious mercy of God out of whose electing

⁷¹ Ibid., 87.

⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 21.

⁷³ "The Bible...needs to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end" (*Creation and Fall*) 22

⁷⁴ See Richard Bauckham, "Eschatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 308.

⁷⁵ Bauckham names the German theologians of the 1960's as Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Gerhard Sauter and Johann-Baptist Metz.

⁷⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 254.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

love and choosing the church exists until the end of time, becomes a crucial question then in the context of any ecclesiology, especially one shaped by the axiom “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*”.

Charles Marsh points in a very helpful direction: In the “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*” axiom Bonhoeffer is describing “the circumference of revelation’s new social space”.⁷⁸ This understanding does not require us to elevate Christ beyond his churchly body, thereby eclipsing or overshadowing the particularity of the (local) church itself. An asymmetrical relationship between Christ and his church can be accepted since there is no competition as to who will be pre-eminent. The circumference of Jesus Christ’s new social space until he comes again will be the church-community. This community will bear witness in worship, sacrament and deed to Christ who is the end of the old order. This is what is meant by “the circumference of revelation’s new social space”. If we now recall Bonhoeffer’s first use of the axiom when he wrote that “the church is...the community of faith created by and founded upon Christ, in which Christ is revealed as the δεύτερος ανθρωπος, as the new human, or rather, as the new humanity itself”,⁷⁹ we are in a position to appreciate Clifford Green’s conclusion when he writes

Adam is the Kollektivperson who personifies humanity as created and fallen, thus being the prototype of the life of every individual and every community before God; Christ is the Kollektivperson of the new humanity, overcoming the sin of the old humanity of Adam; he is the reality of a new personal and corporate life for every human being. The social form of Christ as the Kollektivperson of the new humanity is the church.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 56.

⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 112.

⁸⁰ Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*, 45.

The church-community between Christ's ascension and his second coming is the form he takes⁸¹

In a post-Copernican universe, to ask the question "Where is Christ now?" is to raise an absurdity, if it is imagined that the ascension of Christ refers in some way to some 'heavenly' space to which Christ has or might have 'gone'. It should never be suggested that Bonhoeffer made this crude error, though a search for Bonhoeffer's treatment and understanding of the ascension turns up very little information.

The clearest statement occurs in a sermon Bonhoeffer preached in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, Berlin on Ascension Day, May 25 1933, less than four months after Hitler's accession to power. The text was 1 Peter 1:7b-9; "...when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

Luther once said something like this: While he was on earth he (Jesus) was far away from us, but now he is in heaven, he is close to us. What does that mean? It means that now he is no longer king of the Jews but rather king of the whole world; it means that from heaven he rules over his whole kingdom and is near, though not visible, and present to his whole church, wherever it is scattered, among Jews and heathen, through all the world. He is close to us in his church, in his Word, in his sacrament, in love among the brethren...Joy in the sermon, joy in the sacraments, joy in brothers and sisters – that is the joy of the believing church in its unseen, heavenly Lord.⁸²

This is Bonhoeffer's homiletically inspired expression of the *Christus absens* and the *Christus praesens*, and here he expresses the same thought that Douglas Farrow refers to in *Ascension and Ecclesia*⁸³ when, in talking about Karl Barth's understanding of the ascension, Farrow writes, "The Christ who stands at a distance from us, the *Christus absens*, is also the Christ who in the power of his resurrection and ascension comes forward to meet us, the *Christus praesens*...All are summoned, here and now, 'with supreme realism' to share a common life with him"⁸⁴ In the invitation to share this

⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 323.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 469.

⁸³ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia, on the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology*. (Grand Rapids. MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

common life it is the ascension that underlines Jesus' humanity and his availability at all times and in all places thus enabling the "joy of the believing church in its unseen, heavenly Lord."⁸⁵

It should not be forgotten that Bonhoeffer addresses the analytical and classificatory questions, "Where (are you, Jesus)?" and "How (are you present, Jesus)?", within the framework of the "quintessential religious question",⁸⁶ "Who (are you, Jesus)?" which can only be asked within the context of faith since it is the only place it will receive its answer. Here, in the lectures on Christology, Bonhoeffer develops the consequential outcomes of the ascension in his delineation of his understanding of Jesus' presence.

The question is not, how can the human Jesus, or the God Jesus, be simultaneously here? The question must be, by virtue of what personal ontological structure is Christ present to the church?...It is the '*pro-me*' structure. The being of Christ's person is essentially relatedness to me...This *pro-me*...is to be understood as the being of his very person. The very core of his being is *pro-me*...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*. This *pro-me* should not be forgotten; according to Luther, 'Because it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present in you'."⁸⁷

As Farrow points out, this presence, and that of Jesus' church, is an eschatological presence; "Christ and his church are present only eschatologically, only as the Spirit makes a way across the boundary line that has been drawn through all things, even time itself, by Jesus-history".⁸⁸

Before leaving these issues it should be pointed out that Douglas Farrow draws attention, in passing, to Bonhoeffer's "glaring pneumatological deficiency".⁸⁹ Farrow is not the first to have made this sort of observation; similar comments have been made by Matt Jenson in

⁸⁵ Farrow, quoting Barth again, asks "Did any living Christian or Christian community ever live except on this presupposition?" Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 239, f.349

⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 303.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁸⁸ Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 269, f.53. In the same footnote, Farrow makes this interesting observation; Bonhoeffer points out that "if Jesus is the mediator between God and man, he is the mediator also between us and ourselves, that is, between 'the old and the new existence.' That is why his presence is a hidden presence, and his ecclesial body an entity in the world but not of it - why Christianity must be 'religionless'; or, as we would say, ambiguous".

⁸⁹ Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia, on the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology*, 177, f.43.

his "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology."⁹⁰ Jenson draws attention to the lack of significant reference to the Holy Spirit, as the creator of contemporaneity in the *Christology Lectures*. "Of particular interest" writes Jenson, "is this continuing presence, which is difficult to fathom without a proper pneumatology."⁹¹ In Bonhoeffer's defence, Jenson concedes that the lectures "are lectures on Christology" but even that does not make things much easier. As he points out, it is "the absence of Christ (that) allows for the presence of Christ in the Spirit" and "it would seem that a lot of the sticky space and time questions and more general questions about just what the 'present Christ' means might be side-stepped, or at least minimized, with a robust pneumatology."⁹²

While agreeing with these comments, I note in passing, Clifford Green's article, "Trinity and Christology in Bonhoeffer and Barth."⁹³ After scanning the evidence of Trinitarian thought throughout the Bonhoeffer corpus, Green writes, "I believe I have shown that the doctrine of the Trinity was a permanent and perduring presupposition of Bonhoeffer's theology",⁹⁴ and that "Christology functions in Bonhoeffer's theology somewhat analogously to Trinitarian theology in Barth's Church Dogmatics."⁹⁵ While the Bonhoeffer texts are peppered with references to the Holy Spirit, for some reason that is difficult to work out, Bonhoeffer's use of them has drawn criticism, which in turn has drawn a rebuttal of the claim that he demonstrates "a glaring pneumatological deficiency".⁹⁶

Gary Badcock comes to an interesting conclusion in this regard. Bonhoeffer's theological vision, he writes

...is far more than straightforwardly Christological. Fundamentally, it represents a particularly searching account of the Christian life. And as a theology of the Christian life, it could with greater justice be termed pneumatological than Christological, for though he seldom mentions the Holy Spirit in his overall theology and does little to develop it as a separate theological theme, the pneumatological problems of faith and obedience, or worship and witness, are everywhere present at the core of Bonhoeffer's

⁹⁰ Jenson, "Real Presence: Contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology."

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹³ Clifford Green, "Trinity and Christology in Bonhoeffer and Barth," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60, no. 1-2 (2006).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁶ Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia, on the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology.*, 177. f.43.

theology. This is also true of the faith he lived, and to which he so urgently called his generation.⁹⁷

In a further, unrelated but not irrelevant comment, Badcock reflects on Robert Jenson's "apparently robustly realist" position in regard to the phrase "the body of Christ". Badcock portrays Jenson's position in this way: "...the only 'body' of Christ there is, is the ecclesial one, but this ecclesial body is the 'real presence' of Christ, and is presumably to be grasped in Lutheran terms as 'in, with, and under' the members of the church in their hearing of the Word."⁹⁸

Badcock writes,

And yet Jenson has said something important. For the doctrine of the church is in the strict sense a *resurrection* doctrine, grounded in the basic conviction of Christian believers in the continuing presence and activity of the Lord Jesus Christ – and not simply in events of the past...what the resurrection of Jesus amounts to is the transition of Jesus from the obscurity of first-century Galilee and Judea to the status he bears in the faith of the church as the Lord and Saviour of the world. It is precisely the resurrection that grounds the whole existence of the church as the place of Christ's continuing presence and activity in the power of the Spirit. To put the point in formal theological language: there is no Christology without pneumatology, and no ecclesiology without both.⁹⁹

Summary

Die Kirche ist Christus als Gemeinde existierend "does not mean that an institution calling itself church defines where Christ is communally present. On the contrary, it is not a church organisation that defines Christ, but Christ who defines the church. In other words, it is precisely where, and only where, 'Christ exists-as-Gemeinde' that we find the 'church' (*Kirche*)."¹⁰⁰ To make the connection that wherever there is an empirical organisation called 'church', there is Christ, is to misunderstand Bonhoeffer's intention. Karl Holl had also made it clear to Bonhoeffer that Luther's appreciation of the church was as rich as it

⁹⁷ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 183.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82-84.

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 14-15.

was because Luther had taken both its Christological core and its “communal structure”¹⁰¹ seriously.¹⁰² Hence only “Christ present in communal word and sacrament, that is the *Gemeinde Christi*, constitutes the church.”¹⁰³ A Christological core and a communal structure is the position Bonhoeffer adopted from the beginning and, maintained into and throughout *Letters and Papers*, though there in more muted tones.

Christus als Gemeinde existierend gives spatial expression to the Christological foundation and the communal structure of the church. It was Bonhoeffer’s way of ensuring, as best he could, that humankind would neither “lose sight of the Church as human historical society”, nor “polarise God and the human community and render God as a purely transcendent reality, unrelated to human social space and time”,¹⁰⁴ the very issues he pursued with vigour in the *Ethics* and from his prison cell in Tegel. Not that these issues were new to him, since he had set aside one chapter of *Sanctorum Communio* to deal with precisely these issues, and the question remained the same “How does the eschatological question relate to the church as community”?¹⁰⁵

Bonhoeffer’s whole life had been given over to answering this question; put simply, his confession was that the church is the community of the second, life-giving Adam. “*The concept of Christian community proves to be defined by an inner history...[which] can be seen in the concepts of primal state, sin and revelation, all of which can be fully understood only when seen as intending community.*”¹⁰⁶ It is this “inner dialectical history”¹⁰⁷ that holds the Church as a human historical society together with and related to God in human, social space and time, and it is this that ensures that the difference between Christ and the church as a human historical society is maintained.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 293.

¹⁰² For an authoritative survey of Luther's view of the church see Chap 29, 277-285 Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development*.

¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Webster, *Holiness*, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 58-106. Chapter Three. “The Primal State and the Problem of Community”.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 58 f.1 which is SC-A, the dissertation typescript of *Sanctorum Communio*.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 59 f.1.

A holy imagination points towards the form of the suffering servant

In his *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Paul S. Minear points to the considerable number of images and pictures of the church offered in the New Testament.

It would seem that (the early Christian) imagination was so flexible because it was so alive to the mystery of the church's participation in the creative and redemptive work of the Triune God. Perception of this mystery induced an almost endless variety of modes of describing it. Yet, if we are to believe the cumulative witness of the New Testament, every congregation was all too prone to blindness. It did not see itself either as it was or as it was meant to become. The images were normally used to cure this blindness. The cure required a rebirth of imagination that would enhance deeper perceptions and more authentic self-recognitions. They needed new eyes for seeing, and this change required a greater degree of "play" in their thinking.¹⁰⁸

While Eberhard Bethge was asking his troubling questions about the future of the church, Bonhoeffer, it seems, had no doubts. There would be a future for the church. Driven by his own lively and holy imagination, Bonhoeffer was wrestling with the question as to *how* the church could be "alive to the mystery of...participation in the creative and redemptive work of the Triune God"¹⁰⁹ in a world that was pushing God to the outer edges of life, and dismissing God as significant in any way at all. The church of Bonhoeffer's Germany "did not see itself either as it was or as it was meant to become" and his use of a cluster of spatial metaphors throughout his corpus was a major contribution to a longed-for rebirth of churchly imagination that would, he hoped, "enhance deeper perceptions and more authentic self-recognitions" by Christian believers.

During the prison years Bonhoeffer's ideas did not develop in a straight-line; there was no systematic unfolding of 'pure' doctrine. Bereft of the intimacies of church community into which he had poured his life for the last fourteen years, Bonhoeffer's own faith and his world of ideas were now re-shaped by reading many 'secular' books smuggled into prison,

¹⁰⁸ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 250.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

especially the writing of Wilhelm Dilthey.¹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer fortified himself by the use of the daily office, Bible reading and singing Paul Gerhardt's hymns,¹¹¹ was invigorated by conversations with fellow prisoners and the occasional sympathetic prison guard, and of course was nurtured and sustained by his correspondence with his family and his colleague Eberhard Bethge.

The theology that emerged from Tegel was theology wrought out of a daily living and a daily dying behind bars, not a theology of limitation but one of true condescension. It was wrought out of a

worldly holiness...a spirituality grounded in daily life and relationships (where) the humblest tasks in this world, if seen as service of your neighbour, as fulfilling your God-given vocation, are more pleasing to God than the otherworldliness of the monastic ideal...It proved the deadly foe of all sentimentality...(It was a spirituality that)...commuted between the lofty discourse of the classics and the rude simplicities of the vernacular.¹¹²

Bonhoeffer's theology, previously worked out in the environs of Berlin and Tübingen, Barcelona, New York, London and Finkenwalde was now being tested and stretched in the confines of Tegel Prison. He would be damned and he would be killed.¹¹³

Now it becomes clear how the dynamics of Bonhoeffer's spatial church lead directly to the Cross and towards a form of corporate kenosis. Forever the re-former, Bonhoeffer, servant of Jesus Christ, continues to be busy with his "supreme concern, the revival of the church".¹¹⁴ Far from failing, his ecclesiology has led him, and by implication the church, to the only space befitting one whose whole existence had been defined by the rich content of *Stellvertretung*. So it becomes clear that the "mission of God is the calling and formation

¹¹⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). German historian, psychologist, sociologist and hermeneutic philosopher, held Hegel's Chair in Philosophy at the University of Berlin. Dilthey "helped form the modern study of hermeneutics and the philosophy of history". See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8. "Index of Names" 680. It was from Dilthey that Bonhoeffer "borrowed" the term "world come of age" and it was first mentioned in the letter to Eberhard Bethge of June 8, 1944.

¹¹¹ Carter Lindberg, ed. *The Pietist Theologians. An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, The Great Theologians (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005). Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) See Chapter 4. "In Germany, Gerhardt's hymns belong next to Grimm's fairy tales and even before Luther's translation of the Bible..."

¹¹² Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 126-27.

¹¹³ Of the true theologian, Luther wrote: "Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando". ("It is not understanding, reading, and speculation that make the theologian, but to live, no, more to die and be damned.")

¹¹⁴ Refer Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 205.

of a people”, an act in which the “form and content of the gospel” are bound together in an embodied witness that, in its own way, bears testimony to what Bruce Hamill calls “ecclesial otherness”.¹¹⁵ It will be recalled that Bethge had observed that Bonhoeffer was moving relentlessly in the direction of the *theologia crucis*, and as Bethge has also pointed out “...the only form he knew this was in its urging us toward the concrete fellowship of those who share Christ’s sufferings in the world.”¹¹⁶ So shape and form remain important as does a concrete form of expression of the revelation of suffering and redemption. Bonhoeffer never abandons a shape or form of the concrete fellowship of those who share Christ’s sufferings in the world.

Life shaped by Christ

It was Bonhoeffer’s reading of Wilhelm Dilthey while in prison that influenced his perception of humanity’s understanding of life without necessary recourse to the God-hypothesis, a process of understanding that had started during the Renaissance and ended with the Enlightenment when, according to Bonhoeffer, the time of religion was over. For Bonhoeffer, this was a great relief; it was a ground-clearing move for it meant that Jesus could become Lord of the world anew.

As a result of reading Dilthey’s *Lebensphilosophie*, Bonhoeffer’s clarity about life grew and on July 21, 1944, the day after the failed assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler, Bonhoeffer makes some of his most profound and intense, yet straightforward observations about life shaped by Christ.

In the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. 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*. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself...then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities – then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but

¹¹⁵ Bruce Hamill, "What Exactly Is the Church Called to Be in Our World? On Living Post-Christendom.," *Candour*, no. 2. March 2011 (2011): 13.

¹¹⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 887.

rather the sufferings of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is *μετάνοια*. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian. (Cf. Jer.45!) *How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one's failures when one shares in God's suffering in the life of this world?*¹¹⁷ [My emphasis]

Ralf Wüstenberg summarises these words: "Thus by interpreting the concept of life Christologically, Bonhoeffer distinguishes his view from the philosophy of life. In terms of a philosophical understanding, life is ambiguous: in the light of revelation, life is definite through Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer thus takes up the concept of life from Dilthey and gives it a theological meaning."¹¹⁸

This new meaning and the link between life and the sufferings of God can be seen most clearly in Bonhoeffer's prison letter to Bethge of July 16 1944. Here he establishes that one lives by participating in the sufferings of God. He starts with the question Jesus asks his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane after he finds them sleeping, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?" (Matt 26: 40b). To be asked this question, says Bonhoeffer, is exactly the opposite of what a religious person would expect God to ask. However, God in Jesus, actually asks humans to share with him in his sufferings. But to be able to even think about doing this, one must be "delivered from false religious obligations and inhibitions" allowing one to live a secular life.

Being a Christian does not mean being religious in a certain way...(it) means being human...the human being Christ creates in us. It is not a religious act that makes someone a Christian, but rather sharing in God's suffering in the worldly life. That is '*μετάνοια*', not thinking first of one's own needs, questions, sins, and fears but allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks, into the messianic event, in which Isa. 53 is now being fulfilled!¹¹⁹

And then, after pointing to many New Testament examples of people who were "pulled along into the - messianic - suffering of God in Jesus Christ",¹²⁰ Bonhoeffer points out that it is their faith that is demonstrated in their behaviour. This has nothing to do with a religious method which is always and only "partial"; "whereas 'faith' is something whole

¹¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 485-86.

¹¹⁸ Ralf K. Wüstenberg, "Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Tegel Theology," in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 70.

¹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 480. The use of the word "now" points, interestingly, to the fact that up until this point Bonhoeffer had always seen the sufferings of God's servant as accomplished on the cross of Golgotha. See 481. f.50

¹²⁰ Ibid., 481.

and involves one's whole life. Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life. But what is this life like? this life of participating in God's powerlessness in the world?"¹²¹

Then, in a "promise" reminiscent of an earlier undertaking he writes "I'll write about this next time, I hope".¹²² And this time he did – on July 21st concluding with these words;

How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one's failures when one shares in God's suffering in the life of this world?...I am grateful that I have been allowed this insight, and I know that it is only on the path that I have finally taken that I was able to learn this. So I am thinking gratefully and with peace of mind about past as well as present things.¹²³

The church takes on the form of the suffering servant who is the Lord of all

When life is lived on the cusp of the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection, one shares in God's suffering in the life of this world. This is the hermeneutic that shapes Bonhoeffer's church in the *Prison Letters* and the church now takes on a startling new clarity: the church itself takes on the form of the rejected, suffering servant who is the Lord of all.

This is neither a new nor an unfamiliar motif. It had been embedded within *Sanctorum Communio* in Bonhoeffer's understanding of vicarious representative action¹²⁴ and in the concept of the neighbour as the "suffering other for whom Christians must care and whom they must defend"¹²⁵ and as importantly, in his 'practical theology' from as early as January 1933, the installation date of Adolf Hitler as the Reich Chancellor. Eberhard Bethge reports that this 'political turning point force(d) Bonhoeffer's life onto a different course.' Without any change in his personal convictions or his theology it became clear to Bonhoeffer that "academic discussion must give way to action. It was imperative to

¹²¹ Ibid., 482.

¹²² Ibid., 482.

¹²³ Ibid., 486.

¹²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 155.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 179f and 304.

relinquish the shelter and privilege of the academic rostrum, as well as the protected ‘rights and duties of the ministry’, if the power of weakness were to be credible.”¹²⁶

It was in *Discipleship* that Bonhoeffer began to speak openly about the shape of the church as that of the suffering Jesus Christ. Starting with the Apostle Paul’s injunction to “be transformed into a new form (μεταμορφωσθε) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom 12:2), Bonhoeffer points to this form which is solely to be determined by Christ, since

...the community of Christ has a ‘form’ that is different from that of the world. The community is called to be ever increasingly transformed into this form. It is, in fact, the form of Christ himself. He came into the world and in infinite mercy bore us and accepted us. And yet he did not become conformed to the world but was actually rejected and cast out by it. He was not of this world. If it engages the world properly, the visible church-community will always more closely assume the form of its suffering Lord.¹²⁷

The church, like its Lord who suffered, will overcome the world, not by ridding it of evil, but by being transformed into the form of the suffering servant-Lord. I do wonder what this means for the church in Aotearoa New Zealand at the end of the first decade of our 21st century. The questions are: Is the visibility of the church and the space it occupies as important an issue today as it was for Bonhoeffer?” and is this “certain form” Bonhoeffer proposes, the form of the suffering servant, still a valid form for the shape of the church today?” or is the *theologia crucis*, as Robert Kelly wonders, “an artefact of the past without any value for contemporary theology or church?”¹²⁸

Bonhoeffer’s question was: “How does the Christian community live when it is constantly threatened with state programmes designed to destroy the uniqueness of the church”? while the question we ask is a different one: “How does the Christian community live with the paralysing indifference of the society in which it is embedded?” I suspect that for Bonhoeffer, however, these two questions share a common reference point: In *Life Together* it is expressed like this, “How does the Christian community live faced with any

¹²⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 258.

¹²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 247.

¹²⁸ See Robert A. Kelly, “The Suffering Church: A Study of Luther’s *Theologia Crucis*,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, no. 50 (1986).

society “which [does] not allow any decisive significance to be attached to questions about God and truth”?¹²⁹

In *The House Where God Lives*, Gary Badcock makes the point that discussions about the church as the Body of Christ lend themselves to the glorification of the ecclesial body. But, he argues, when we take the Gospel texts which indicate that the “risen Lord of the Gospels bears on his body the marks of his crucifixion (Luke 24:40; John 20:27) and that the vision of the exalted Christ, whose body the church is elsewhere said to be, is described in the Apocalypse as ‘a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered’ (Rev 5:6)...there should be no bypassing the reality of suffering in ecclesiology. The pattern of life into which the church is baptised is a cruciform one.”¹³⁰

In the relative comfort and sufficiency of the First World, most of us know about the suffering to which Bonhoeffer is pointing only in, what Badcock calls, “folkloric ways”.¹³¹ By 1937 when the Finkenwalde seminary was closed by the Gestapo, Bonhoeffer was living right on the edges of it and following his return from the USA in 1939 he would be plunged headlong into uncertainty and eventual suffering. Badcock suggests that “because of (the church’s) wealth, it has little to hope for...Only those who suffer persecution can understand what it means to yearn for a future of God’s making.”¹³²

Not surprisingly, suffering is not a particularly attractive option. Martin Luther argued that at the very least, suffering was to be regarded as one of the most important marks of the true church:

They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world and the flesh...by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to be like their head, Christ...they must be called heretics, knaves, and devils, the most pernicious people on earth, to the point where those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish, and plague them to death are rendering to God a service...because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God.¹³³

¹²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 126.

¹³⁰ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 104.

¹³¹ Ibid., 102.

¹³² Ibid., 103.

¹³³ Ibid.

But as Badcock notes, this was “too strong a meat for the Reformation movement to take in and digest. In the end, it was true preaching and right administration of the sacraments that came to be codified as the functional marks that distinguished the true church from the false.”¹³⁴ In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer would go on to propose that whatever else suffering means it is that the church should be found in the brokenness and godlessness of the world and that this would mark it as the true church.

In *Between Cross and Resurrection. A Theology of Holy Saturday*¹³⁵ Alan Lewis argues that the church must be found in the godless places and spaces since that is where the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ went; specifically he wonders what the space between the cross and the grave has to teach the church and wonders how the church must die for the sake of the Gospel. In commenting on this, Badcock notes that Lewis wants the experience of the church in the west to be properly understood and given its proper name so that we might be able “to see that in this name lies the key to understanding who and what we are as the body of Christ at this point in our history. This name of course is Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, whose broken body the church shares.”¹³⁶

Alan Lewis’ conclusion to his belief that something in the church must die for the sake of the Gospel is that

Christ’s way to the fulfilment of his lordship leads through the servanthood and emptiness which culminate in Joseph’s tomb. Death and burial are antecedent to his victory and glory. But, by contrast, the church has already had its triumphal history, its long, but passing, epoch of grandeur and prestige, its generations of clerical ministers vested with power and crowned to greater or lesser degrees with superiority, dominance, and glory. The way for us forward now, in our Easter Saturday world, can only be a way back, a return to the cross, from power to service, from glory to self-giving, from governance to freedom and to sharing, the authority that comes from embracing suffering and service rather than evading it or consigning it to other people’s shoulders. This reversionary, ecclesial pilgrimage, back from resurrection glory to the cross and its humility, must pass through the same grave of Jesus Christ on Easter Saturday, except that now in this reversal of his history interment and crucifixion are the antecedents of humility and service.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹³⁵ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection. A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

¹³⁶ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 108.

¹³⁷ Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection. A Theology of Holy Saturday*, 367-69.

It is sobering to read Lewis as if it were an interpretation of Bonhoeffer's life. It captures in a succinct and powerful way the essence of almost everything Bonhoeffer wrote and it would not be out of place in *Discipleship* or the *Prison Letters*. It is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's "Outline for a Book"¹³⁸ and in particular his proposed Chapter Three about the church. Bonhoeffer's whole orientation to life in Christ is captured in these words "The way forward...can only be a way back, a return to the cross...to service...to self-giving...to freedom and to sharing" and an acceptance of the "authority that comes from embracing suffering and service." This "reversionary, ecclesial pilgrimage from resurrection glory back to the cross and its humility" was the journey that Bonhoeffer invited the church to join him on.

These thoughts that are captured somewhat in prayer in the Eucharistic Liturgy of *A New Zealand Prayer Book*.

Jesus, Son of God, our true and only Saviour:
 You died on the cross, a criminal under a curse;
 You are God who forgives.
 You died helpless, a failure and in pain.
 You are God with whom there is hope;
 you showed us the greatest love there is;
 for you died for us with the passover lambs.

Help us to forgive as you have forgiven us.
 Help us to trust you, even when hope is failing.
 Help us, if we are called to suffer,
 To take up your cross
 And to follow you in your redeeming work.¹³⁹

Personhood

It has been interesting to note that Bonhoeffer eschews the use of the word "identity" in reference to the people of God. Instead, from the opening chapters of *Sanctorum Communio*, his use of the word "person" and the cognate "personhood" captures the theological dimension of being in a way that the consumer-focussed notion of identity could never accomplish. In the Berlin Christology lectures of 1933, Bonhoeffer makes the

¹³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 499-504.

¹³⁹ *A New Zealand Prayer Book. He Karakia Mihinare O Aotearoa*. Auckland: William Collins Publishers Ltd., 1989. 534-35.

point that the personal structure of being is made complete only in Jesus Christ. Those who believe and obediently follow Jesus, are pulled into the reshaping experience of Jesus' death and resurrection and their new awareness of personhood is nurtured and matures within the church-community. Here, where God's economy of grace abounds, personhood is redeemed. Here, life is lived the way it was meant to be. Here, within the space of the church, we know and are caught up into "the enactment of God's purpose to sustain humanity".¹⁴⁰

At first glance, Bonhoeffer's profound poem "Who am I?",¹⁴¹ might be thought of as an attempt to plumb the psychological depths of his own self while under the pressures of imprisonment; it is in fact a profound statement about the "redemption of the ego",¹⁴² the point one reaches when one's self is "thrown away...and sacrificed "without any consideration of itself"; here it is redeemed in the midst of the world "through beholding God's singular goodness."¹⁴³ It is a grateful declaration as to how an utterly human person has been found by God and in this act has found himself.

WHO AM I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I step out from my cell
calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me
I speak with my guards
freely, friendly, and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.

¹⁴⁰ John Webster, "The Human Person," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 224.

¹⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 459-60.

¹⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 534. A phrase used by Bonhoeffer in a sermon delivered in Madrid on October 21, 1928 on the twentieth Sunday after Trinity. The text was Luke 17:33. "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it."

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 534-35.

Am I really what others say of me?
 Or am I only what I know of myself?
 Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
 struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled,
 starving for colours, for flowers, for birdsong,
 thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
 shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
 tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
 helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
 too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
 weary and ready to take my leave of it all?

Who am I? This one or the other?
 Am I this one today and tomorrow another?
 Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite
 and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?
 Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
 Fleeing in disarray from victory already won?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
 Whoever I am, thou knowest me: O God, I am thine!

Several points need to be made about Bonhoeffer's anguished confession of faith. Brian Rosner¹⁴⁴ suggests that Bonhoeffer stands in a long tradition of faithful people for whom being known by God in Christ represents the only hope one can hold to with any certainty and at the same time have confidence in knowing who they are. To be known by God "as one standing in grace",¹⁴⁵ effects a fundamental shift in the nature of being, and it was upon this radical position that Bonhoeffer built his understanding of personhood.

As importantly, this was not a new theological insight for Bonhoeffer. Though now in prison, Bonhoeffer's confession is hardly academic. Rosner's suggestion is that

It is uttered in the midst of intense longing, confusion and suffering. Like an Old Testament psalm of lament, the poem includes 'the sustained interrogative, the optative yearning, the imperative responsibilities...[but closes with] the final vocative of faith'. In short, 'Du kennst mich' brings light to Bonhoeffer's dark night of despair.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Brian S. Rosner, "Known by God: C.S.Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Evangelical Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2005): 343-52.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

“Dark night of despair” or the final act in a struggle to give up any attempt to redeem his own ego, Bonhoeffer knew that to be forgiven and restored to the place where he knew that God knew exactly who he was, was the only place where he might stand in sure and certain hope and to be crafted as a fully human person.

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer had already outlined humankind’s desperate search for knowledge, including the search for an answer to the question “Who am I”. This was posed as the Delphic oracle’s injunction to “Know thyself”. Concluding that “the thinking and philosophizing of human beings in sin is self-glorifying, even when it seeks to be self-critical or to become ‘critical philosophy’”¹⁴⁷ and in a world in which human beings in Adam are pushed to the limits of their solitude, a world in which “...the cries of conscience...ring without echo in the world that the self rules and explains”, men and women “seek themselves in themselves”.¹⁴⁸ This phrase is referenced back to Martin Luther’s 1519 sermon “A Sermon on Preparing to Die” in which Luther writes “Search for yourself only in Christ and not in yourself, and you shall find yourself for ever in him.”¹⁴⁹

Bonhoeffer continues, stating that our knowledge of ourselves is imprisoned in untruth:

To be placed into truth before God means to be dead or to live; neither of these can human beings give themselves. They are conferred on them only by the encounter with Christ in *contritio passiva* and faith. Only when Christ has broken through the solitude of human beings will they know themselves placed into truth. It matters not whether, in the offense that the cross causes the sinner, human beings die forever and remain in solitude, or whether they die in order to live with Christ in the truth (for die they must, as Christ died). In both cases, true knowledge of themselves is given here only through Christ.¹⁵⁰

Both *Act and Being* and “Who am I?” were written in Berlin in circumstances that could hardly have been more different. It is clear that between the winter of 1930 (*Act and Being*) and the summer of 1944 (“Who am I?”), Bonhoeffer’s position regarding personhood being complete only in Christ remained essentially unchanged. And although much of what he wrote, especially in *Life Together* and in many of the prison letters, looks at first like an attempt to explore the psychology of the self, he keeps himself under a strictly imposed rule to stay within the bounds of a theological and thus Christological articulation

¹⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, 138.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 139.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 139. f.4 and [8].

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 141.

of personhood. Personhood, redeemed and complete in Christ is a rich blend of personal commitment in discipleship, commitment to one's brothers and sisters in Christ in the community of the redeemed in whose company personhood itself is validated and the continuity of an individual's existence guaranteed in Christ,¹⁵¹ commitment to a boldness and risk-taking in ethicality,¹⁵² and commitment to true worldliness.

Charles Marsh has argued that Bonhoeffer's understanding of the self, set as it is within a "Christological description of life with others offers a compelling and unexpectedly rich alternative to post-Kantian models of selfhood", that is, to any model of selfhood that places the self at the centre of relations with others.¹⁵³ How are we to understand selfhood in such a way that it does justice to the "logic of Christology" as proposed by Bonhoeffer,¹⁵⁴ a question that brings us to "Bonhoeffer's conception of the new being in Christ."¹⁵⁵ Marsh's conclusion is that persons of faith are "reconfigured" in Christ in such a way that breaks wide open any narrowly conceived understanding of conversion: "Metanoia" he suggests,

is not an activity that occurs within the cycles of the ego but a gracious miracle energizing the person (in the words of the prison writings) to be 'caught up into' the messianic event of life together...in table fellowship with strangers, in attending to the sick, in fellowship with the weak and the suffering – in gathering with the ones outside...In the end, the place of the Christological relation and the source of the self converge in the 'being there for others.'¹⁵⁶

For it is in the "being-there", as Rasmussen points out, that we locate the "essence of Christ's personhood."¹⁵⁷ "The self" as Marsh explains, "becomes itself in Christ...in life for and with others, the person becomes what he or she is intended to be by becoming more than what he or she is in overabundant love."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, 407.

¹⁵² One is reminded of Luther's "Be then a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice still more boldly in Christ, who is victor over sin, death, and the world." Cited by the editor in *Act and Being*, 123. f.65

¹⁵³ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, vii.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 78. Marsh points to the distinction between the way Hegel formulated the relation between God, world, self and other as self-mediated, while Bonhoeffer "redescribed...human sociality as Christ-mediated".

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁵⁷ Rasmussen, "The Ethics of Responsible Action," 216. The reference here is to Bonhoeffer's contention that Christ is here as the Centre of our existence, as the Centre of history, and as the Centre of nature. See Bonhoeffer. *Berlin 1932-1933*, 324-327.

¹⁵⁸ Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Promise of His Theology*, 151.

Chapter Six

Living 'upright in the unsteady space between lost certainties and unknown futures'¹⁵⁹

'...an absolutely grounded hope...for life'¹⁶⁰

Towards the end of July 1944 as the allied bombs dropped closer to Tegel Prison than ever before, their thudding causing the earth to twist and shake violently, Bonhoeffer reported to Eberhard Bethge that he had just finished reading Dostoyevsky's *Memoiren aus dem Totenhaus* (*Memories from the House of the Dead*), a book that, he said, was full of great and wise things.

I am still preoccupied with the claim - which with (Dostoyevsky) is certainly no cliché - that no person can live without hope, and that people who have really lost all hope often become wild and evil. This leaves open the question whether hope in this case equals illusion. Certainly the significance of illusion for life is not to be underestimated, but for the Christian I think the only important thing is to have well-founded hope. And if even illusion has sufficient power in people's lives to make life go on, how great, then, is the power that an absolutely grounded hope has for life, and how invincible such a life is. 'Christ, our Hope'¹⁶¹ – this formula of Paul's is the strength of our life.¹⁶²

A hope for life, well-founded and absolutely grounded is to be found "in Christ". Written amongst the falling bombs, Bonhoeffer knew this was no illusion and although the "Christ, our Hope" formula was addressed to Timothy, Bonhoeffer knew well enough that the epistle is directed to the church-community. "Christ, our Hope" then becomes the church's grounding formula.

¹⁵⁹ Rasmussen, "The Ethics of Responsible Action," 206.

¹⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 488. (Letter to Eberhard Bethge dated July 25, 1944).

¹⁶¹ The reference is to 1 Tim 1:1.

¹⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* 488.

I suggested in the Introduction that Bonhoeffer's life was given over to the search for a trustworthy and contributing Christian presence in the world, a Christian *turangawaewae* as the stable place in a shaking and shifting world where Christians find ground that does not move beneath their feet, this community with a Christological core and a communal structure, the first-fruits of a new order inaugurated by Jesus Christ, where Christ's people might engage in the ministry of rebuilding the waste places and healing the broken-hearted.

It will be recalled that Bethge appears to be strangely critical of Bonhoeffer's efforts to articulate and manage this *turangawaewae* into existence, saying openly that at the end Bonhoeffer had failed. But to wonder if he failed or succeeded may be unhelpful, for Bonhoeffer was not particularly concerned about success or failure in themselves.

His interest was in the crucified Christ who

disarms all thinking aimed at success, for it is a denial of judgement. Neither the triumph of the successful, nor bitter hatred of the successful by those who fail, can finally cope with the world. Jesus is certainly no advocate for the successful in history, but neither does he lead the revolt of the failures [gescheiterte Existenzen] against the successful. His concern is neither success nor failure but willing acceptance of the judgement of God. Only in judgement is there reconciliation with God and among human beings.¹⁶³

What permits both those who are successful and those who are unsuccessful to stand before God is their acceptance of the divine judgement since "only in the cross of Christ, and that means as judged, does humanity take on its true form."¹⁶⁴ So it is that in the suffering of God's church-community the failure and success of Christ repeats itself. The church once again becomes the grand statement and sign of God's redeemed community.

It has become clear that Bonhoeffer's use of the spatial images to delineate and interpret the church serves a number of functions; the images enhance the process of theological reflection by contributing a peculiarly dynamic and generous character to the way faith describes, reflects upon and confesses its understanding of the church; the images furnish a shape for the church of God's heart and the local empirical church, and by extension they confer a unique way of being upon the people of God. Bonhoeffer used the spatial imagery with functional and pastoral intent to describe and define a distinctive people in order to

¹⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 90.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

ensure that their corporate gathering in the *Gemeinde* was well-structured theologically and that this gathering occupied a well-shaped space in the world. While it is impossible to know exactly why Bonhoeffer anchored his ecclesiology in the spatially referenced metaphors, it was a felicitous move, since it allowed Bonhoeffer the room he needed to move in order to develop his theological constructions about the church and its life during the chaos of the Nazi Reich.

Bonhoeffer's church

Structuring the confession of Christ's presence

It will be recalled that John Godsey suggested that, in his attempt to recapture the Reformation understanding of revelation in a way that did justice to the issue of faith and community, and in such a way that was neither individualistic nor abstract, Bonhoeffer bound revelation to the church because “revelation has a spatial component as well as a temporal one.”¹⁶⁵ In binding it to the church he also attributed to revelation a corporate dimension.

In addition, Bonhoeffer created his starting point which was that the concept of religious community would never explain the concept of church, which could “only be reached where the Christian revelation is believed, that is, taken seriously.”¹⁶⁶ John Phillips is correct when he insists that Bonhoeffer's intention was to “liberate a genuinely theological concept of the church”¹⁶⁷ since he recognised that general theories of community could in no way “determine the content of the doctrine of the church.”¹⁶⁸ His way of liberating a genuinely theological concept of the church was to make use of spatial metaphors that gave him room to move as he delineated a church in sharp contrast to the shrinking and restrictive modes of acting and being that existed within Germany and especially the Reich Church.

It was Bonhoeffer's passionate intent to provide a shape and a form for the church that stood over against the Reich. The Declarations of Barmen in May 1934 and Dahlem in

¹⁶⁵ Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 15.

¹⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 133. f.23.

¹⁶⁷ Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 38.

¹⁶⁸ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 181.

October the same year eventually constituted the Confessing Church. Clause One of the Barmen Declaration, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death”, became the call to a resistance against the theological claims of the Nazi state which, amongst other things, included practice of the *Führerprinzip*. The Barmen Declaration challenged the *Führerprinzip* head-on and the church that Bonhoeffer depicted bore the marks of a sociality shaped by self-sacrificial and self-giving love and eventual crucifixion. Such is the outcome for the church, this “*congregatio fidelium*,... [this] authentic community that confess Jesus Christ alone as Lord”,¹⁶⁹ when it confronts any unyielding and unforgiving lord or *Führer*.

Bonhoeffer’s intent to provide a shape for the church was driven by his desire to see the church live faithfully. But how could it do that if it had been “evacuated of theological substance”,¹⁷⁰ the phrase used by Gary Badcock when he proposes that it is never the case that the church needs to be made relevant, nor does it “need to be made to serve this or that contemporary cause”.¹⁷¹ But this, of course, is exactly what Bonhoeffer observed when he looked at the Reich Church; a church serving the cause of the Reich which he could see, almost as if by instinct or so it seems, was absolute folly. Humankind, caught up in its own destructive inner logic would always bring catastrophe upon itself. Hence his belief in the absoluteness of the God who speaks from outside humankind’s inner logic.

From the beginning Bonhoeffer construed the church as a discrete and bounded association of people whose lives are taking on the texture and shape of Jesus Christ. In the tradition of the Reformation, Bonhoeffer had claimed a Christological centre for the church and described it as the place where reality is re-formed and re-structured in Jesus Christ; or to use André Dumas’ useful and pithy construction, the church is that space “where the world is formed in Christ and where Christ is formed in the world”.¹⁷² It is the place of reconciliation and the place “where testimony is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ”.¹⁷³ It is that part of humanity in which Christ has taken shape and form: put

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 335.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 94.

¹⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 202.

simply, the church is the renewed form of humanity. The church as an historical event in its particularity is visible, empirical and concrete, and as an eschatological event has theological shape in the merciful electing, choosing, and redemption of God and in God's gracious purposes. The church as the community of reconstructed humanity is the way the world is meant to be. "Overflowing from the heart of God, the church is reality as restructured in Jesus Christ...[who] *is himself* the church at the heart of reality, broken on the Cross where the reality of every human disruption is objectively present, and then rebuilt at Easter where the universe is reconstituted."¹⁷⁴ The church is restructured reality, that community where a reconstruction of torn apart humanity takes place in the new life shaped by Christ in the church-community.

It has been argued that Bonhoeffer's use of the spatial images or metaphors throughout his corpus establishes and strengthens the identity of the church. Put simply, the church has boundary, shape and substance in its historicity and concreteness, and profound theological shape and identity in its eschatological being. All the while, the spatial images set a course for the possibility of a dramatically re-shaped church in the form of the *theologia crucis* of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Bonhoeffer's first use of a spatial metaphor succinctly captures both a new way of knowing and a new way of behaving within and amongst the people of God; the *barrier* is the theological metaphor used to represent a moment in time, or perhaps more accurately, *the* moment in time, when a person stands over against me, and I, in my separateness and individuality become acutely aware of and recognise obligation to the other in a self-giving, responsible way. Only the *barrier* makes it possible to see the other as he or she really is and to respond to the other's deepest need.

The use of *barrier* proves to be extremely important in Bonhoeffer's unfolding approach to epistemology since he argues that it is only in responding to the other's deepest need that we can make the claim that we "know" an-other. For Bonhoeffer maintained that "epistemology constantly intruded into the primacy of ethics, (and that) we will never get to the reality of the other by way of metaphysics or epistemology."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 91.

¹⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 47.

More recently, N. T. Wright¹⁷⁶ has made a similar case arguing in much the same way:

...Jesus calls his followers to a new mode of *knowing*. I have written elsewhere about what I have called an epistemology of love. We have traditionally thought of knowing in terms of subject and object, and have struggled to attain objectivity by detaching our subjectivity. It can't be done, and one of the achievements of postmodernity is to demonstrate that. What we are called to, and what in the resurrection we are equipped for, is a knowing in which we are involved as *subjects but as self-giving, not as self-seeking, subjects*: in other words, a knowing which is a form of love...in the resurrection one is given the beginning of a new knowing, a new epistemology, a new coming-to-speech, the Word born afresh after the death of all human knowing and speech, all human hope and love, after the silent rest of the seventh-day sabbatical in the tomb.¹⁷⁷

As an ontic-ethical category, the *barrier* secures a social order that is neither exploitative nor disinterested. It does this by forcing on us an awareness of the other as distinct and separate, a situation that may breed isolation, a possibility that is overcome in the concept of the church. In developing the I-thou dynamic in which the other is seen and recognised and a true boundary established for the 'I', ethical transcendence is established as the real transcendence.¹⁷⁸

This social order secured by the barrier finds its origins in Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* and lectures on Christology which tell a big story ranging from the pre-history of beginnings to the person of Christ existing *pro-me*. The groundwork for Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is worked out in his focus on the primal human community. Into the act of creation in which the man is free to worship the Creator and free for the other, Bonhoeffer introduces the concept of the *imago dei* as an image of the relationship between people that will be the basis for behaviour within a new community. The arrival of the partner-woman who brings with her "the power of the other" places the man in a position from within which he is reminded constantly of his limits: the unmediated relationship in which person faces person becomes a battleground for survival as the relationship swings between life and death, love and hate, community and isolation. Bonhoeffer will address this issue in

¹⁷⁶ In the following quote N. T. Wright refers to what he calls "a new mode of knowing...an epistemology of love." In "The James Gregory Lecture" delivered at St Andrews in December 2007. Wright refers additionally to an epistemology of faith and an epistemology of hope. These are both ways of knowing unique to the community of God's people. (http://www.jamesgregory.org/downloads/Tom_Wright/lecture/Tom_Wright_Lecture.pdf Accessed 25 April 2011.)

¹⁷⁷ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 251-53.

¹⁷⁸ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, See 61-62.

more detail in *Life Together* where he addresses the intact community of the church where relationships mediated by Jesus Christ put the other first, maintaining an ethicality that drives the life of that community. The tree of life at the base of which the man stumbled and fell, becomes the tree of life upon which Jesus dies and from which Christ gifts life back to community just as the tree had originally promised to give life to community.

Bonhoeffer's interest in these chapters was to ensure that the space men and women occupied was that space of community created, preserved and re-created by Jesus Christ. By taking and using the images of spatiality, Bonhoeffer has given serious theological consideration to the structure, shape, form, boundaries and life within the church-community. Jesus gave a new form and shape, a new structure and meaning to life. The form is that of the suffering servant and the shape that of the crucified Messiah standing in the place of another: while life is structured with Christ at the centre which imparts the meaning of one who is there-for-the-other. This reality of Christ's presence is never contested by Bonhoeffer. Christ is present in the Church through his *pro-me* structure and consequently, standing in my place, "He is there for his brothers and sisters in that he stands in their stead...If this is so, then he *is* the new humanity."¹⁷⁹

Boundary is the complex theological category that ensures and protects personhood, identity, individuality and community. *Boundary* takes on an even more profound meaning when Bonhoeffer proposes that Christ *is* the boundary between two realities; one, a world of illusion in which our "I", the essence of our being, is trapped within the heart turned inwards upon itself, and the other, the world of reality in which our "I" is set free into a world where Christ is not only *boundary* but has become the redemptive *centre as* the structure and form that gives life reality. This structure and form is embodied in the church.

The Barmen Declaration of May 1934 fearlessly attributed a structural sense to the concept of the *boundary* imparting the idea of a line that marks a covenantal relationship. In addition, the Second Confessing Synod of Berlin-Dahlem in October 1934 "challenged the authority and legitimacy of both the Reich Church and the German Christian movement and proclaimed itself the only legitimate Protestant Church",¹⁸⁰ drawing this "structural"

¹⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, 315.

¹⁸⁰ http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1569. (Accessed 20 April 2011)

boundary even more firmly. But even when used structurally, Bonhoeffer still infuses theological meaning into the word. He reminded the students at Finkenwalde that “The boundaries of the church are not the boundaries of privilege, but those of God’s merciful selection and call”,¹⁸¹ thus framing Christian being and personhood as that which is brought into being, through the new existence in Christ.

I regard *Lebensraum* as one of Bonhoeffer’s boldest spatial references. The call for *space* in which *to live* and *to be* the church, grafted to the call of radical obedience to Jesus, became a most significant spatial metaphor during the *Kirchenkampf*, culminating in what Phillips calls “the perfect statement of the apocalyptic vision which underlay Bonhoeffer’s position concerning the church’s ‘claim to space’ during the church struggle... ‘When the Christian community has been deprived of their last inch of space on the earth, the end will be near.’”¹⁸²

Lebensraum implies substantial and visible spaces that are required out of which the church might proclaim its gospel, worship its Lord, and order and live out its life. Here the eschatological community takes shape and, in the words of Peter Brunner, Bonhoeffer’s contemporary, “delineate itself in a first outline in the struggling and suffering church.”¹⁸³ This is “where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ...(and the space) in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed.”¹⁸⁴ Without such visible spaces the church runs the risk of spiritualizing Christ and “devaluing itself into a purely spiritual entity”.¹⁸⁵

It is the dramatic “last inch of space” declaration that points towards the increasing ambiguity yet surprisingly uncomplicated core idea embedded in Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology that challenges us when we move to the *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Bonhoeffer points to this community of Christ shaped by a form “closely assuming (that)...of its suffering Lord...If it engages the world properly, the visible church-community will always more closely assume the form of its suffering Lord.”¹⁸⁶ In this

¹⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 179.

¹⁸² Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 126.

¹⁸³ Yeago, "The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology," 224.

¹⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 247-8.

comment Bonhoeffer gives an indication of the emphasis that he will place on the church as he increasingly shapes it towards the *theologia crucis*.

It is Bernhard Lohse who points to Martin Luther's 1518 theses for the Heidelberg Disputation for a clear meaning of *theologia crucis*.¹⁸⁷ Lohse quotes Luther; "He deserves to be called a theologian...who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross...A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is...That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded and hardened."¹⁸⁸ Lohse makes two points in regard to the *theologia crucis*: First, the *theologia crucis* "holds solely to the cross, where God both hides and reveals himself",¹⁸⁹ which is the only way to a profoundly truthful and certain knowledge about God and humankind; and second, the *theologia crucis* is not to be seen as opposed to a theology of the resurrection, which for Luther was "bound inseparably with the cross".¹⁹⁰ A theology of the resurrection complements a theology of the cross.

The church is about to be referenced to the form of the suffering servant. It will take the form of the suffering church transformed by Christ at the centre where "self-giving love (is) made possible by and patterned on the suffering Messiah."¹⁹¹ The energy and dynamism implicit in spatiality is now liberated to carry the church to the only place where it might be re-shaped, re-formed, perhaps even resurrected.

It was Catholic theologian, William Kuhns who proposed that

In the light of the church-world thought of the *Ethics*, it becomes clear that the Church took on for Bonhoeffer not simply a fresh doctrinal formulation, but an entirely new meaning. The traditional notions of the Church, as a fortress of the faithful protesting against the world's onslaughts, as a gathering of Christians to pray and share in a 'religious' experience, or even as the place where the Word is preached and sacraments offered to men - all these interpretations lacked the one life-giving power: bearing Christ's commitment to the world. Bonhoeffer turned the idea of the church inside out. In doing so, he restored to

¹⁸⁷ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development*, Chapter Five "The Uniqueness of Luther's Theology" 35-41.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 71.

it much of the vitality and social concern absent from ecclesiology for centuries.¹⁹²

It is this turning of “the idea of the church inside out” that had also led Bonhoeffer to listen very carefully to the aging Karl Holl, who had offered his Luther seminars during the early years of Bonhoeffer’s Berlin studies. Holl had said then that “if Luther’s theology of church was to have any meaning in the light of God’s Word, then confession of faith in the presence of Jesus Christ and the community’s structuring of that confessed presence had to be integrated.”¹⁹³ It became Bonhoeffer’s deeply held belief that the manner in which the church structured its confession of Christ’s presence was the most significant project in which it could ever be immersed. And it is precisely this structuring of the confession of Christ’s presence that has produced the rich vein of ecclesiology that can be now be mined in the Bonhoeffer literature.

When considering Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, the formative and shaping experiences of his trip to Rome as an eighteen year old must not be overlooked. For it was here, in the spaciousness of the churches of Rome, offering a sense of the ethereal that a wonder and a sense of the holy was provoked. His profound experience of Evensong in the Trinita dei Monti on Palm Sunday will be recalled. He wrote that it was “...almost indescribable...with unbelievable simplicity, grace and great seriousness, 40 young girls who wanted to become nuns sang evensong...every trace of routine was missing. The ritual...was worship in the true sense. The whole thing gave one an unparalleled impression of profound, guileless piety...It was the first day on which something of the reality of Catholicism began to dawn on me...I think I’m beginning to understand the concept of ‘church’.”¹⁹⁴

It is impossible, to imagine that this sort of experience did not imbue his dissertations and later writings with a rich substrate of longing for the reality of God that lies behind the words. Indeed, once we sense the urgency of *Discipleship* and the wisdom of *Life Together*, the profundity of the *Ethics* and the genuine searching of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, we can see and feel the richness of an ecclesiology that represents both a

¹⁹² Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 156.

¹⁹³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 7.

¹⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, 88-89.

genuine conversation between himself and the world and the church, and a passionate offering of himself to the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ.

In what may be one of the highest tributes paid to Bonhoeffer regarding his use of spatial imagery, John Webster proposes that

Bonhoeffer's use of spatial imagery is especially significant: in its acts of proclamation, sacrament and order, the church assumes a specific set of contours, and so claims a particular territory. The church's authority in the world, its representation of a commendable mode of human existence, does not take the form of a doctrine only but of a communal enactment in space, what Bonhoeffer calls (pointedly) 'the living-space [*Lebensraum*] of the visible church-community'...Whereas for most of his contemporary Lutherans, Christian difference was radically internalized, for Bonhoeffer the church's public, territorial character is essential to its witness, for in its visibility before the world, the church 'gains space for Christ'.¹⁹⁵

The spatial images establish a specific set of contours and claim a particular territory for the church of Jesus Christ and within that particular territory marked out by these contours the church represents a commendable mode of human existence which is enacted communally within the *Lebensraum* of the visible church community. In this way the church gains space for Christ. This is no outrageous claim. Nor is it a modest claim. It is simply a sober and a stunning affirmation of the reality of the *Gemeinde*, which is grounded in Jesus Christ and in the gracious electing mercies of God. This *Gemeinde* occupies the *Lebensraum* in which those who live as the redeemed and renewed humanity in Christ live "upright in the unsteady space between lost certainties and unknown futures"¹⁹⁶ as they "mak[e] Christological reality the centre of [their] very being...[and] maintain the full range of thought, action and meditation about the mystery of the incarnation that saves confession from being a series of worn-out platitudes, life from a barely-endured pragmatism, and piety from inner smugness."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," 176-77.

¹⁹⁶ Rasmussen, "The Ethics of Responsible Action," 206.

¹⁹⁷ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian of Reality*, 16.

It is fitting to conclude with the words of Gary Badcock, used in the introduction. It will be recalled that Badcock held forth “the possibility of a rerooting of the church itself - and our thinking about it – in its true sources.”¹⁹⁸ Today, looking around, Badcock notes that “much of what calls itself the church has been so evacuated of theological substance”¹⁹⁹ that it has nothing to offer the secular world in which it is embedded. The church is “fundamentally a mystery of Christian faith: before all else, it is something biblical and creedal, something that ‘we believe’, and only as such is the empirical or sociological or even pastoral existence and function of the church also something of theological interest.”²⁰⁰

I suggested in the Introduction that Bonhoeffer would have resonated with these observations, based on his own assessment of the German church in the years before the war. Looking at the church today, he might very well have exactly the same thoughts since in many ways the church is hollowed out or “evacuated of theological substance”. Bonhoeffer also knew that the church was not a community of the sort that needed to be made relevant nor made to serve any contemporary cause since it carries within its own life its very own logic of meaning and being. That logic is that it is the community that bears witness to God’s drama of creation, salvation, and redemption and lives to tell that story from within its own life – the life of restored and reconstructed humanity.

This takes us right back to the beginning. Bonhoeffer had not yet reached the end of the first, short introductory chapter of *Sanctorum Communio* when he declares openly his vantage point: “...our purpose is to understand the structure of the given reality of a church of Christ, as revealed in Christ, from the perspective of social philosophy and sociology.”²⁰¹ But then from deep inside him comes his unerring, apparently intuitive commitment to something bigger than the pursuit of truth based solely upon the canons of current epistemology. “But the nature of the church can only be understood from within, *cum ira et studio* [*with* passionate zeal], never by non-participants. Only those who take the claim of the church seriously – not relativizing it in relation to other similar claims or their

¹⁹⁸ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives. Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 334.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

²⁰¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, 33.

own rationality, but viewing it from the standpoint of the gospel - can possibly glimpse something of its true nature”.²⁰²

Viewed from the standpoint of the gospel, Bonhoeffer glimpsed something of the church's true nature. It was astonishingly profound and exceedingly demanding. Jesus Christ, whom Bonhoeffer never divorced from the very being of the church, called for a radical obedience, even to suffering and death for the world. It was obedience to this Lord, the Lord of the church, that shaped the man and his life – Bonhoeffer, the passionate participant who strove to interpret the church to his people and reform it from the standpoint of the Gospel.

²⁰² Ibid.

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