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**Under the No and the Yes:
Navigating Christian Life with Bonhoeffer's
Christology, Ecclesiology, and Theological
Anthropology**



**Durham
University**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

Department of Theology and Religion

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Navigating Christian Life with Bonhoeffer's Christology, Ecclesiology,
and Theological Anthropology**

Abstract

This thesis considers a series of apparent problems in Bonhoeffer's depiction of Christian life, ranging from his description of Christian agency, to the visibility or invisibility of the church; from the nature and moral status of suffering, to the activity of prayer. It is my argument that the tensions in Bonhoeffer's presentation become understandable when placed within his Christologically rooted ecclesiology and theological anthropology.

According to Bonhoeffer, Christian life begins in an encounter with Christ, which appears as a divine No and a divine Yes. In Christ's No, the person's sinful self is judged and killed. But, within the No, Christ's Yes is simultaneously heard, releasing the person into new life in conformation with Christ. To be conformed with Christ is precisely to become free to be oneself in the world and enter Christ's church community. The free person exists only in the church community, and the church community only in persons who have been encountered by Christ, with Christian freedom being constituted in responsibility for others. As Christ is free for the world, the Christian is made free for others. Encounter with Christ does not occur once and for all. Christian life is lived under the No and Yes, receiving the world, and all relations therein through a pattern of encounter and response to Christ's Divine word(s).

It is into this pattern of life that I will place the various tensions apparent in Bonhoeffer's corpus. My argument is that we can allow for variability in the freedom-for of Christian life, so long as it is unified by active discernment and acceptance of Christ's No (judging where one errs) and Yes (being re-conformed to one's personhood in Christ's freedom-for). Active discernment could more fully be defined as a life lived in prayerful response, which is where this thesis will conclude.

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Statement of Copyright

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List of Abbreviations

Throughout the thesis, I have cited the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English translation and the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke for all primary source material:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition in 16 volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996-2013).

- DBWE 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. by Clifford Green, trans. by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
- DBWE 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. by Hans-Richard Reuter and Wayne W. Floyd, trans. by Martin Rumscheidt, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
- DBWE 3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. by John W. De Gruchy, trans. by Douglas S. Bax, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 3, first paperback edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
- DBWE 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 4, first paperback edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
- DBWE 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. by Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. by Daniel W. Bloesch and James Harold Burtneiss, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 5, first paperback edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).
- DBWE 6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. by Clifford J. Green, trans. by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Scott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 6, first paperback edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).
- DBWE 7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Fiction from Tegel Prison*, ed. by Clifford Green, trans. by Nancy Lukens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 7 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).
- DBWE 8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. by John W. De Gruchy, trans. by Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
- DBWE 9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918-1927*, ed. by Clifford Green, Marshall D. Johnson and Paul Duane Matheny, trans. by Mary C. Nebelsick and Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 9 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).
- DBWE 10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931*, ed. by Clifford Green, trans. by Douglas W. Scott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 10 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
- DBWE 11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work, 1931-1932*, ed. by Victoria J. Barnett, Mark Brocker and Michael B. Lukens, trans. by Isabel Best, Nicholas S. Humphrey, Marion Pauck, Anne Schmidt-Lange and Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 11 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

- DBWE 12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin, 1932-1933*, ed. by Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. by Isabel Best, David Higgins and Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).
- DBWE 13 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1935*, ed. by Keith W. Clements, trans. by Isabel Best, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 13 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
- DBWE 14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935-1937*, ed. by H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Bocker, trans. by Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).
- DBWE 15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground, 1937-1940*, ed. by Victoria J. Barnett, trans. by Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick and Scott A. Moore, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).
- DBWE 16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945*, ed. by Mark S. Bocker, trans. by Lisa E. Dahill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke in 16 Bande (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1986-1998).

- DBW 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 1, Sanctorum Communio: Eine Dogmatische Untersuchung Zur Soziologie Der Kirche*, ed. by Joachim von Soosten (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1986).
- DBW 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 2, Akt und Sein: Transzendentalphilosophie Und Ontologie in Der Systematischen Theologie*, ed. by Hans-Richard Reuter (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1988).
- DBW 3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 3, Schöpfung Und Fall*, ed. by Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1989).
- DBW 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 4, Nachfolge*, ed. by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1989).
- DBW 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 5, Gemeinsames Leben; Das Gebethbuch der Bibel*, ed. by Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1987).
- DBW 6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 6, Ethik*, ed. by Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil and Clifford Green (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1992).
- DBW 7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 7, Fragmente Aus Tegel*, ed. by Renate Bethge and Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1994).
- DBW 8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 8, Widerstand Und Ergebung: Briefe Und Aufzeichnungen Aus Der Haft*, ed. by Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge and Renate Bethge (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1998).
- DBW 9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 9, Jugend und Studium 1918-1927*, ed. by Hans Pfeifer (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1986).

- DBW 10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 10, Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika 1928-1931*, ed. by Reinhart Staats and Hans von Hase (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1992).
- DBW 11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 11, Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931-1932*, ed. by Eberhard Amelung and Christoph Strohm (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus), 1994.
- DBW 12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 12, Berlin 1932-1932*, ed. by Carsten Nicolaisen and Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1997).
- DBW 13 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 13, London 1933-1935*, ed. by Hans Godeking, Martin Heimbucher, and Hans-Walter Schleicher (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1994).
- DBW 14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 14, Illegale Theologenausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935-1937*, ed. by Otto Dudzus and Jürgen Henkys (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1996).
- DBW 15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 15, Illegale Theologenausbildung: Sammelvikariate 1937-1940*, ed. by Dirk Schulz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998).
- DBW 16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 16, Konspiration Und Haft 1940-1945*, ed. by Jørgen Glenthøj, Ulrich Kabitz and Wolf Krötke (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1996).

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In the spirit of what is to come, I thank everyone who has been *free-for* me.

Dedication

*Dedicated to my grandmother, Daphne (Pat) Burden, who would be 'shouting from the rooftops'
with pride.*

Under the No and the Yes: Navigating Christian Life with Bonhoeffer's Christology, Ecclesiology and Theological Anthropology

Introduction

This thesis developed from an interest in a paradox Bonhoeffer draws attention to in *Life Together*. There, discussing the dynamics of Christian life, he writes,

We recognize, then, that only as we stand within the community can we be alone, and only those who are alone can live in the community. Both belong together. Only in the community do we learn to be properly alone [allein]; and only in being alone [Allensein] do we learn to live properly in the community. It is not as if the one preceded the other; rather both begin at the same time, namely, with the call of Jesus Christ.¹

Theological anthropology and ecclesiology are understood interrelatedly by Bonhoeffer, linked by his Christology. We learn to be alone (ourselves, as persons) through Christ's encounter with us. We learn to be in community (in the church, Christ's body) through Christ's encounter with us. The named tension here is that these events are *simultaneous*. We become ourselves, *as* we enter community; we enter community *as* we become ourselves; both occur as we are encountered by Christ's call. Ecclesiology and theological anthropology are therefore distinct but unified concepts for Bonhoeffer, held together by their relationship with Christ.

My argument is that it is by paying attention to the 'systematicity'² of Christology, ecclesiology and theological anthropology in Bonhoeffer's thought that can guide us in understanding the messiness involved in Christian living. I will explore how the interrelatedness of these theological concepts overcomes certain 'problems' arising in Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christian life. This will include taking up 'the movement of his thought in its entirety'³ in order to apply it to issues he does and does not explicitly address.⁴ Upon first reading the contents of

¹ DBWE 5:83; DBW 5:66.

² See A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 1.

³ Hanfried Müller, 'Concerning the Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *World Come of Age: A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Collins, 1967), pp. 183-184, cited in Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 16 and Wayne Whitson Floyd, 'Style and the Critique of Metaphysics: The Letter as Form in Bonhoeffer and Adorno', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 46.1 (1992), pp. 248-249.

⁴ For certain issues, this will involve going 'beyond Bonhoeffer', prompted by Bonhoeffer's own broader thought; this includes, for example, my Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 140-169. Like McBride, this thesis attempts to be 'both

this thesis, the sections may seem disparate – from considering divine-human relations in the context of human agency, to the visible or invisible nature of the church; from exploring the experience of suffering, to the use of the psalms or one's own words within the practice of prayer. My aim is to show that a coherent dynamic unites these topics. Halbach, among others, has identified that although Bonhoeffer's theological works may 'foreground a particular theological doctrine (creation, hamartiology, Christology, ecclesiology), a synchronic reading of his works brings out how each theological locus gains its shape from other theological loci.'⁵ I am applying this recognition to Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christian life across his works. There exist multiple studies which provide a thorough-going approach to Bonhoeffer's materials by focusing on a consistent theological theme.⁶ This thesis differs in that it looks at various theological 'problems' and how they can be viewed through Bonhoeffer's Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology.

My argument consists of two interrelated parts. First, that Bonhoeffer's thought can be held together by the same systematicity present in the passage from *Life Together* above: that we understand the human person through community, and the community through the human person; both rooted in a total orientation to Christ. Bonhoeffer's overall theological vision must be viewed through his theological anthropology and ecclesiology, rooted in his incarnational, judging, justifying, and eschatologically directed Christology.

Second, by focusing on Bonhoeffer's interrelated Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, I seek to demonstrate how Bonhoeffer's total theology is thoroughly and consistently oriented to the *person* of Christ and the personhood-in-relation he calls one into. If

exegetical and constructive. It is exegetical insofar as it explicates Bonhoeffer's writings, and it is constructive insofar as it furthers the lines of his thinking in order to address the needs of our contemporary moment,' McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 11.

⁵ Ross E. Halbach, *Bonhoeffer and the Racialized Church* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020), p. 11; Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 79-80; Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), p. 289.

⁶ On Bonhoeffer's sociality, Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999); Bonhoeffer's Christology, Jens Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019); Koert Verhagen, *Being and Action Coram Deo: Bonhoeffer and the Retrieval of Justification's Social Import* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021); Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology, Tom Greggs, 'Bearing Sin in the Church: The Ecclesial Hamartiology of Bonhoeffer', in *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016); David Emerton, *God's Church-Community: The Ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology Volume 36 (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Jennifer M. McBride, 'Reformation through Repentance: The Church's Public Witness', in *Luther, Bonhoeffer, and Public Ethics: Re-Forming the Church of the Future*, ed. by Michael P. DeJonge and Clifford J. Green (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018); McBride *The Church for the World*; Michael G. Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Bonhoeffer's apocalypticism, Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Emerton, *God's Church-Community*.

Christian life is understood as a *living response* to Christ's encounter with us, my argument is we can allow for a certain 'polyphony'⁷, understanding said differences to ultimately be harmonised by a committed belief in and obedience to Christ.⁸ As Bonhoeffer said in his own doctoral dissertation of 1927, the unity of the Christian church is based not on '*unanimity of spirit*', but on *divine unity of Spirit*.⁹ For Bonhoeffer, Christian personhood, action, and community, can be 'differentiated', so long as they are 'unified' in their orientation to Jesus Christ, the living word of God. Christian life can be *varied*, so long as it is lived in active discernment for and response to the encounter of Christ.¹⁰ Active discernment could also be defined as a life lived in prayerful response, which is where this thesis will conclude.

Christological *Cantus Firmus* with Ecclesiological and Anthropological Counterparts

It has long been agreed that the question "Who is Jesus Christ?" 'forms the *cantus firmus* of Bonhoeffer's theological development from the beginning to the end,'¹¹ and that Christology is at the very centre of his theology.¹² However, we need to define Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christology. Pangritz states that throughout his life, Bonhoeffer participated in a movement towards Christological concentration, inspired and inaugurated by Karl Barth's dialectical theology.¹³ However, in Bonhoeffer's thought, his Christological focus is never isolated away from other theological themes but is the centre upon which they rest and around which they orbit.¹⁴ If Bonhoeffer's 'cantus firmus' is Christology, it is always and continuously accompanied by theological and worldly counterparts.

⁷ Andreas Pangritz, "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?", in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 151.

⁸ Belief and obedience belong together, DBWE 4:63; DBW4:52.

⁹ DBWE 1:198; DBW 1:128-129.

¹⁰ His divine No and Yes, as I will explore further in this introduction.

¹¹ Andreas Pangritz, "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?", p. 134.

¹² For example, Pangritz, 'Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?'; André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality* (London: SCM Press, 1971); Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*; Clifford J. Green, 'Trinity and Christology in Bonhoeffer and Barth', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 60.1 (2006); Jochen Bohn, 'Bonhoeffer's Religionlessness: Foundation of an As-If Theology', in *Religion, Religionlessness, and Contemporary Western Culture: Explorations in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology*, ed. by Stephen Plant and Ralf K. Wüstenberg, International Bonhoeffer Interpretations, 1 (Frankfurt am Main; New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 59–77; Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); Trygve Wyller, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *Key Theological Thinkers*, ed. by Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise (Routledge, 2013), pp. 113–122; Verhagen, *Coram Deo*; Christiane Tietz, 'Christology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 150–167.

¹³ See Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

¹⁴ Pangritz in 'Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?' notes that in 'spite of the Christocentric conception of Bonhoeffer's theology, only a few of his texts deal with Christology explicitly. One exception is the 'Circular Letter' of Christmas 1939... The most detailed reflection on Christology, however, has been expounded by Bonhoeffer in his *Christology* lectures.' Christology orients the entirety of Bonhoeffer's theology, but it is rarely dealt with in isolation, p. 136.

For Bonhoeffer, Christ meets us in the world and changes our way of being through his encounter with us. We are encountered by Christ's living word in the world; through the words of scripture, in sacraments, preaching, and in the community of the church. Christ encounters us because he is ontologically pro-me.¹⁵ Being *free-for* the world, he unites himself with reality and the creatures therein. Christ's freedom is towards, not away from, creation.

Christology for Bonhoeffer is therefore not, in Green's words, 'a speculative inquiry into divine and human natures as reified entities.'¹⁶ Christology ought not attempt to answer the question "how" the word of God became human, but instead seek "Who" this word is for us today.¹⁷ In Christ's encounter, we are addressed, as de Gruchy says, 'with an immediacy that demands not just the response of the intellect but of the whole person.'¹⁸ Persons *are transformed* through encounter with Christ, responding with their whole lives.¹⁹ The ramifications of this are important for my thesis. Christology for Bonhoeffer is never static or abstract. Christology concerns *Christ's encounter with real persons*²⁰ in the world, who come to know Christ and the reality he has established. This is not something we gain once and for all, or something that can be neatly packaged metaphysically, but rather something we respond to with our whole lives.

Christ as the one who is 'pro-me' is there for humanity. Christ stands in humanity's place before God, taking our place in his freedom-for the world. This means that Christ truly *is* the church; he *is* the new humanity. To encounter Christ is to be conformed to his person, which is simultaneously to enter the church community, existing, as Christ does, *for others*. It is this understanding which, Zimmermann says, 'for Bonhoeffer unites Christology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and the Christian life as discipleship into an interconnected whole. The unity, character, and on-going relevance of his theology are best explained as a continual exploration of how God's having become human defines reality,'²¹ and how Christian life enters and operates in that reality.

¹⁵ DBWE 12:310; DBW 12:291.

¹⁶ Clifford Green, 'Human Sociality and Christian Community', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 123.

¹⁷ 'This is the question asked by horrified, dethroned human reason, and also the question of faith: Who are you? Are you God's very self? This is the question with which Christology alone is concerned...because the One who is questioned is the Son himself, the immanent question of "how" can never comprehend him,' DBWE 12:302; DBW 12:282-283.

¹⁸ John W. de Gruchy, 'Bonhoeffer', in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, by Gareth Jones (Hoboken, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2007), p. 361.

¹⁹ Zimmermann calls this Bonhoeffer's 'Christian humanism' – Christology which is founded in real-world encounter. See Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*.

²⁰ I will use 'persons' in this thesis rather than 'individuals', given Bonhoeffer's own preference for 'person'; Clifford Green, 'Human Sociality and Christian Community', p. 118.

²¹ Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, p. 48.

The Limit and the Centre / The No and the Yes

Zimmermann suggests that 'Bonhoeffer conducts theology as anthropology, not by developing general anthropological axioms but by always delineating the human within theological categories.'²² We cannot justify our own existence because our value is grounded solely from, Verhagen says, 'standing *coram Deo* [which] is realized in the social sphere.'²³ We learn who we are – or should be – *through encounter* with the incarnate Christ. 'Only because Christ is the Christ who is present are we still able to inquire of him.'²⁴

Meeting Christ in encounter is to meet the one who stands in my place. Christ therefore in an important way stands at my *limit*. He is the one who has stood in the place of humanity, who has taken on sin in our stead, and who has justified our sin through his death and resurrection. To meet Christ is therefore to recognise a limit or boundary, one I feel 'I cannot cross.'²⁵ It is to meet the self I that ought to be *and am not*.

At the same time, however, meeting Christ as a limit and boundary is to simultaneously meet Christ as 'the center that I have regained,'²⁶ and recognise Christ as 'the center of [my] existence.'²⁷ Christ's encounter releases me to be myself, to be who I was made to be, and to enjoy my created freedom as one made in his image. In Christ, I retrieve my own freedom *for others* in conformation with the Who at the centre of reality.

This is not a psychological statement for Bonhoeffer but an 'ontological[-]theological one, because it refers not to our personality but rather to the persons we are before God.'²⁸ Meeting Christ, we recognise 'that our limit is in Christ... [and at] the same time see that in this limit we have found our new center.'²⁹ Christ is the limit of human life; he judges us and brings to an end our sinful existence. But simultaneously he is 'the beginning of the new existence, and that means the center... he is the judgment and the justification.'³⁰ In him, our previous dealings in the world are judged, but we are simultaneously invited to regain our centre and participate in

²² Ibid, p. 49.

²³ Verhagen, *Coram Deo*, p. 32; cf. DBWE 1:54-55; DBW 1:32-33.

²⁴ DBWE 12:310; DBW 12:292.

²⁵ DBWE 12:324; DBW 12:306.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ DBWE 12:325; DBW 12:307.

²⁸ DBWE 12:324; DBW 12:307.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ DBWE 12:325; DBW 12:307.

his 'promeity'.³¹ Meeting Christ as the centre who is our limit, we are called out of isolation to remember the promeity at the heart of creation, and learn we exist in and through our relations with others. We are thus placed in the church community, the new humanity, directed to and for one another in Christ's pro-me structure.

Another way of understanding this dynamic is through Bonhoeffer's concept of the divine No and Yes.³² Christ encounters us as limit through his divine No.³³ Through Christ's No, our sinful lives in self-imposed isolation from true community are judged and killed. However, in hearing the divine No, we are simultaneously invited to hear and respond to Christ's divine Yes, and to regain Christ as the centre of our being. Here, I am invited to conform myself to Christ's promeity and gain my creaturely freedom, which is precisely to live for others in community.

Christian life is therefore understood as life under the divine No and the Yes, recognising Christ as the limit and the centre of my existence, and receiving the church community and the world under this same No and Yes: 'life is concrete in the contradictory unity of Yes and No that lies outside life itself, namely in Jesus Christ.'³⁴ To live a Christian life is to recognise that our lives are lived under Christ's No and Yes, and that relating to Christ in this way is precisely how we relate to all other relationships; 'only the relation to Jesus Christ is the basis for our relation to other human beings and to God.'³⁵ This means, Bonhoeffer says, that 'our encounters with others, like our encounters with God, are subject to the same Yes and No that is present in our encounter with Jesus Christ.'³⁶

Reality under the Divine No and Yes

Such an understanding of life under Christ's divine No and Yes, as limit and centre, allows for a holistic view of reality. For Bonhoeffer, there is '*only one reality*'³⁷ which is the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Christ is the boundary and centre of humanity, but also history and nature. Christ acts as judge and redeemer, bringing death to sinful humanity, and

³¹ Philip Ziegler, 'Christ For Us Today - Promeity in the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15.1 (2013), pp. 26-35; Philip G. Ziegler, 'God', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 137-149.

³² I choose throughout the thesis to order 'divine No and Yes' in this way because, although for Bonhoeffer these two words are spoken simultaneously, it is hearing the 'Yes' *only through and with the 'No'* that avoids self-justification.

³³ See 'History and Good [II]' DBWE 6:246-298; DBW 6:245-299.

³⁴ DBWE 6:253-254; DBW 6:252-253.

³⁵ DBWE 6:254; DBW 6:253.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ DBWE 6:58; DBW 6:43. Emphasis original.

simultaneously offering life through himself. Through participating in Christ's promise, therefore, we stand in the world and with God at the same time. 'The reality of Christ embraces the reality of the world in itself,'³⁸ overcoming dualistic thinking. As Zimmermann says, because '[r]eality and existence are unified *in Christ*... Christian ethics deals with the whole human being as embedded in a complex totality of relations without fragmentation. Bonhoeffer concludes that 'as reality is one in Christ, so the person who belongs to this Christ reality is also a whole.'³⁹

For Bonhoeffer, persons who have met Christ as boundary and centre are reminded of their nature of promise. We are created to be free-for others, in a community that is simultaneously free-for me.⁴⁰ I do not exist outside of community, and yet my personhood is not subsumed into the communal. I exist through *encounter* with other persons and communities (who also exist through encounter), and therefore, although personhood is constituted through others, one's own personhood must remain intact in order for encounter to be possible.⁴¹ Our existence as social beings is, to use Mawson's words, 'in a sense; equiprimordial: God created and intended human persons to be simultaneously distinct from and related to one another.'⁴² In Christ's encounter, we are made free for others but also made aware of our own created personhood. Neither the person nor the community diminish the other.

Not only is the person prevented from being subsumed into the communal or vice versa, but what Zimmermann calls Christomonism⁴³ is also averted due to the 'personalist-foundation of Bonhoeffer's ontology.'⁴⁴ The world is not dissolved into Christ, nor Christ into the world. Christ's divine personhood as pro-me unifies reality but also transcends it. We gain an understanding of Christ through Christ's free encounter with us, but Christ always simultaneously remains a transcendent mystery above and beyond human knowledge. We cannot grasp or categorise the incarnate one. He must remain the 'Who' of reality. Such an

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, p. 189, cf. DBWE 6:89; DBW 6:62.

⁴⁰ For Bonhoeffer, ethical responsibility in the world is made possible through Christian encounter with Christ, and regaining Christ as the centre and boundary of human existence. It is therefore the *Christian* who is ethically responsible and closest to our created nature in Christ's freedom-for. This, of course, introduces a worrisome exclusionary tone to Bonhoeffer's theology, which must be acknowledged at the outset. Unfortunately, there is not space in this thesis to fully explore the exclusionary or inclusionary nature of Bonhoeffer's theology. It is interesting, however, that Bonhoeffer does see responsible non-Christians working in their 'very own freedom' (*eigenster Freiheit*) as closer to God given responsibility in freedom-for than so-called "Christians" who hide in their private virtuousness (*privaten Tugendhaftigkeit*) (DBWE 8:38-40; DBW 8:20-23; DBWE 6:77-83; DBW 6:63-69); and for Bonhoeffer – although some passages seem exclusionary – the whole world is *united by Christ, whether the world acknowledges or not*. See DBWE 6:47-75, 250-251; DBW 6:31-61, 249-250 and discussion in this thesis, pp. 47-50.

⁴¹ See discussion of structurally open and structurally closed in DBWE 1:66-68, 72-73; DBW 1:40-41, 46.

⁴² Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, p. 79.

⁴³ Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, p. 191.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

understanding protects the transcendence of God, while affirming the genuine presence of Christ for and with the believer. Therefore, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, reality, soteriology, eschatology, and discipleship retain their differentiation, but are connected and made understandable through Christ as the incarnate word.

***Nachfolge*: Discernment of the Ultimate in the Penultimate**

*Nachfolge*⁴⁵ literally means to follow or run behind. The distinctiveness of the life of a disciple arises, as Wilmer suggests, from consistently 'trusting and yielding to the mediation of Christ. The obedience of the disciple is not exhausted in doing particular actions or obeying specific commands. Rather, obedience means submitting to the Lord, [and] taking only what comes through his mediation.'⁴⁶ To be a disciple is to submit one's whole life to the call of Christ. It is not as if Bonhoeffer rejects human knowledge. Rather, he rejects any *separation of knowledge* from encounter in Christ. For Bonhoeffer, as Nissen says, 'Christology and epistemology are closely linked'⁴⁷ because through encounter, Christ is recognised as the centre of our existence, the world, and reality. Christ himself represents the centre of human knowledge.

It has long been commented on that Bonhoeffer's theological writings cannot be separated from his life.⁴⁸ This has been most often explored in relation to his final materials, the *Letters and Papers and Prison*,⁴⁹ but I believe Ulrich is correct when suggesting,

What Bonhoeffer articulates in his writings is the life of a human being in patient and attentive expectation of God's action, ready to surrender to God's will and plan...

Bonhoeffer's own particular 'way of life' is not an abstract template for Christian living. His life was an historic event, a story of discipleship, not as a pattern for Christian life but as a particular story of living with God.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Nachfolge* is the title of Bonhoeffer's work on discipleship, DBW 4. Although DBWE 4 now follows the German title, previous versions e.g. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995) use the title 'The Cost of Discipleship,' a choice which, according to Haddon Willmer, introduces a tautology. 'The content of discipleship is defined by the way Jesus went to the cross and beyond. It is therefore tautologous to speak of the *cost* of discipleship, since denying oneself and taking up one's cross is integral to following Jesus,' Willmer, 'Costly Discipleship', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 175.

⁴⁶ Willmer, 'Costly Discipleship', p. 179.

⁴⁷ Ulrik B. Nissen 'The Christological Ontology of Reason', *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie*, 48.4 (2007), p. 464.

⁴⁸ Hans G. Ulrich, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom: The Presence of God - The Freedom of Disciples', in *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology Through Poetry*, ed. by Bernd Wannenwetsch (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 151; Gruchy 'Bonhoeffer', pp. 257-258; Verhagen, *Coram Deo*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ DBWE 8; DBW 8.

⁵⁰ Hans G. Ulrich, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom', pp. 150-151.

Reading Bonhoeffer's theology, then, we must pay attention to the need for *discernment* and *inhabiting Christ's encounter*. I am encountered with Christ's divine No and Yes, and it is through these twin commandments that I realise I am judged entirely but simultaneously freed to live for others.

Crucially, this does not just occur once and for all, but as I *continue to live in the world*. Christ encounters me with his ultimate word, Bonhoeffer says, but the world continues to exist.⁵¹ I therefore must continue to live in the sinful world, viewing it and my relations therein through Christ's ultimate word,⁵² constantly seeking his encounter afresh in my interactions with others, in my daily activities, and in prayer.

The pattern of Christian life therefore consists of orienting oneself and one's freedom for others to Christ's encounter. Christian life is to live under the divine No and Yes; seeing oneself, one's actions, and one's relationships with others as under divine judgement⁵³ and redeemed only to the extent that one is oriented to Christ's own being. Christian life consists of *discernment*, of seeking Christ's ultimate word (the No and Yes) afresh, to show me where I have erred, and how I can reorient myself to Christ's reality. This also involves discerning *when* and about *what* we need to hear the No, and when and about what we need to hear the Yes. This knowledge cannot be determined in the abstract but only in specific situations and relationships. Because Christian life exists *in community*, this is not a discernment that I face alone, but only within the community which also acts as a limit and centre of my existence, which encounters me and brings me back into relationship with Christ. The church lives through its discernment and response to Christ's judgement and encounter, as do the persons within it. As a Christian, my ethical decisions, my relationships with others, the structure of my community life, *everything* depends on my freedom-for in Christ, my limit and centre.

Lived Theology

Numerous theologians have asserted the need not to create a sharp line between lived theology and doctrinal theology.⁵⁴ Any concept of doctrine being a 'second-order' discipline which merely

⁵¹ See 'Ultimate and Penultimate things', DBWE 6:146-170; DBW 6:137-162.

⁵² Christ's ultimate word is qualitatively ultimate but also temporarily ultimate, DBWE 6:149-151; DBW 6:140-141.

⁵³ In a state of repentance, McBride, *The Church for the World*, pp. 17, 42-43, 57-59, 139-144; Greggs, 'Bearing Sin in the Church', pp. 79-93. This is important for the church avoiding self-justification.

⁵⁴ See Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Valerio Valeri and Roger Keesing, 'On Anthropology as Interpretive Quest', *Current Anthropology*, 28.3 (1987), pp. 355-357; Paul Rabinow, 'Discourse and Power: On the Limits of Ethnographic Texts', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 10.1/2 (1985), pp. 1-

reflects on, or regulates the ‘first-order’ of Christian life and speech is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of Christian life.⁵⁵ The idea of being able to separate theological reflection from daily life is to accept the myth of the free autonomous subject. But, as Tonstad suggests, this ‘self-determining, autonomous’⁵⁶ person, with self-possessing doctrinal understanding *does not exist*.

Instead, we are formed and form our lives *in response to our context*. Our understanding does not take place in a vacuum. To take seriously Christ as the centre of human existence, and the centre of the church, is to understand Christian knowledge as occurring *within* the church, with church not simply understood as an empirical reality or depository of belief, but rather, what Healy describes as a ‘distinctive way of life made possible by the gracious action of the Holy Spirit, which orients its adherents to the Father through Jesus Christ.’⁵⁷ Christian life is formed *in Christ’s encounter*, where Christ chooses to encounter us, namely his church.

An unexpectedly helpful thinking partner can be found in McIntosh’s account of spirituality. According to McIntosh, spirituality must be thought of as the ‘transformation and discovery of the self’ which always and only ‘happens in encounter, it is an activity constantly stirred up and sustained by the other who calls one out of one’s “self” and into the truth of one’s mission in life, out of provisionality and into the adventure of the incarnation.’⁵⁸ Spirituality is therefore about the active presence of God orientating the person and *not* about inward positivistic experience.⁵⁹

13; Michel Serres, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978); Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids; Vancouver: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997).

⁵⁵ See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Ed Watson, ‘Another Nature of Doctrine: George Lindbeck, Kathryn Tanner and Christian Identities’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 74.3 (2021), pp. 262–273.

⁵⁶ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), p. 63.

⁵⁷ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 6.

⁵⁹ Since the 17th century, mysticism and spirituality have been associated with inward privatised experiences, divorced from theology and often referred to in a pejorative way. See Amy Hollywood and Rachel Smith, ‘Christology’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, ed. by Mark A. McIntosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 484–506; Kevin L. Hughes, ‘Living the word’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, ed. by Mark A. McIntosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 108–12; Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism. The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Sandra M. Schneiders, ‘Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?’, *Horizons*, 13.2 (1986), pp. 253–274; Joann Wolski Conn, ‘Toward Spiritual Maturity’, in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 235–259; Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013); Ralph Norman, ‘Rediscovery of Mysticism’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. by Gareth Jones (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), pp. 449–465; Hans Urs von Balthasar, ‘Word and Redemption: Theology and Sanctity’, in *Explorations in Theology 1, The Word Made Flesh*, ed. by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 181–210; Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Ellen T. Charry, ‘The Moral Function of Doctrine’ in *Theology Today*, 49.1 (1992), pp. 31–45; Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the*

If this is the case, spirituality is intimately linked to theology.⁶⁰ However, one might think initially in terms of encounter with God as the common ground of spirituality and theology: spirituality being the impression that this encounter makes in the transforming life of people, and theology being the expression that this encounter calls forth as people attempt to understand and speak of the encounter.⁶¹

This may lead to an impression that theology depends on spirituality as its source, with theology merely expressing what spirituality has experienced. However, as McIntosh reminds us, 'in real life, we have no "freeze frame" picture... but a living community of prayer and reflection.'⁶² The relationship of spirituality and theology in Christianity should therefore be seen as a 'process or way of life,'⁶³ of 'being drawn into an encounter, being led to make a response – these lie at the heart of Christianity.'⁶⁴ Just as there ought to be no 'second-order' relation of theology to lived experience, this account of spirituality teaches us that we ought not think of theology as separate from lived encounter with God.⁶⁵

As Bonhoeffer says, 'the person ever and again arises and passes away in time. The person does not exist timelessly; a person is not static but dynamic.'⁶⁶ This is how we should understand Christian life, personhood, and the link between knowledge, praxis, spirituality, and theology. We are met by Christ who is pro-me and learn to view our relationships and actions in the world through him. We seek further encounter with him in the world, to be judged and receive our freedom-for again. We are then met by Christ's encounter again, judged, and re-conformed to him and others, and so on, and so on. There is no part of life not affected by this encounter, no knowledge or action which is separate from it; 'willing and thinking come from God and go towards God.'⁶⁷

It is for this reason that this thesis will end in a slightly unconventional way. The conclusion of my final chapter on prayer will also act in part as a conclusion to the overall thesis. My

Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Frances Young, 'Paideia and the Myth of Static Dogma', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, ed. by Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 265–284; Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2003).

⁶⁰ See Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Mystical - or What Theology Can Show', in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, ed. by Edward Howells and Mark Allen McIntosh, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 451 for more on the relationship between theology and mysticism.

⁶¹ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p. 6.

⁶² Ibid. p. 12.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 151.

⁶⁵ See Rahner's discussion of 'everyday mysticism' in Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 64.

⁶⁶ DBWE 1:48; DBW 1:28.

⁶⁷ DBWE 1:63; DBW 1:39.

argument throughout is that Christian life for Bonhoeffer involves orientation to and a constant practice of discernment for Christ and his divine No and Yes, seeking and responding to his word through our encounters in the world. There is no area of life not incorporated into Christ's reality. Another way we can think of Christian life under the No and Yes is therefore as a life of prayer. Prayer both seeks and responds to Christ's encounter, as a practice which orients the life of the Christian person. It therefore feels appropriate to finish the thesis with a focus on prayerful discernment, in the context of the inseparability of doctrine from lived theology. As I will argue at the end of this thesis, theology itself is a type of prayerful discernment.

Bringing it all Together: A Pattern of Life

As Bonhoeffer states, the decisive passages in the New Testament do not say,

one theology and *one* rite, *one* opinion on all matters public and private... Instead they say: *one* body and *one* Spirit, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of us all... The point is not "unanimity in spirit" ["Einigkeit im Geist"], but the "unity of the Spirit" ["Einheit des Geistes]... [which] unites the plurality of persons in to a single collective person [Gesamtperson] without obliterating either their singularity or the community of persons. Rather, *unity of spirit, community of spirit, and plurality of spirit are intrinsically linked to one another through their subject matter.*⁶⁸

This returns us to the beginning of this introduction, that the community exists in persons and persons exist in community. Both are 'intrinsically linked to one another', their singularity and plurality intact, 'through their subject matter', namely their relationship to the person of Christ.

In Christ's encounter, one is released into freedom-for others. The person therefore exists in the church community, and the church community exists in the persons who have been encountered. The church and Christian persons therein recognise life and all relations under Christ's divine No and Yes. We live under the No and the Yes, in a process of discernment, repentance, and seeking Christ's encounter. This means that we do not know what path we will take ahead of time, and that there are no general Christian beliefs or practices, nor theory or discipline separable from living discernment: there is only the Christ who encounters us and bids us follow. We must be willing to be judged and proven wrong, in the hope that we will be

⁶⁸ DBWE 1:192-193; DBW 1:129-130. Emphasis original. Unlike the capitalisation of 'Spirit' in the first half of the passage, it is interesting that in the second half, translators of DBWE choose to treat each usage of *Geist* as equivalent, whereas Bonhoeffer may have intended to play on its multiplicity of meanings: [Holy] Spirit, intellect/mind, and a Hegelian usage as well. In that case, a better translation could be "unity of Spirit" but lower case "spirit" for the other instances.

righted and brought back onto the narrow path. We do not do this alone, but in the community where our personhood exists. As Elliston states, ‘the emphasis falls not on principles that forever determine right conduct, but on the *sort of human being one is to be*’.⁶⁹

Christian life means living as a person who has been encountered (Christology), judged (the divine No), redeemed (the divine Yes) and transformed into Christ’s freedom-for others (ecclesiology and theological anthropology). I have been encountered, I have been judged, I have been redeemed, and I live for others. Having been encountered, *I continue to live in the world*. I therefore *seek* encounter, I *seek* judgement, I *seek* redemption, I *seek* others. It is this pattern of encounter and seeking encounter which frames everything to come.

Chapter Contents

In the chapters that follow, I have focused on themes that appear throughout Bonhoeffer’s works, relating to key aspects of Christian life. As we will see, although each is important to Bonhoeffer’s overall theological vision, there are tensions in their presentation within the corpus.⁷⁰ I will consider each ‘problem’, considering what unresolved issues are present, before placing them within Bonhoeffer’s broader Christological, ecclesiological, and theological anthropological understanding of life under Christ’s divine No and Yes. As we will see, this task is not about making static judgements on any aspect of Bonhoeffer’s work but viewing each problem through Bonhoeffer’s dynamic vision of Christian life in active discernment.

The first two chapters of the thesis (and their associated case studies) focus to an extent on two sides of a theological coin: the person and the church community, respectively, and their relationship to one another through Christ. The final two chapters represent a slight gear shift, in that they do not consider the person and the church and their Christic interrelatedness *explicitly*, but instead focus on two important related themes – suffering and prayer – and how these are also understood through Bonhoeffer’s Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology.

⁶⁹ Clark J. Elliston, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Ethical Self: Christology, Ethics, and Formation* (Lanham: National Book Network, 2016), p. x.

⁷⁰ Some appear as a problem when comparing works across the corpus; others represent problems found more broadly in theology (e.g. the problem of suffering); others appear as a problem because they are anomalous to Bonhoeffer’s broader theological vision.

Agency⁷¹

The first chapter will consider the problem of human agency and the continuity of Christian ethical action in Bonhoeffer's thought. If one dies under the divine No in the call of Christ, and thereafter lives entirely from Christ alone under his divine Yes, what does this mean for human agency in the context of Christian life? This chapter will consider whether Bonhoeffer implies a competitive relationship between human and divine agency, especially in his works written around the Finkenwalde period.⁷² It will also consider whether there is an issue of continuity for Christian agency. If Christ's encounter strips someone of their previous context and desires, what does this mean for the formation of the Christian person and their agency in the world?

The chapter will demonstrate how Bonhoeffer avoids these twin problems by his Christologically informed ecclesiology and theological anthropology. I will first explore this through Bonhoeffer's concept of freedom *in relation*. Christian agency involves obedience, which is precisely the *fulfilment*, not the destruction, of Christian freedom. Second, I will discuss Bonhoeffer's concept of the divine No and Yes. Where certain materials suggest extreme self-denial, it is the divine No being emphasised by Bonhoeffer, but the No is and must always be accompanied by the divine Yes. Finally, I will place agency within the church community context, arguing that continuity of action is made possible because I do not exist by myself but always in community.

Agency Case Study: Christian Actions⁷³

After discussing the problem of Christian agency in chapter one, this accompanying case study will consider an area where Bonhoeffer's approach to Christian action seems to vary. Namely, we see a move from apparent pacifism to involvement in active resistance. How can we resolve such a change in approach to Christian ethics, and is this possible without Christian agency becoming self-justified and piecemeal? If there are no normative rules to Christian ethical action, how does one avoid the possibility of any action becoming "justified"? I will seek to resolve this issue through a consideration of Christian life under the divine No and Yes; every action must be taken in a position of repentance (the No) and seeking Christ's will anew (the

⁷¹ Agency, pp. 28-67.

⁷² For example, his description of the Beatitudes in *Discipleship* and his description of Christian relationships in *Life Together*, DBWE 4:102-107; DBW 4:101-107; DBWE 5:32, 42-44; DBWE 5:19-20, 29-31.

⁷³ Agency Case Study, pp. 68-87.

Yes). I will also seek to place Christian action within the church community; I do not act alone, but in the context of the church which also exists under the No and Yes of Christ.

Church⁷⁴

Having considered human agency and its position in the church under the divine No and Yes, the next chapter will be dedicated to the church itself. The first problem to explore lies in the church's visible (as a human institution) and invisible (as divinely constituted) dimensions. In certain works, Bonhoeffer calls for the church to be a radically visible entity⁷⁵ and yet in others⁷⁶ suggests the church ought to be identifiable only by its distinctive way of being for others in conformation with Christ. The second issue concerns the church's relationship with the world. In some material, the church is characterised as no longer subject to the world.⁷⁷ Existing entirely in relation to Christ, it has no immediate access to the world, even the most intimate of relationships.⁷⁸ But elsewhere, Bonhoeffer describes the 'this-worldliness'⁷⁹ of the church, with no division of church and world.

I will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer's material on the (in)visibility and worldliness of the church can be understood through his christologically rooted ecclesiology and theological anthropology. In relation to the church's visibility, I will explore Bonhoeffer's notion of belief and obedience.⁸⁰ As obedience is not considered a by-product of belief or vice versa, the visible entity of the church is not a by-product of its invisible institution in Christ. Instead, both exist simultaneously. Second, I will consider for whom visibility exists, demonstrating the church remains the church *only to the extent* it does not exist for itself but for Christ and the world.⁸¹ In relation to the church's worldliness, I will discuss how the church receives the world afresh through Christ as mediator.⁸² I will then frame Christian worldliness through Bonhoeffer's Christological "apocalypticism". The church is "called out" of the old world (in the divine No) and into Christ's new creation (in the divine Yes), but only as it is simultaneously "called into" the old world, viewing it through the new.⁸³ I will finally consider how the church lives in a state

⁷⁴ Church, pp. 88-138.

⁷⁵ DBWE 4:111-114, 218, 224; DBW 4:110-114, 232, 241-242.

⁷⁶ Like the first chapter, there is a split between earlier works and later. I will argue this relates to changing emphasis.

⁷⁷ DBWE 4:100, 236; DBW 4:99, 252.

⁷⁸ DBWE 4:95, 250; DBW 4:90, 266.

⁷⁹ DBWE 8:485; DBW 8:451.

⁸⁰ DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:52.

⁸¹ This will involve discussion of the divine mandates, e.g. DBWE 6:388-394; DBW 6:392-398.

⁸² Discussing Bonhoeffer's exposition of Abraham and Isaac, DBWE 4:98; DBW 4:32; Genesis 22:1-19.

⁸³ Existing under Christ's No and Yes.

of *repentance*, bringing the world into recognition of the new creation by repenting the sin of the old.

Marriage Mandate Case Study: Bonhoeffer's Treatment of Women⁸⁴

In the church chapter, we will have considered how the church remains a divine mandate only to the extent that it exists not for itself or its self-preservation, but for Christ and the world. In this related case study, I will discuss Bonhoeffer's presentation of his marriage mandate and the broader issue of androcentrism, patriarchalism, and female gender essentialism in his material. This case study differs from other chapters in that it represents a critique of Bonhoeffer's explicit theology and an attempt at correction by taking seriously Bonhoeffer's broader call for life under Christ's No and Yes, in the context of Christ's personhood for others. In this case study, I see my work taking place within the theological approach Bonhoeffer *himself calls for*; the need for constant questioning of "Who Christ is for us today?" and the mandates remaining divinely justified only to the extent they exist in Christ's freedom for the world in constant discernment and repentance. The case study, in a sense, takes the position of Bonhoeffer's church community, discussing, and critiquing his thinking (in the divine No) but only as it simultaneously uplifts and redirects his thinking to the contemporary needs of the world and mutual freedom-for in Christ's encounter (the divine Yes).

Suffering⁸⁵

Suffering is an undeniable part of Christian life: to become a disciple one must die to one's old self under the divine No, which involves suffering. After being encountered, one continues to live in the world, bearing one's own sins and the sins of others, also involving suffering. This chapter will consider the moral status of suffering in Bonhoeffer, especially associated with the phrase 'costly grace'⁸⁶ and whether this implies suffering as an inherently valuable experience, rather than something borne for the sake of grace. I will argue that Bonhoeffer avoids the first interpretation through his interrelated Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology.

First, I will attend to the 'death' of the Christian person in Christ's call and demonstrate that it is *the death* which is instrumental in becoming a Christian, not the associated suffering. Second, I will explore suffering through Bonhoeffer's understanding of the penultimate and the ultimate.

⁸⁴ Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 139-168.

⁸⁵ Suffering, pp. 169-207.

⁸⁶ DBWE 4:44-45; DBW 4:30-31.

Encountered by Christ's ultimate word (the divine No and Yes), our worldly existence becomes relativised. However, as we continue to live in the world, the world continues to exist, and should not be done away with. We must therefore attend to suffering in all its horror, whilst knowing it will once again become relative to Christ's word – but *not until Christ's word is spoken again*.⁸⁷ Finally, I will place suffering in the context of the church community. The Christian person is conformed to Christ's freedom-for, bearing and suffering for the world. Christians are therefore sent precisely *to do penultimate work*.⁸⁸ However, the person does not become a Christian in isolation. Suffering therefore takes place in the social context of the church, borne by the whole community and ultimately Christ. We can therefore look at suffering's place alongside the grace of the church, whilst simultaneously attending to its horrors on an individual level. Christians do not exist alone, so neither do they suffer alone. Suffering must be understood within a community of bearing.

Prayer⁸⁹

The final chapter will consider the role of prayer in Christian life. Having confirmed throughout the thesis that Christ encounters the human person and brings them into his church community, that Christ judges the person and thereby releases them into freedom-for, this chapter will argue that prayer is understood precisely *as* the living response to such encounter. To pray is to recognise myself existing in and through Christ's reality, which is simultaneously to exist in his church-community in relation to the world. Prayer, so understood, is the very fabric of Christian life in freedom and obedience to Christ. It is a concrete activity but also a daily orientation or pattern of response to Christ's reality.

I will apply this understanding to three issues in Bonhoeffer's presentation of prayer, including the possibility of praying the imprecatory psalms,⁹⁰ praying using scripture or one's own words, and how prayer can be understood as a delineated activity but also something surrounding the whole 'day'.⁹¹ Having explored these, I will conclude the chapter – and the thesis – with the suggestion that prayer is both made *possible* through Christ's encounter and is made *in response* to Christ. Prayer can therefore *describe* the Christian life of discernment in response to Christ. Everything discussed in the thesis – from Christian agency, to the nature of the church; from the

⁸⁷ DBWE 6:150-159; DBW 6:141-151.

⁸⁸ DBWE 6:62-63; DBW 6:154-155. Doing penultimate actions – e.g. reducing the suffering of others – for the sake of the ultimate.

⁸⁹ Prayer, pp. 208-239.

⁹⁰ Otherwise known as prayers of vengeance; DBWE 5:174; DBW 5:129.

⁹¹ Day understood as a pattern of response rather than just the literal period of time, inspired by DBWE 3:49; DBW 3:45-46.

experience of suffering, to reciting the psalms, can be described as prayerful response to Christ. Even theology itself – Bonhoeffer's own and this thesis – can be understood as prayer.

Chapter 1: Agency

Introduction

In Christ's encounter, the person is judged and their sinful self is killed. From that time, they live through Christ's grace alone, understanding themselves entirely in relation to Christ's word of judgement and justification. As Bonhoeffer says, '[i]n baptism we become Christ's possession.'⁹² Every Christian action, all relationships, *entire lives* are oriented to Christ as the centre of reality. Christ is the mediator⁹³ not just between me and God, but between me and every other entity in the world, living and inanimate.

He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities [in the world]. He wants to be the medium; everything should happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things. *He is the mediator*, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality.⁹⁴

Anything other than a total orientation to Christ is a return to a life of sin and falsehood.

If one lives entirely from Christ, with Christ standing between the person and reality, what does this mean for Christian agency? This chapter seeks to ascertain whether Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christian life implies a competitive relationship between human and divine agency. Specifically, I am seeking to understand whether Bonhoeffer suggests that in becoming a Christian, the person should not "own" their own actions and relationships, nor see them as flowing from themselves (their identity, history, context etc.), and instead see them as coming entirely from Christ's revelation, spoken through scripture and the proclamation of others. If one must let go of their understanding of reality in order to receive everything entirely from Christ, then grace would seem to deplete or destroy human nature, leaving us with a competitive notion of divine and human agency: I deny myself in order to live entirely from and in reference to Christ the mediator.⁹⁵

⁹² DBWE 4:207; DBW 4:221.

⁹³ We will explore Christ as mediator in more detail in the Church chapter, pp. 119-123.

⁹⁴ DBWE 4:93-94; DBW 4:88. Bonhoeffer consistently uses *der Mittler* for Christ's role as mediator, a word which in the German captures more explicitly that Christ not only *mediates* but is truly *in the middle* of relationships, and in the *centre* of reality.

⁹⁵ On the misuse of a theology of submission, see Catherine Clark Kroeger, 'Let's Look Again At The Biblical Concept of Submission', in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. by Marie M. Fortune and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 135-140. This will be touched on again in the Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 139-168, especially pp. 144-148.

This could seem to be the case in some of Bonhoeffer's writings. For example, in Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde material, self-denial is emphasised as key to discipleship. Christians are made ethically responsible for others in conformation with Christ's freedom-for, but, in such responsibility, they look *entirely outside* of themselves. In themselves, they have no wisdom or knowledge. Describing the Beatitudes in *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer describes disciples as 'needy in every way.... For [Jesus'] sake they have lost all'⁹⁶; they are meek and 'renounce all rights of their own for the sake of Jesus Christ'⁹⁷; they hunger and thirst for righteousness and have a pure heart which 'does not know about good and evil... [and] depends solely on Jesus...'⁹⁸; their heart 'belongs entirely and undividedly to Christ; it looks only to him, who goes on ahead.'⁹⁹

Bonhoeffer consistently suggests that to enter discipleship, the person must die to their previous earthly existence and exist instead entirely in reference to Christ: 'they no longer live by their own resources... [but] live entirely by God's word pronounced on them, in faithful submission to God's judgment, whether it declares them guilty or righteous.'¹⁰⁰ In fact, self-denial means 'knowing only Christ, no longer knowing oneself. It means no longer seeing oneself, only him who is going ahead.'¹⁰¹ Christians 'in themselves... are destitute and dead.'¹⁰² Responsible Christian action therefore comes *solely* from Christ. The disciple should not own their actions, nor see their actions in relation to their own agency; they do not look to themselves, nor have their own wisdom – they know only the one they are following.

This self-denial is not only present in Christian actions but also in relationships. Bonhoeffer continues in *Life Together*, that in Christ's church community, 'the more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede, and the more clearly and purely will Jesus and his work become the one and only thing that is alive between us.'¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer proceeds to compare relationships which come from the 'self' vs those viewed through Christ the mediator.

Self-centred love loves the other for the sake of itself; spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ. That is why self-centred love seeks direct contact with the other persons. It loves them, not as free persons, but as those whom it binds to itself. It wants to do everything it can to win and conquer... Self-centred love does not think much of truth. It

⁹⁶ DBWE 4:102; DBW 4:101.9/2/2023 3:46:00 PM

⁹⁷ DBWE 4:105; DBW 4:104.

⁹⁸ DBWE 4:107; DBW 4:106-107.

⁹⁹ DBWE 4:107; DBW 4:107.

¹⁰⁰ DBWE 5:31; DBW 5:19.

¹⁰¹ DBWE 4:86; DBW 4:79.

¹⁰² DBWE 5:34; DBW 5:22.

¹⁰³ DBWE 5:32; DBW 5:19-20.

makes the truth relative, since nothing, not even the truth, must come between it and the person loved.¹⁰⁴

The implication here is that relationships formed from human desires are defective. Human relationships seek to ‘conquer’ the other, loving others for what they do for *me* rather than loving the other for *who they are*. Such relationships can never be ‘true’ because to be truthful, Christ must be in the middle as mediator. I therefore ought not trust my own desires and instead seek to view others through what Christ reveals to me, through his word in scripture, preaching, and sacrament. Indeed, Bonhoeffer explicitly states that ‘[c]ontrary to all my own opinions and convictions, Jesus Christ will tell me what love for my brothers and sisters really looks like. Therefore, spiritual love is bound to the word of Jesus Christ alone. Where Christ tells me to maintain community for the sake of love, I desire to maintain it. Where the truth of Christ orders me to dissolve a community for the sake of love, I will dissolve it, despite all the protests of my self-centred love.’¹⁰⁵ I remain in a community only for as long as the word of Christ compels me to do so. I ought to subdue my own desires and preferences even in the most intimate of relationships – as Bonhoeffer reminds us, marriage is a type of community¹⁰⁶ – to live entirely through Christ.

In an earlier lecture on the prophets, Bonhoeffer writes in even stronger terms, that ‘God has chosen [the prophet as] a vessel of his will, but he breaks that human vessel to pieces because he is too powerful; God rips apart, breaks to pieces, destroys the... human figure... *to be the bearer of the living God*.’¹⁰⁷ The human agent is a vessel for God’s infinite agency to work in and through. We seem, therefore, to be presented with a radically competitive understanding of divine and human agency, where the human is emptied of sinful agency and taken over by God’s absolute will.

It is true Bonhoeffer says in *Discipleship* that *one chooses to follow Christ*. The disciple must respond to Christ’s call by taking a step, which,

puts the follower into the situation of being able to believe. If people do not follow, they remain behind, then they do not learn to believe. Those called must get out of their situations, in which they cannot believe, into a situation in which faith can begin.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ DBWE 5:42; DBW 5:29.

¹⁰⁵ DBWE 5:43; DBW 5:30. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁶ God ‘has a purpose for every community no matter how small, every friendship, every marriage, every family,’ DBWE 1:119; DBW 1:74.

¹⁰⁷ DBWE 10:332; DBW 10:292. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸ DBWE 4:62; DBW 4:50.

The disciple must step out of their previous life and security into a new life in Jesus' call.¹⁰⁹

However, this very choice to follow Christ seems precisely to *be a choice to let go of my free decision making*; to leave my past behind, and along with it my previous relationships,¹¹⁰ and knowledge.¹¹¹ As Bonhoeffer says, '[t]he road to faith passes *through obedience to Christ's call*.'¹¹² The disciple freely chooses to follow Jesus but this choice seems to be based on a competitive notion of divine and human agency. In choosing to follow Christ, I am also choosing to base my actions and relationships entirely on his teachings, asking only what he would have me do in each and every situation. I am *choosing* to follow Christ, but this choice requires me to disregard my own desires, understanding, and wisdom. It is for this reason that the rich man of Matthew 19:16-22 fails to become a disciple, Bonhoeffer says.

He is not looking at the commandments. He is instead looking at himself again, his problems, his conflicts. He retreats from God's clear commandment back to the interesting, indisputably human situation of "ethical conflict." It is not wrong that he knows about such a conflict, but it is wrong that the conflict is played off against God's commandments. The commandments are actually given in order to bring ethical conflicts to an end.¹¹³

Thinking in this way, of human conflict vs God's commandment, is for Bonhoeffer here, 'already a refusal to obey the commandment. Double-minded thinking has replaced the simple act.'¹¹⁴ The Christian can therefore indeed claim that discipleship consists of choosing to follow Christ freely and deliberately. The problem is that in making such a daily choice, Bonhoeffer seems to suggest a need to *turn away* from any ingredients the person brings to a situation which may feed into and result in an ethical conflict, and instead accept that all human patterns of perception, thought, and memory must be destroyed to make way for grace.

The first issue in this chapter, then, is that Bonhoeffer seems in places to suggest that grace does not heal or redeem our histories, our identities, or our capacities, so much as destroy them. To follow Christ daily appears to include a daily attempt to rid myself of any remaining human nature, to turn away from my existing knowledge and relationships, and concentrate on Christ

¹⁰⁹ Peter had to get out of the boat, DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:51. Although obedience is inseparable from belief, as we will explore in the Church chapter, pp. 106-111.

¹¹⁰ "Those who dare to become single individuals trusting in the word are given the gift of church-community. They find themselves again in a visible community of faith, which replaces a hundredfold what they lost.... In the mere fact that they now have everything solely through Jesus, that they have it through the mediator," DBWE 4:99; DBW 4:95.

¹¹¹ DBWE 4:101-107; DBW 4:99-107; DBWE 5:31-32; DBW 5:19-20.

¹¹² DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:51.

¹¹³ DBWE 4:71; DBW 4:61.

¹¹⁴ DBWE 4:71; DBW 4:62.

alone. The more I rid myself of my desires, the more I can be obedient to Christ's justifying grace.

This leads to the second problem to assess. If we understand divine and human agency in competition, everything relies on grace coming in as a purging force to strip the person of their sinful agency. If this is the case, we need to ask what remains *between* moments of Christ's encounter and accompanying grace. If Christ's encounter comes to destroy sin and does not simultaneously build something *new* – forming a new identity for the Christian as they live in the world – this destroys any sense of *continuity* or life under grace. Grace can then only come in the form of repeated acts of interruption, or destructions, of my sinful self. If this is so, Christian life is reduced to a life 'in the crater', as it were, waiting for the next 'divine bombshell' to hit.¹¹⁵

Without continuity of grace, there can be no formation of the Christian self. Christian action, so imagined, is destined to become piecemeal and sporadic. Returning to *Discipleship*, we read '[t]wice the call went to Peter: Follow me! It was Jesus' first and last word to his disciple... His whole life lies between these two calls;'¹¹⁶ and, '[i]t was God who caused Luther to fail on that path [of monastic life]. God showed him through scripture that discipleship is not the meritorious achievement of individuals, but a divine commandment to all Christians.'¹¹⁷ Ought we infer from these passages that Christian discipleship has no content outside of moments of divine encounter? These statements seem to suggest that there is no Christian learning or internalising of grace, and therefore no formation. Instead, revelation can only break in from the outside. If divine revelation is entirely 'act' [Akt]¹¹⁸ what does this mean for ongoing Christian life, action, and community?

I will demonstrate in this chapter that these two problems regarding the relationship of human agency and grace can be resolved within Bonhoeffer's broader Christology, ecclesiology and theological anthropology, and life under the divine No and Yes. I will explore how Bonhoeffer avoids a competitive understanding of divine and human agency and an understanding of grace without continuity, by exploring his material in the following ways.

¹¹⁵ A purposeful echo of Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung)*, ed. by Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), p. 12 cited in Mark W. Elliott, 'Barth (1919-1922) and the Power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16-17)', in *Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans*, ed. by Christophe Chalamet, Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, and Andreas Dettwiler, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 287-288.

¹¹⁶ DBWE 4:46; DBW 4:31-32.

¹¹⁷ DBWE 4:47; DBW 4:33-34.

¹¹⁸ Bonhoeffer distinguishes between the 'act' and 'being' of revelation in his *Habilitation thesis* (DBWE 2; DBW 2). I will return to this distinction when discussing Bonhoeffer's concept of revelation within the church later in this chapter, pp. 62-65.

In the first two sections, I will discuss the issue of competition between divine and human agency in theology more broadly and then demonstrate how Bonhoeffer's thought differs. For Bonhoeffer, in Christ's call, we are called into conformation with Christ and his filial freedom-for.¹¹⁹ Christ does not overpower me or destroy me. Instead, he reveals to me the freedom-for at the heart of creation. Being brought back into created freedom involves seeing and responding to our situation as creatures made in Christ's image. In this freedom, I am brought into encounter with Christ and am enabled to share in his freedom-for in responsibility. I am truly made *free* – but this freedom constitutes my relation and responsibility to others. So understood, human agency in Christian discipleship is agency that has been *released* and *conformed* to Christ, not destroyed. I am released from false ways of viewing myself and the world, and am brought back to my created freedom with others.

I will further explain this through Bonhoeffer's idea of the divine No and Yes. In some works, especially in the Finkenwalde era, Bonhoeffer seems to call for extreme self-denial (as above), and yet in his later materials, especially *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he appeals for Christian responsible action in the world, and radical ethical responsibility that comes without a divine safety net. These seem to stand in stark opposition to one another.¹²⁰ I will suggest, however, that Bonhoeffer's thought remains consistent.¹²¹ The difference between his materials lies in their *emphasis*: namely, where Bonhoeffer is emphasising the divine No and the divine Yes, respectively. Under the divine No, our fallen selves are judged, our sins are condemned, and we are called to turn away from our sinful selves. However, in the divine Yes, we are entirely justified and brought into relationship with Christ, where we regain our *true* created freedom in our responsibility to others. As disciples, we exist under the divine No and the divine Yes *simultaneously*. We are truly judged but also truly justified and released into our created freedom. Discipleship therefore doesn't entail a simple competitive notion where we lose ourselves to receive Christ's grace. Rather, we shed our fallen sinful selves (in God's No) but this occurs in order to simultaneously *regain* our created freedom (in God's Yes). So understood,

¹¹⁹ Christ's encounter *creates* personhood. Bonhoeffer's understanding of personhood is in 'strikingly ethical terms,' Stephen J. Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 63.

¹²⁰ Judging continuity with Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is not helped by the 'unfinished character of these papers... the very specific theological language Bonhoeffer uses, and the new and unusual concept of the book,' Hans Pfeifer, 'Ethics for the Renewal of Life: A Reconstruction of its Concept', in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition: Papers Presented at the Seventh International Bonhoeffer Congress, Cape Town, 1996*, ed. by John W. De Gruchy (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997), p. 137.

¹²¹ There is a development in the emphasis from self-denial to ethical responsible action, but I will argue that the theological message remains consistent. We deny the self that is fallen, in line with the divine No of God's judgement; we are released into freedom-for, in line with the divine Yes of God's justification. These are two sides of the same theological coin; cf. James H. Burtress, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 121.

Bonhoeffer avoids a competitive understanding of divine and human agency, and we can also regain a sense of continuity in his thought.

My discussion of the divine No and Yes will lead to an explanation of Bonhoeffer's notion of simplicity and wisdom. Bonhoeffer does not deny that there is a form of wisdom we can inhabit as Christians. The wisdom he points to, however, is a wisdom *grounded in simplicity*. Wisdom is constituted in knowing our lives to be lived entirely under God's divine No and Yes. To be simple and follow Christ alone is not to have a reduced or naïve view of the world.¹²² On the contrary, *simplicity* allows one to see the true nature of reality as conformed to and united with Christ. The simplicity Bonhoeffer calls for is not a simplicity which reduces the self; it is a simplicity which comes from being reunited to my created nature through Christ. Simplicity therefore *is* wisdom. Simple wisdom requires allowing false knowledge of the world to be interrupted and judged in the divine No, but it is also an invitation to see the world as it *really is*, as created and reconciled in Christ through the divine Yes. Christians live in accordance with this revealed wisdom, as something that can be learnt, internalised and inhabited.

I will then explore God's place in the world in relation to Christian existence. Bonhoeffer speaks of God as being the limit but also the centre of human existence. Hearing the divine No, we encounter God's word as something outside us. We are encountered by Christ as God's word, who judges our sinful existence. The word comes as a barrier that must confront and overwhelm us. And yet, to be encountered and overcome by Christ is precisely to be reminded of the centre of myself and the world. The world is created in relationship with God, who is at the centre of everything. Reality *is* God's reality. Christian agency is therefore not a grappling to seek and understand God by looking to the edges of human thought; it is in fact a return to the centre of who we are, receiving life entirely from Christ, and passing this gift to others through our freed will. Christ, through the divine No and Yes, calls us back to the centre of our created selves (theological anthropology) which is precisely to live for others (ecclesiology).

Finally, having established the pattern of human agency in Christ's freedom-for under the divine No and Yes, I will look at the continuity of revelation, demonstrating that Bonhoeffer's understanding of revelation occurs *within* the church community. The truth that is uncovered to us in revelation is a truth that we belong to one another and are responsible to one another. Being awoken to this truth of mutual responsibility at the centre of who we are *is* to be awoken

¹²² Even if the German for 'simple' (*Einfalt*) may imply this! See discussion on p. 54.

to our true freedom. There is continuity of revelation because revelation is never received in isolation but *within our community*.

The revealed truth of mutual responsibility is not only a truth *about* our relation to one another, but is also a truth we learn *with* and *from* one another. We increasingly inhabit our lives under the divine No and Yes, in the simple wisdom that God is at the centre of our lives, as we come to know and experience more deeply that we live with and from one another, and with one another's help. Revelation occurs, and continues to occur, *in our relationships in the church-community*. The form of our obedience to Christ's word (the divine No and Yes) therefore takes place in our collective learning how to live together and form a life that we share.

Human and Divine Agency

If God breaks into a person's life, overpowering them through his infinite power and directing them to Christ and others in vicarious representative action, what happens to the human agent and their self-determination? How can we possibly comprehend an all-powerful God working alongside human agency? The two would appear to be at odds with one another: the more of one we uphold, the more the other must diminish in proportion.

I would like to explore the nature of divine and human agency as it has been discussed by other theologians before bringing the topic into conversation with Bonhoeffer's material specifically. Given what we have discussed in the introduction of this chapter, Bonhoeffer sometimes seems to present a competitive understanding of divine and human agency. Disciples reduce themselves, their knowledge, and understanding in order to follow God. A very different idea of divine and human agency is present in the work of Kathryn Tanner¹²³ and Rowan Williams, among others.¹²⁴ I will present Tanner and Williams' notion of non-competitive human and divine agency, and show that, despite initial appearances, Bonhoeffer is not as far away from this theology as he may seem.

The issue with divine and human relations can often be reduced to an issue of divine *power*, especially when construed as 'power over.'¹²⁵ Power wielded in this way is exercised instead of and superseding human power. The problem with a 'power over' understanding of divine relations with creation, however, is that it makes a crucial mistake. Namely, it places God as an item in the universe, that can somehow replace finite nature. This confuses the nature of God's infinite agency. A non-competitive view of divine and human agency insists instead that divine and created action do not stand *against* one another in competition due to the different *natures* of these agencies.

¹²³ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

¹²⁴ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum), 2018, p. xii; cf. Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters*, first edition (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1987), pp. 10-11, Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 79; see related critique of Sarah Coakley, Graham Ward and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, Gender, Theology and Spirituality, first edition. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹²⁵ For a discussion of 'power over', see Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2011); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, Volume I: Christianity, second edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), pp. 134-142.

If, as Williams says, we understand and accept God as the source 'of every limited, finite state of affairs, then God cannot be spoken of as one item in a list of the forces active in the world.'¹²⁶ Instead, God is *the source* of all these finite agencies. Due to this, God and divine power can never be understood in *competition* with any activity inside the universe. Tanner agrees,

If God's agency... [is] universal and immediate, then everything non-divine must be talked about as existing in a relation of total and immediate dependence upon God. Non-divine beings must be talked about as always and in every respect *constituted* by, and therefore *nothing apart from*, an immediate relation with the founding agency of God.¹²⁷

Creaturely agency in the world is established in God's gift of creation. God is the source of all life and action in the world. Everything in the world relies upon this gift and is nothing outside of this gift. And *because* God is the founding agent of all there is in the world, God cannot be said to be *in* the world. The finite agency of creation is therefore not in competition with God. Humans *can truly have agency in the world* – founded in and sustained through God's everlasting infinite power. We must therefore maintain a direct rather than 'inverse proportion between what the creature has, on the one hand, and the extent and influence of God's agency, on the other.'¹²⁸ The creature becomes what it is and flourishes not by way of separation or opposition to God, 'but within the intimacy of a relationship to divinity as its total ground.'¹²⁹

We can therefore identify two orders of efficacy. There is the horizontal created order of cause and effect found in finite agency. There is simultaneously the vertical 'order whereby God founds the former.'¹³⁰ Predicates applied to created beings concern what happens in the horizontal created order, the plane of cause, effect, and competition with other finite agents. But these predicates say *nothing* about the vertical relation of a creature's dependence on God. We can therefore maintain free human agency founded in and entirely dependent upon God's infinite self.

To be free, a person must be master, one might suppose, of that which conditions choice on the created level. To be contingent, a created cause must have a non-necessary logical relation with its created effects. Freedom or contingency of such a sort says nothing about a creature's freedom or contingency with respect to the divine agent who creatively founds the whole of created beings and their effects and their mode of relation. There need be no contradiction in saying relations that are free or contingent along the horizontal axis of a

¹²⁶ Williams, *Christ the Heart*, p. xii.

¹²⁷ Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 84.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 85.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp. 89-90.

created order are determined to be so in a vertical relation of absolute dependence upon divine agency.¹³¹

Human agents are truly free whilst also entirely dependent upon God. Indeed, as Barth states, God is active *alongside* the creature. God allows the creature to be active in its freedom, but always also participating in God's gift.¹³² Wherever human activity thrives, there we have truly free agency – by virtue of God's 'directly effective will to preserve, under His direct and superior cooperation and according to His immediate direction.'¹³³

Another way to think about this is by orders of causality. Created causes are always secondary causes with respect to the primary creative agency of God. God wills everything to happen in the world, and therefore created causes are subordinate to God's agency.¹³⁴ However, created causes also possess their own operation and efficacy, and are executors of the causal order God ordains. Although the creative agency of God directly 'founds and sustains a creative being in its power, operations and actual production of created effects... Created beings are the executors of the order for the world.'¹³⁵ Effects in the world are therefore wholly attributable to natural causes *and* divine power.

For Tanner and Williams, the world is sustained by God's power – from the smallest of organisms to the most complex of human accomplishments. There is no sense of competition between divine and human agency in this model. Given what we described in the introduction of this chapter, of Bonhoeffer's notion of self-denial in Christian discipleship, his theology would appear to be in opposition to such thought. As I will explore, however, Bonhoeffer's theology of agency can be fruitfully located in proximity to this tradition of non-competitive agency, but also going beyond it through his specific vision of Christian encounter with Christ.¹³⁶

What we will find is that Bonhoeffer understands Christian agency in and alongside Christ's encounter in a very specific way. As I will demonstrate, Christ's grace does indeed take over and kill the sinful human self, *but* only as it simultaneously releases the person into their created – and thus God-given – freedom in responsibility.

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 90.

¹³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation, Volume 3, Part 3: The Creator And His Creature*, paperback edition (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), referenced in Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 93.

¹³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3:3, p. 13 referenced in Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 91.

¹³⁴ Tanner, *God and Creation*, pp. 91-92; cf. Austin Farrer, *Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry* Austin Farrer's *The Glass of Vision With Critical Commentary*, ed. by Robert MacSwain (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) pp. 22-23.

¹³⁵ Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 92.

¹³⁶ After all, Christology is never about 'the general relation between God and creatures', Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 7. In this volume, Tanner offers her own Christological account of non-competitive divine human relations.

Christ's Free Obedience

We have established above that, as the source of the created world, divine agency founds and sustains all creaturely agency and is not in competition with it. This is true at the level of creation, as we have discussed. However, it is revealed in a unique way in Christ's incarnation. As Williams says, thinking Christologically 'requires us to think of non-duality in its proper sense: God and the world are not two things to be added together. Neither are they two things that are "really" one thing. They exist in an asymmetrical relation in which one depends wholly on the other, yet is fully itself, made to be and to act to its own logic and structure.'¹³⁷ The incarnation is not an extra-terrestrial event, through which God changes himself in order to enter an alien world. It is instead, a radical change in the 'relation between the world and its maker at a particular point in history, such that one element of that world... [becomes] uniquely the vehicle of the absolute creative freedom of God the word.'¹³⁸

Thomas Aquinas can be used as a compelling lens for understanding the specific non-competitive relations revealed in Christ.¹³⁹ Jesus' true humanity and agency, Aquinas says, are inseparably and permanently united to the word of God. The limitless love that belongs to Jesus from all eternity is *actualized* through his life and death, but is not *augmented* by those events.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, however, it is only the enactment, above all on the cross, Williams says, 'that his love, now embodied in the world, can release the grace we need. *Limitless* love has to become actively real in our world through *limited* human action, including suffering.'¹⁴¹ Jesus truly acts and lives in history. Simultaneously, however, the reconciliation of the world to God, gained through Christ's action, cannot merely be described as a historical episode. It is a supernatural act, bringing about what no other agent in creation could do through their own finite capacity – namely, bringing fallen creation back into right relationship with God. We therefore need to access an 'adequate language to tell the truth about Jesus... [as] a model for the union of divine and human action in Christ that sees Christ as the historical and bodily *location* of unlimited active freedom.'¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart*, p. xiv.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. xiv-xv.

¹³⁹ Williams compares Aquinas and Bonhoeffer in *Christ the Heart*, ch. 1; cf. Barry Harvey, 'Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, by Peter Frick (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), pp. 11–30.

¹⁴⁰ *Summa Theologiae* III, questions 17 and 18 in Thomas Aquinas, *The Collected Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Past Masters (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 1993).

¹⁴¹ Williams, *Christ the Heart*, p. 21; cf. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, pp. 16–26.

¹⁴² Williams, *Christ the Heart*, p. 5.

For this reason, Aquinas promotes *esse* language. *Esse*, Williams says, means ‘*active existence*’, and therefore denotes everything that is involved in ‘being the kind of substance that thing really is, [and] the kind of impact its presence makes in the world as it really is.’¹⁴³ This differs from *essence*. *Essence* involves the kinds of things we use to qualify the identity of something. For example, we can identify certain general qualities which identify the essence of a horse and not a cat. *Esse* is something different.

[E]sse is applied to actual individuals in the world... being this or that distinct subject, *this* horse, *this* human... only in this particular identifying context can we speak of active being.¹⁴⁴

Crucial to *esse* is recognising the ‘active phenomenon’¹⁴⁵ of a being. Based on active phenomenon – the behaviour, mannerisms, and effect – of a particular dog, for example, we can confidently identify a dog as being *Fido*. It must be Fido, and ‘not Spot or Rover; this dog can be identified as having a unique history, a unique set of specifying relations.’¹⁴⁶ It is this aspect of *esse* which is the most comprehensive, because it designates something as a concrete and continuous agent in the world, through the active phenomenon of its unique history, qualities, behaviours, and relationships.

Importantly, leaving Fido behind and returning to Christ, nothing can be added to or subtracted from the *esse* of the divine word in the incarnation.¹⁴⁷

The *esse* of the divine word as such, as the second Person of the eternal Trinity, is what it is in virtue of its eternal relation to God the Father – an eternal living-out of divine life in the mode of ‘filiation’, the eternal self-sufficient life that is God’s realizing itself as ‘Son’, as the divine life receiving divine life as eternal gift and eternally giving it in return.¹⁴⁸

Jesus Christ is a human embodiment of the *same pattern* of agency through which the divine word is the word. Hence, Williams adds, ‘when we speak theologically of the divine Word, we do not and cannot speak simply of this eternal subject; we speak of what the divine Word has actually done in this world and of how we have learned to identify the divine Word in action within human history.’¹⁴⁹ We cannot divorce the human Christ from the divine word, and yet we also cannot do away with the earthly Christ. For it is Christ in his earthly ministry, crucifixion, subsequent resurrection and founding of the church who calls Christians to *share* in his filial *esse*.

¹⁴³ Ibid. p. 26.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 27

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 29.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Jesus is an inseparable part of our theological discourse about the Word, to the extent that we should never have learned to speak plainly about the Word's activity, or to associate ourselves in faith with the Word's activity, independently of Jesus.¹⁵⁰

To be affiliated with Jesus Christ means sharing in, deriving one's identity and 'the conditions and constraints of community membership from this common source.'¹⁵¹ Discipleship means to become *affiliated with Jesus* and his *esse*. Affiliated here means more than to merely choose to be like Jesus; it is to share ontologically in the same existence of Christ; to be brought into the same *esse*.

The pattern of identity shared by Christ to those he calls is one of *filiation*. Filiation is an *esse* that is active and deliberate, but *simultaneously* dependent and receptive. Indeed, filiation can *only* be active in a dependent and receptive way. Everything Christ has and does is from God the Father. Jesus acts in a way that depends entirely upon the Father. He is wholly obedient to the Father and receives everything that he is and does from the Father. And yet simultaneously, Christ acts in a way that is also wholly his own. His actions are entirely his, flowing from his filial identity. It is therefore not that Christ chooses to obey the Father, as if he chooses to obey the Father's will rather than his own. Instead, Jesus, *through* doing the Father's will, is simultaneously *enacting his own will*. Jesus does the Father's will which is *also entirely his own*. His obedience to the Father is also to act in full accordance with who he himself is.

We therefore gain the following picture of Christ; he is given away and suffers at the hands of God – and yet simultaneously *gives himself. He chooses to be given*. Christ's active filial *esse* brings with it a 'new frame of reference for perceiving human agency and human hope.'¹⁵² Such an account of the incarnation coheres closely with a non-competitive account of divine and human agency, but demonstrates how it is specifically instituted through the incarnation.¹⁵³

We find the following language in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*,

Jesus stands before God as the obedient one and as the free one. As the obedient one, he does the will of the Father by blindly following the law he has been commanded. As the free one, he affirms God's will out of his very own insight, with open eyes and a joyful heart; it is as if he re-creates it anew out of himself. Obedience without freedom is slavery, freedom without

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 30.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p. 53.

¹⁵² Ibid. p. 49.

¹⁵³ It is *Christ* who is sacrificed – not a concept. Incarnation and Christology must be united because it is 'by participating through faith in Christ's death and resurrection, the believer is made a new creation. This is achieved through 'inclusive place-taking,' Richard H. Bell, 'Sacrifice and Christology in Paul', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 53.1 (2002), p. 9.

obedience is arbitrariness. Obedience binds freedom, freedom ennobles obedience.

Obedience binds the creature to Creator, freedom places the creature, made in God's image, face-to-face with the Creator.¹⁵⁴

Jesus carries out the father's will in complete obedience to the father. Simultaneously, he *affirms the father's will* 'out of his very own insight, with open eyes and a joyful heart.' Obedience to the will of the father does not entail the suppression of his will. His will instead *affirms* the command of God, and his own creative energy 're-creates' the command out of himself. He *receives all* from God, and simultaneously *gives back* to God entirely from his own will.

Christ lives entirely from God's resources, but also entirely from his own will in response. This is not a person split down the middle between obedience and freedom, forever vacillating between two opposing responses. The entirety of Christ's life involves freedom which constitutes his obedience, and obedience which constitutes his freedom. It is his obedience which grounds and gives basis to his free action; it is his freedom which directs and empowers his obedient action.

Christ's free obedience, his filial *esse*, is what he offers to those who follow him. To those who accept his encounter, he offers the same freely obedient life. Through Christ's encounter, we are bound as creatures to the creator in obedience. However, this obedience *is the simultaneous rediscovery of our true freedom*.¹⁵⁵ We are released in Christ's encounter to act in accordance with our true identity as creatures – namely, our created freedom-for in the image of Christ's own filial freedom. To understand this created freedom, which is freedom in obedience (or responsibility), I would like to turn to one of Bonhoeffer earliest works, *Creation and Fall*.

In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer speaks about the creation of humankind in the image of God:

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. To be sure, it is free only through God's creation, through the word of God; it is free for the worship of the Creator. For in the language of the Bible freedom is not something that people have for themselves but something they have for others. No one is free 'in herself' or 'in himself' ['an sich'] – free as it were in a vacuum or free

¹⁵⁴ DBWE 6:287; the paradoxical nature of this statement is arguably better captured in the original German, due to the more overt direct comparison of two opposing notions in a construction English can't replicate: 'Jesus steht vor Gott als der Gehorsame und als der Freie,' DBW 6:288.

¹⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer subverts 'the cartesian emphasis on the individual thinking subject and the Nietzschean concept of the Übermensch bestriding the world... free *for* him or herself, free *from* external interference and constraints. Bonhoeffer, however, sets his understanding of freedom firmly within the context of community, and, as a result the equation is reversed. Authentic freedom is freedom *from* self, *for* God and *for* others,' Ann L. Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom: Courageously Grasping Reality*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology & Biblical Studies (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 84.

in the same way that a person may be musical, intelligent.... Freedom is not a quality a human being has; it is not an ability... it is a relation and nothing else.¹⁵⁶

To be free is to act in accordance with one's true nature in God's image. For Bonhoeffer, our true nature and situation is that we are creatures who are bound to one another. Therefore, freedom is not something possessed like an attribute. Instead, it is something that 'happens to me through the other.'¹⁵⁷ Freedom is a 'relation between two people'¹⁵⁸ and therefore being free does not mean to be free for oneself; instead, it means being 'free-for-one-another,'¹⁵⁹ because I am bound to the other. To hide myself away¹⁶⁰ from ethical responsibility is in fact to evade my created freedom. Christ's encounter releases me from sinful isolation and back into relation with the other who constitutes my freedom.

To be free, therefore, means being free *for* others in responsibility; only 'by being in relation with the other am I free.'¹⁶¹ Freedom therefore always *includes* ethical responsibility – i.e. obedience to – the other who I am set in relation with and who I am free for. Just as Christ is free for humankind, humans are free for other humans, the world, and God. I am bound to Christ, the other person and to the world in my responsibility. My creaturely nature is constituted in this bound responsibility (obedience), but this simultaneously constitutes my freedom and active response in the world.

From the ethical perspective, therefore, 'human beings do not exist "unmediated" qua spirit in and of themselves, but only in responsibility vis-à-vis an "other."' ¹⁶² Because this is so, to be encountered by Christ in the call is to be brought back *into* created freedom-for in ethical responsibility. The person is 'created in the moment of being moved – in the situation of responsibility, passionate ethical struggle, confrontation by an overwhelming claim.'¹⁶³ The individual only *exists* in relation to others.

How does this relate to what we have explored so far? God's agency, embodied through Christ's incarnation and subsequent call, does not come as a power which sets itself over against me, in such a way that I am in competition with divine agency. This corresponds with the presentation of agency set out by Tanner and Williams. Bonhoeffer, however, does not speak about

¹⁵⁶ DBWE 3:62-63; DBW 3:58.

¹⁵⁷ DBWE 3:63; DBW 3:59.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer expresses this literally in DBWE 3/DBW 3 when after the fall Adam hides himself from God (DBWE 3:127; DBW 3:119), and Adam and Eve hide their nakedness from one another (DBWE 3:124; DBW 3:117).

¹⁶¹ DBWE 3:63; DBW 3:59.

¹⁶² DBWE 1:50; DBW 1:30.

¹⁶³ DBWE 1:49; DBW 1:29.

reconciling human and divine agency in *general*, but rather how God brings human beings back into alignment with their true selves through conformation to Christ in his call.

Christ does not overpower finite agency, but instead offers and enables finite agency the possibility of returning to its God given nature. Christ calls human agents back into their created selves, to that which God originally intended. Christ as the ultimate vicarious representative of humanity works on behalf of humankind to bring them into reconciliation with God. Christ calls humanity to conform to his image; the image in which we were originally created. Here we are reminded that we are selves-existing-in-relation, selves-in-movement-toward-one-another. We are created free, but that very freedom is the freedom to be responsible for one another. Acting in responsibility and obedience to God and others is to act *as we were created to be and what we were created for*. God's infinite agency specifically embodied in Christ's call brings us back into and sustains our created ways of being in this specific way.

To answer Christ's call in discipleship, then, is not to reduce ourselves in our response, but instead to *remind ourselves of our created nature*, which is to be free for others in conformation with Christ. Our existence, our freedom, lies *outside* of ourselves. Our freedom *is* externally oriented. Our freedom *is* in the other. To look outside of ourselves is not to deny our true selves – but is to remind ourselves who we really are.¹⁶⁴

God's call to obedience therefore does not destroy the agency of the person but rather *frees* them into their original state. Much like the account of non-competitive agency provided by Tanner and Williams, the person as creature is created entirely in relation to God. Like Aquinas' *filial esse* language, the person is created in response to another (obedient), but simultaneously actively confirms this response (free). Christ's encounter is a call to return to our created nature of freedom in responsibility to God, the world, and other beings. I am not encountered just once by Christ. Christian discipleship is a *life* lived in response to Christ's encounter, demanding free action for others, knowing that I will be encountered again and again.

It cannot be ignored that Bonhoeffer's material – especially his Finkenwalde writings – includes passages on radical self-denial. As I will explore in the next section, however, this 'denial' is really a denial of the sinful self which has turned away from the creaturely nature of freedom-for. Christ's call which comes to destroy the sinful self, however, is only one half of the encounter. This is the divine No, bringing divine judgement on our sinful, fallen selves. However,

¹⁶⁴ Charles Marsh, 'The Overabundant Self and the Transcendental Tradition: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Self-Reflective Subject', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 60.4 (1992), pp. 659–672.

the divine No is only and always given alongside the divine Yes of justification and divine grace. The Christian lives under the divine No and Yes simultaneously. We are judged of our sinful selves, but also justified, released, and brought into conformation with Christ's own being. It is living under the divine No and Yes and how this relates to human agency that I will consider in the next section.

Life Under the Divine No and Yes

We have established that Christian personhood is constituted in freedom-for, conformed to Christ's own filial identity. The disciple, encountered by Christ in scripture, preaching, or through the word of another Christian, is reminded that they are created to be in relation to others, which instead of taking their freedom away, in fact constitutes and directs their freedom in relation. Christ was free for us in his earthly mission and on the cross, but simultaneously worked in complete obedience to the father; we are free for others in the world but are simultaneously entirely obedient to and responsible for our community, Christ, and God. It is through such an understanding of human nature that Bonhoeffer avoids a notion of competitive divine and human agency.

It cannot be ignored, however, that in some of Bonhoeffer's material, especially in his earlier work and the Finkenwalde material, he describes Christian life as including self-denial. Returning to passages considered in the introduction of this chapter, Bonhoeffer says that disciples are 'needy in every way'¹⁶⁵; they 'renounce all rights of their own for the sake of Jesus Christ'¹⁶⁶; they hunger and thirst for righteousness; they do 'not know about good and evil' but depend 'solely on Jesus.'¹⁶⁷ Discipleship means 'knowing only Christ, no longer knowing oneself. It means no longer seeing oneself, only him who is going ahead.'¹⁶⁸ Christians 'in themselves... are destitute and dead.'¹⁶⁹

And yet in his later works, especially *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer calls for Christian ethical responsibility in the world. Christian responsibility is

not merely concerned with good intention, but also with the good outcome of action; not only with motive, but also with content. It seeks to understand the entire given reality in its origin, essence, and goal, seeing it under the divine Yes and No. The objective is not the application of some kind of limitless general principle. Thus, in the given situation it is necessary to observe, weigh, evaluate, and decide, and to do all that with limited human

¹⁶⁵ DBWE 4:102; DBW 4:101. In the DBWE translation and in the original German, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer's treatment of the Beatitudes, for example 'needy', are an indicative *description* of the state of discipleship rather than a *normative statement*. For example, 'Mangel haben die Jünger an allen Stücken', literally translates as 'The disciples *have want* of every piece,' and not '*should have want*'. Bonhoeffer does not claim disciples *ought to be needy*, instructing them to reduce themselves or their situation to enter discipleship; rather they *are* needy, their situation *has* changed after Christ's encounter, viewing life not through themselves but through Christ alone. This is a subtle but pertinent distinction. 02/09/2023 15:46:00

¹⁶⁶ DBWE 4:105; DBW 4:104.

¹⁶⁷ DBWE 4:107; DBW 4:106-107.

¹⁶⁸ DBWE 4:86; DBW 4:79.

¹⁶⁹ DBWE 5:34; DBW 5:22.

understanding. We must have courage to look into the immediate future; we must seriously consider the consequences of our actions; and we must attempt seriously to examine our own motives and our own hearts.... [And] at the given place to consider reality and do what is necessary.¹⁷⁰

The Christian described here in *Ethics* must assess a given situation, observe, and decide what to do. The Christian deed is done only 'after... weighing all personal and factual circumstance.'¹⁷¹ In *Ethics* and in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer speaks about the role of the Christian in ethical conflict. It is the Christian alone who can 'stand firm'¹⁷² against worldly evil. All ethical positions other than the Christian acting in responsibility ultimately fail.¹⁷³ The Christian is 'called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one.'¹⁷⁴ Only the Christian, in the end, can face up to the evil in the world.

Bonhoeffer's thoughts on Christian agency certainly develop over his theological career and can be characterised as a movement from emphasising self-denial to an emphatic call for free, responsible Christian action in the world. However, as I will demonstrate, I believe Bonhoeffer's underlying theology of agency remains consistent, albeit with a changing emphasis. Described generally, his Finkenwalde era focuses on the 'No' of discipleship, and the later works on the 'Yes'.¹⁷⁵ Christian life, however, is to live beneath both the No and the Yes of God *simultaneously*. Bonhoeffer describes this in the first half of 'History and Good II' in his *Ethics*.¹⁷⁶

In 'History and Good II', Bonhoeffer states that when we are 'struck by the word'¹⁷⁷ of Christ, we recognise that

we have fallen from life, from our life. We recognize that we live in contradiction to life, to our life. In this word of Jesus Christ we thus hear the No spoken over our life, which is not life, or rather, is life only in the sense that even in our contradiction we actually still live from the life called Jesus Christ, the life that is the origin, essence, and goal of all life and of our life. The No spoken over our fallen life means that it cannot become the life that is Jesus Christ without its own end, annihilation, and death. The No that we hear brings about this death.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁰ DBWE 6:267-268; DBW 6:267.

¹⁷¹ DBWE 6:268; DBW 6:268.

¹⁷² DBWE 8:40; DBW 8:23.

¹⁷³ See DBWE 6:77-83; DBW 6:63-69; DBWE 8:38-40; DBW 8:20-23; cf. discussion in Larry Rasmussen, 'The Ethics of Responsible Action', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 206-225.

¹⁷⁴ DBWE 8:40; DBW 8:23.

¹⁷⁵ As compared to his early works, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, where I would argue that human and divine agency are treated with largely the same theological stance but less explicitly and in a more dispassionate way. For reasons of space, I have not been able to expand my discussion to these texts here.

¹⁷⁶ 'History and Good II' in DBWE 6:246-298; DBW 6:245-299.

¹⁷⁷ DBWE 6:250; DBW 6:250.

¹⁷⁸ DBWE 6:250-251; DBW 6:250.

To enter discipleship with Christ, therefore, is to die to our fallen life. It is to recognise that the 'life' we have been living is in fact not life at all, because our true life is the life in which Jesus is recognised as 'the origin, essence of, and goal.'

The No spoken over us therefore kills us and the 'life' we have been living. To kill this 'life', however, is to simultaneously recognise this 'life' was not truly life at all. Indeed, as Bonhoeffer says in *Creation and Fall*, having fallen away from the creator in sin, the 'life' that humans lead is actually life *in death*. To live in death means having to live by one's own resources, knowledge of good and evil, and to no longer live in recognition of God as the centre of all reality – and yet still having to live before God in the world 'as an outlaw, as one who is lost and damned.'¹⁷⁹ This 'life' is therefore really to be dead. To be dead 'means to-have-to-live'¹⁸⁰ and 'have life not as a gift but as a *commandment*.'¹⁸¹ It is life in death because

The *commandment to live* demands from me something that I am not in a position to fulfil. It obliges me to live out of myself, out of my own resources, and I am unable to do that...

Humankind... *lives* out of its own resources; it is alone. Yet *it cannot live*, because in fact it does not live but in this life is dead, because it *must* live, that is, it *must* accomplish life out of its own resources and just that is its death.¹⁸²

Fallen human life means living according to one's own apparent knowledge of the world. Yet, 'living' this life is to not be able to live at all, because it is separate from the source and origin of life. Fallen humanity exists in a circle of experiencing good and evil, good which comes from evil, and evil which comes from good, without access to the centre of all reality which is truly God.¹⁸³ It is separated from created freedom in responsibility to others.

To be encountered by Christ, therefore, is to recognise that we have 'fallen from'¹⁸⁴ and are living in contradiction to life in Christ. We need to hear the divine No spoken over this life which in fact is truly 'not life' because it is lived in ignorance of Christ as 'the origin, essence of and goal of all life and of our life.'¹⁸⁵ The No spoken over us, Bonhoeffer, says, is necessary because we

¹⁷⁹ DBWE 3:90; DBW 3:84-85.

¹⁸⁰ DBWE 3:91; DBW 3:85. It is interesting to contrast the normative statements of fallen life (in death) here with the indicative description of Christian personhood we considered from the Beatitudes above in DBWE 4:102; DBW 4:101. In the Beatitudes, disciples live in Christ; here the fallen human *must live*, which is precisely not to live at all: 'denn er *muß* nun leben... er *muß* es aus sich selbst heraus vollbringen, und eben das ist sein Tod.' To regain one's personhood in Christ is to regain life as gift, not command.

¹⁸¹ DBWE 3:90; DBW 3:85.

¹⁸² DBWE 3:91; DBW 3:85.

¹⁸³ Bonhoeffer describes this as living with the knowledge of Tob and Ra, DBWE 3:88-93; DBW 3:82-87.

¹⁸⁴ DBWE 6:250; DBW 6:250.

¹⁸⁵ DBWE 6:251; DBW 6:250.

cannot live in Christ without the 'end, annihilation, and death'¹⁸⁶ of fallen life, which is truly death.

My suggestion is that it is in emphasising the 'No' that Bonhoeffer says disciples do 'not know about good and evil' but depend 'solely on Jesus.'¹⁸⁷ Christ's divine No spoken over the person destroys fallen life. It forces one to recognise that life from one's own resources is no life at all. Hence, Bonhoeffer says in *Discipleship*, disciples should die, forget themselves and view 'only him who is going ahead.'¹⁸⁸ To live as a disciple is to die to one's sinful fallen self. The divine No reveals that in fallen life, one is 'destitute and dead.'¹⁸⁹

However, Bonhoeffer continues in *History and Good II*,

by killing us, the No becomes a hidden Yes to a new life, to the life that is Jesus Christ. Christ is the life that we cannot give ourselves, but which comes to us completely from the outside.... This new life is not present other than hidden under the mark of death, of the No. We now live stretched between the No and the Yes. We can no longer speak about our life other than in this relation to Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ as the origin, essence, and goal of life, of our life, and apart from the fact that we are creatures who are reconciled and redeemed, we can only arrive at biological or ideological abstractions. As a life that is created, reconciled, and redeemed, and that in Jesus Christ finds its origin, essence, and goal, our life is stretched out between the Yes and the No. Only in the Yes and the No can we recognize Christ as our life.¹⁹⁰

The divine No kills our previous sinful life, but only as it simultaneously offers new life in Christ's divine Yes.

Hearing the divine Yes, which is the yes 'of creation, reconciliation, and redemption'¹⁹¹ does not happen without simultaneously hearing the 'No of judgment and death over life that has fallen away from its origin, essence, and goal.'¹⁹² As Bonhoeffer continues,

no one who knows Christ can hear the Yes without the No and the No without the Yes. It is the Yes to what is created, to becoming to growth, to flower and fruit, to health, to happiness, to ability, to achievement, to value, to success, to greatness, to honor, in short the Yes to the flourishing of life's strength. It is the No to falling away from the origin, essence, and goal of

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ DBWE 4:107; DBW 4:106-107.

¹⁸⁸ DBWE 4:86; DBW 4:79.

¹⁸⁹ DBWE 5:34; DBW 5:22.

¹⁹⁰ DBWE 6:251; DBW 6:250.

¹⁹¹ DBWE 6:251; DBW 6:251.

¹⁹² Ibid.

life, which is always already inherent in all of these things. It is the No that means dying, suffering, poverty, renunciation, surrender, humility, self-deprecation, and self-denial, and that, in these very forms, again already contains the Yes to new life.¹⁹³

Discipleship, therefore, means life under both of words together – the No of judgement against human fallenness, suffering, and sin; but only together with the Yes to human life in reconciliation with Christ. The No and Yes do not represent two boundaries between which human life vacillates.¹⁹⁴ Rather, the No and Yes are spoken *together*, they belong together, as they call us into a life unified in Jesus Christ. The life of the disciple is ‘one in Jesus Christ, is held between the Yes and the No so that in each Yes already the No is perceived, and in each No also the Yes.’¹⁹⁵ Therefore, Bonhoeffer says, the divine No and the divine Yes, ‘the flourishing of life’s strength and self-denial, growth and death, health and suffering, happiness and renunciation... belong inextricably together in living unity of unresolved contradictions. Any attempt to isolate one from the other, to play one off against the other, or to appeal to one against the other is an unholy destruction of the unity of life. This then leads to the abstraction of a vitalistic ethic and a so-called ethic of Jesus.’¹⁹⁶ The disciple ought not abstract life away from the unity held in Christ’s divine No and Yes spoken over us. It is only by living under both words together that we can leave behind commanded ‘life’, which is actually death, into the unity of life in Christ alone.

It is through encounter with Christ’s No and Yes from outside of myself that I am released to live with and in response to other human beings in my freedom for.

[Christians] are directed outward to the Word coming to them. Christians live entirely by the truth of God’s Word in Jesus Christ. If they are asked “where is your salvation, your blessedness, your righteousness?,” they can never point to themselves. Instead, they point to the Word of God in Jesus Christ that grants them salvation, blessedness, and righteousness. They watch for this Word wherever they can. Because they daily hunger and thirst for righteousness, they long for the redeeming Word again and again. It can only come from the outside.¹⁹⁷

This is a Finkenwalde passage, but it already implicitly contains the framework of life in accordance with Christ’s No and Yes. Having been encountered with Christ, I understand my previous way of living (in death) as fallen. This is to hear the divine No. Simultaneously, however, I am called back into my created nature and freedom constituted in and for others (the divine Yes). I am called *out* of my sinful existence to live in conformation with Christ’s filial *esse*.

¹⁹³ DBWE 6:251-252; DBW 6:251.

¹⁹⁴ We will look further into this later in the chapter, pp. 52-61.

¹⁹⁵ DBWE 6:252; DBW 6:251.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ DBWE 5:31-32; DBW 5:19.

My source of self is found in my relationship to others; my freedom is constituted in responsibility. At the same time, however, I must continue to hunger and thirst for this righteousness, and continue to seek this word in others, in order to overcome my sinful self as it continues to exist in the world.¹⁹⁸

In the divine No, we are called out of our sinful and distorted understanding of ourselves and our world. We need a word from outside of ourselves – a word from Christ – to call us out. This word that comes from the outside, calls us to focus outside of ourselves, in recognition of our dependence upon Christ and our responsibility for one another. Simultaneously, however, this call from outside is a call back *to ourselves*. The divine Yes is a call to remember our true nature; a call to live in accordance with the truth about ourselves and our world. It is therefore a call into true creaturely freedom. It is for this reason, Bonhoeffer says, that Christians ‘need other Christians who speak God’s word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened.’¹⁹⁹ We ‘need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of Christ.’²⁰⁰ We need others to kill our uncertain and disheartened selves (encounter us with the divine No) and bring us back to ourselves under Christ’s reconciling grace (the divine Yes).²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ For more on the relationship between the penultimate and the ultimate, see Church chapter, pp. 129-130 and Suffering chapter, pp. 192-193.

¹⁹⁹ DBWE 5:32; DBW 5:19.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Simple Wisdom

In the previous section, we considered discipleship as taking place under the No and Yes of Christ. Christ's encounter contains the divine No of judgement which kills the sinful self, but only as it simultaneously contains the divine Yes of reconciliation, bringing the person back into their created selves. Discipleship, then, means living under both divine words spoken in unity with one another. The two must not be separated from one another.

Considered from the perspective of the divine No, we hear the word of Christ and realise that we have falsely understood ourselves and our relationship with others and the world. Considered from the divine Yes, Christ's encounter is a call to rediscover a truth about ourselves and the world, and to act in accordance with that truth. We are called to remember that we are creatures acting in freedom-for others in conformation to Christ. Our actions in the world are therefore in response to what has been revealed to us in Christ's encounter.²⁰² Christian life, therefore, 'is not a thing, an essence, or a concept, but a person – more specifically, a particular, and unique person,'²⁰³ Jesus Christ. Jesus never says 'I have life, but I am the life. Life can thus never again be separated from this I, from the person of Jesus.'²⁰⁴ To live in accordance with *reality* is to live in accordance with Christ's divine word(s),²⁰⁵ which has important ramifications for how we understand Christian agency.

This understanding means above all that there ought to be no ethical action taken in abstraction from the reality of the world revealed in Christ. To ask what is ethically "good" is replaced with the question of how I act in accordance with Christ's encounter here and now. It is for such a reason that 'the attention of responsible people is directed to concrete neighbours in their concrete reality. Their behavior is not fixed in advance once and for all by a principle, but develops together with a given situation'²⁰⁶ in response to Christ's encounter. Christians are therefore 'not called to impose a foreign law on reality... their action is in the true sense "*in accordance with reality*"'²⁰⁷ because 'everything that actually exists receives from... Jesus Christ,

²⁰² The transformation of the person in Christ's encounter is not once and for all but is a 'dynamic on-going process, which involves a constant interaction with the reality of the external world. It implies acceptance of responsibility... which renders one capable of openness to others.' Vivienne Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil: A Study in Christian Responsiveness*, Religions and Discourse; v. 24 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 50-51.

²⁰³ DBWE 6:249-250; DBW 6:249.

²⁰⁴ DBWE 6:250; DBW 6:249.

²⁰⁵ 'Reality has a Christocentric structure', Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 16.

²⁰⁶ DBWE 6:261; DBW 6:260.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

both its ultimate foundation and its ultimate negation... its ultimate Yes and its ultimate No.'²⁰⁸

Indeed,

it is because human beings and human reality deserved the divine No that God took on humanity and affirmed it; God became human in the body, thus bearing and suffering, as God, the curse of the divine No upon human nature. Because of what God has done, because of the Real One, because of Jesus Christ, reality now receives its Yes and its No, its legitimacy and its limitation. Affirmation and protest now unite in the concrete action of those who have come to know the Real One. Neither affirmation nor contradiction now comes from an unreal world, nor from a programmatic understanding of the expedient of the ideal. Instead, they come from the reality of the world's reconciliation with God as it has taken place in Christ... That is why it is only in and from Christ that it is possible to act in a way that is in accord with reality.²⁰⁹

To act in accordance with reality *is* to act in accordance with Christ's Yes and No; to act in response to Christ's Yes and No *is* to act in accordance with reality.

Such an understanding means that there is no part of the world in which the Christian ought not act, because the whole world stands under the same No and Yes of Christ.²¹⁰ Action in accordance with Christ is action in accordance with reality 'because it allows the world to be the world and reckons with the world as world, while at the same time never forgetting that the world is loved, judged and reconciled in Jesus Christ by God.'²¹¹ The whole world is 'the *domain of concrete responsibility* that is given to us in and through Jesus Christ,'²¹² with no area out of bounds.

In our sinful 'lives'²¹³, we may be tempted to relate to the world as if it were a realm of isolated and atomised individuals, locked in competition with one another. But to relate to the world in this way is to view the world through a distorted lens. Through Christ's encounter, we are called to recognise that although the world as a realm is full of people (including us) who may *try* to live like that, in so doing they are actually living against their true natures and the nature of reality. Our true nature is to be creatures dependent upon one another and upon God. To act in accordance with Christ's encounter (his No and Yes) is therefore to recognise the entire world

²⁰⁸ DBWE 6:261-262; DBW 6:261.

²⁰⁹ DBWE 6:262-263; DBW 6:262.

²¹⁰ Explored further in the Church chapter, pp. 129-136.

²¹¹ DBWE 6:264; DBW 6:263.

²¹² DBWE 6:276; DBW 6:266.

²¹³ Life actually in death, as we explored above; DBWE 3:90-91; DBW 3:84-86.

under the same No and Yes. To act in accordance with reality *is* to act in accordance with Christ. Bonhoeffer sums this up with the idea of ‘simple wisdom.’

Simple wisdom lies in viewing the world entirely from Christ’s justifying action. For Bonhoeffer, simple wisdom is not naïve.²¹⁴ Conversely, it is exactly what *constitutes true wisdom* vs flawed human knowledge. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer states that for true responsible action in accordance with Christ, we ‘replace rusty weapons with bright steel. Only the person who combines *simplicity* with *wisdom* can endure.’²¹⁵ Bonhoeffer understands simplicity or single-mindedness as following God ‘and... [being] able, free and unconstrained, to see the reality of the world’²¹⁶ as created by God and reconciled through Christ. Simple wisdom means turning away from our false sinful perception of reality (in the divine No), and instead viewing it through Christ’s encounter (the divine Yes). Christian simplicity therefore *is* the ultimate wisdom, as it is wisdom released from false knowledge and transformed through Christ’s revelation.

For Bonhoeffer, true wisdom resides in knowing the true state of reality as that which comes from God, has been reconciled once-and-for-all in Christ, and is simultaneously oriented to future perfected reconciliation.²¹⁷ For Bonhoeffer, this is ‘not simply a static vista, but rather Christ himself. In him we come to see all things, both divine and human, not only as they are but also as they are intended to be.’²¹⁸ Christian decisions and actions are made in the context of the world as one inhabits it, but viewing it in its relationship with Christ, now and its future perfected reconciliation.

²¹⁴ Bonhoeffer uses *Einfalt* in his description of simple wisdom. *Einfalt* is a noun meaning uncountable or simple, but is most often used to describe simple-mindedness, naivety, or even gullibility. By combining this directly with ‘Klug’ (smart or clever), Bonhoeffer is emphasising the paradoxical nature of Christian agency; it is by *simply* following Christ that one really *knows* the reality of the world (DBWE 6:81; DBW 6:67-68). The German enriches our understanding of these passages. Bonhoeffer plays with the meaning of *Einfalt*, subverting expectations of its usual connotations of naivety or gullibility. But he also uses it to emphasise its *literal* meaning of *simple* and therefore uncountable/undivided. He describes this simple person as: ‘*Einfältig ist, wer in der Verkehrung, Verwirrung und Verdrehung aller Begriffe allein die schlichte Wahrheit Gottes [the plain/simple truth of God] im Auge behält wer nicht ein Dipsychos [double-psyche], ein Mann zweier Seelen [two souls]... ist, sondern der Mann des ungeteilten Herzens [undivided heart]*’ (DBW 6:67); ‘A person is simple who in the confusion, the distortion, and the inversion of all concepts, keeps in sight only the single truth of God. The person has an undivided heart, and is not a double-psyche, a person of two souls...’ (DBWE 6:81). I would choose ‘the simple truth of God’ to keep the parallelism of simple knowledge and simple truth vs. the DBWE choice of ‘single truth’.

²¹⁵ DBWE 6:81; DBW 6:67. Emphasis mine.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ The eschatological direction of discipleship is covered in the Church chapter, pp. 124-130.

²¹⁸ Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, ‘Situations, Contexts, and Responsibility: Bonhoeffer’s Ethics in the Thought of Joseph Fletcher, Paul Lehmann, and H. Richard Niebuhr’, in *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence of Bonhoeffer’s Life and Thought*, ed. by Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), p 96.

So understood, wise simplicity is not self-contradictory – but includes two different descriptions for the same phenomenon, namely, the freedom-for others which stems from encounter with Christ's No and Yes. As Bonhoeffer says,

The person is wise who sees reality as it is, who sees into the depths of things. Only that person is wise who sees reality in God... Wise people know the limited receptivity of reality for principles, because they know that reality is not built on principles but rests on the living, creating God. So they also know that reality can be helped neither by the purest principles nor with the best will, but only by the living God.²¹⁹

I want to pause on this point: reality rests in the living God, beyond all principles or ethical systems. Therefore, wise people who view reality from the simplicity of their faith (viewing everything in Christ), realise they must be active in history, bringing about the reality that Christ reveals; but simultaneously realise that only Christ can bring about this reality. Reality cannot be helped by anything other than the living God himself. We therefore work in the world with everything at our disposal, but knowing ultimately that only Christ can bring about the reality he has initiated in his cross event.

Acting in accordance with our simple wisdom in relation to reality is therefore 'limited by our creatureliness,'²²⁰ Bonhoeffer says. Returning to a passage we considered above, having been encountered by Christ, we realise that

We do not create the conditions for our action but find ourselves already placed within them. In our action we are bound by certain limitations from both the past and the future that cannot be leaped over. Our responsibility is not infinite but limited. Nevertheless, within these limits it includes the whole of reality. It is not merely concerned with good intention, but also with the good outcome of action; not only with motive, but also with content. It seeks to understand the entire given reality in its origin, essence, and goal, seeing it under the divine Yes and No. The objective is not the application of some kind of limitless general principle. Thus, in the given situation it is necessary to observe, weigh, evaluate, and decide, and to do all that with limited human understanding. We must have courage to look into the immediate future; we must seriously consider the consequences of our actions; and we must attempt seriously to examine our own motives and our own hearts.... at the given place to consider reality and do what is necessary.²²¹

In discipleship, I work within history, with all the tools I possess, to respond to the concrete demands of others and bring about Christ's reality in the world. In so doing, I am limited in my finite abilities, and am yet still set toward the whole world, seeing the world in its entirety in

²¹⁹ DBWE 6:81; DBW 6:68.

²²⁰ DBWE 6:267; DBW 6:267.

²²¹ DBWE 6:267-268; DBW 6:267.

and through Christ's revelation. I am concerned with the whole of reality (under Christ's No and Yes) and I respond with my whole self (also under Christ's No and Yes). Therefore, I consider not just good intentions, the outcome, motive, content etc., but the whole action in its response to the whole of Christ's reality. What matters is seeing the world under Christ's No and Yes and attempting to conform myself and my actions to Christ's reality.²²²

Because reality is created, sustained, and reconciled by 'God who became human'²²³ responsible action must, however, remain conscious of the human character of its decision. Human ethical action can

never prematurely judge its own origin, essence, and goal, but must completely surrender such judgment to God. Whereas all action based on ideology is already justified by its own principle, responsible action renounces any knowledge about its ultimate justification. The deed that is done after responsibly weighing all personal and factual circumstance, in light of God becoming *human* and *God* becoming human, it is completely surrendered to God the moment it is carried out. Ultimate ignorance of one's own goodness or evil, together with dependence upon grace, is an essential characteristic of responsible historical action.²²⁴

I work with everything I have available to me, including my historical and personal context, and my knowledge, but *I view my decision in light of* my simple wisdom of Christ's reality. I use everything within my knowledge of Christ's No and Yes, responding to reality also reconciled in his No and Yes. Ultimately, however, because reality is Christ's alone, I also surrender my decision to Christ in the moment it is made. My knowledge of goodness and evil relies solely on Christ's grace, and therefore my responsible action is surrendered to him in the moment it is made. In so doing, I do not diminish my own freedom; but place my freedom within Christ's reality.²²⁵ It is for *this* reason and this reason alone that the Christian can 'stand firm'²²⁶ against worldly evil, while all other ethical positions ultimately fail. The Christian 'called to obedient

²²² "Responsible action," Bonhoeffer wrote in the manuscript for his unfinished Ethics, 'takes place in the sphere of relativity, completely shrouded in the twilight that the historical situation casts upon good and evil. It takes place in the midst of the countless perspectives from which every phenomenon is seen. Responsible action must decide not simply between right and wrong, good and evil, but between right and right, wrong and wrong.' (DBWE 6:284), cited in Robin W. Lovin, 'Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Responsibility', in *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence of Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought* ed. by Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 66; Bonhoeffer's concept of obedience is no 'facile submission', William D. Apel, "'Who Stands Fast?'" Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton on Obedience', in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition: Papers Presented at the Seventh International Bonhoeffer Congress, Cape Town, 1996*, ed. by John W. De Gruchy (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997), p. 155.

²²³ DBWE 6:268; DBW 6:268.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Repenting where I go wrong, as I will explain further in the Church chapter, pp. 131-134.

²²⁶ DBWE 8:40; DBW 8:23; cf. DBWE 6:77-83; DBW 6:63-69; DBWE 8:38-40; DBW 8:20-23.

and responsible action'²²⁷ views their agency *within* and *empowered by* Christ's ongoing revelation.

For Bonhoeffer, the 'difficulty Christians face is not in trying to wrestle a clear command out of God, as if he were stubbornly refusing to help, but rather to become the person who can embrace what has always been, and continues to be, given.'²²⁸ Only when we give up our pre-formed systems, our fallen knowledge of good and evil, which are 'all examples of a desperate attempt to cling to our own strength, control, and justification,'²²⁹ can we actually act in accordance with God's judgement and reconciling word. Christians act in simple wisdom in response to Christ's reality under his No and Yes. We use everything at our disposal in our historical circumstances, and yet know that ultimately reality will only be reconciled by the one for whom reality exists. My wisdom in action stems from this simple knowledge.

²²⁷ DBWE 8:40; DBW 8:23.

²²⁸ Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, 'Situations, Contexts, and Responsibility', p. 96.

²²⁹ Ibid.

The Word at the Boundary and Centre of Life

We have established that Christian decision-making and action are done in accordance with the reality of God's self-revelation in Christ. Disciples receive everything from Christ through his divine No and Yes, and live in the world acting from their created freedom-for established in Christ's filial *esse*. Christians view reality through simple wisdom, knowing that reality rests in Christ, rather than ethical systems or principle. There is only one reality reconciled to God through Christ, a reality to which Christians bear witness and in which they faithfully participate. Following Christ's encounter does not require a constant yearning or stretching for knowledge at the barrier of our existence – but rather a reminder of who we are, and of the Who at the centre of our lives.²³⁰

However, at the same time, the word which encounters and transforms Christian life is a word *which comes from outside of the self*. It is the divine word from Christ revealed through scripture, preaching, or the ethical claim of the other, confronting us and our previous sinful ways. How do we reconcile this idea of the word coming from outside with a notion of agency which is not competitive?

In *Sanctorum Communio*, for example, Bonhoeffer says,

As long as my intellect is dominant, exclusively claiming universal validity... I am not in the social sphere. But this means that I enter this sphere *only when my intellect is confronted by some fundamental barrier [Schränke]*... What is important is not the nature of the barrier, but the fact that it is experienced and acknowledged as a real barrier.²³¹

Through the fall, Bonhoeffer says, humans live according to their own perception of reality. All knowledge of the world is distorted by the fallen intellect. Because of this, I am never truly in the social sphere – because my relationships are distorted through my understanding of reality. The person isolated by sin is unable to view people as fellow created beings.

The person, Bonhoeffer says, must be re-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.'²³² My sinful intellect must be overcome in order to be transformed; which can only occur as my whole being is claimed in time by an external

²³⁰ See discussion of 'Who' of Christ in the thesis introduction, pp. 13-16.

²³¹ DBWE 1:45-46; DBW 1:26; *Schränke* can depict a physical barrier or a moral claim, or constraint. In Bonhoeffer's usage, it is a *barrier* which *claims* me. This is not merely intellectual but comes to me *externally* from others, and ultimately Christ.

²³² DBWE 1:49; DBW 1:29.

other. I resist and am overwhelmed by the 'you' who claims me. Crucially, however, the human you who claims me, in preaching or scripture, can only encounter and overwhelm me because 'God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; through God's active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human You is an image of the divine You.'²³³

The word that comes from the outside, therefore, is 'alien'²³⁴ because it is outside me; but it is also a call to return to my created self, as it is Christ who calls me – in whose image I am formed. Therefore, the call comes at the boundary of myself, but simultaneously is a call to return to the Who at the very centre of my life. Christ does not claim "the edges" of my existence, but rather Christ's call encounters me as a 'whole person.'²³⁵ We can understand this further through Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* lectures.

In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer writes that the life of the creature is one in which God is 'at the center.'²³⁶ 'Adam's life comes from the center, which is not Adam but God; it revolves around this center constantly, without ever trying to take possession of this center of existence.'²³⁷ Human beings have their life 'from God and *before* God. They receive it... in their obedience, in their innocence, in their ignorance; that is, they possess it in their freedom.'²³⁸ Creaturely freedom has Christ at its centre – it revolves around what is received from God, and what we give back to God in grateful response.

This is important for our understanding of human agency. The disciple, as Bonhoeffer says, lives in and before Christ. Discipleship involves being fully immersed in the world God created, with God at the centre of existence. I am encountered by Christ who is external to me; but through this, I am reminded that my life is entirely constituted to the other through the Divine 'Who' I am conformed to. Christ is the centre of my life even as he is outside me.

²³³ DBWE 1:54-55; DBW 1:32-33.

²³⁴ To use Luther's terminology; Martin Luther, 'On Christian Freedom', in *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform*, ed. by Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Martin Luther, 'Two Kinds of Righteousness', in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. by Timothy F. Lull, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

²³⁵ DBWE 1:54; DBW 1:32.

²³⁶ Tietz says Christology 'stands at the centre of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology' – we could as easily say Christ stands at the centre of Christian life and reflection. See Tietz, 'Christology', p. 150; cf. Christiane Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance the Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).

²³⁷ DBWE 3:84; DBW 3:78.

²³⁸ DBWE 3:84; DBW 3:79.

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer includes an illuminating phrase regarding the use of oaths, which proves useful for our understanding.

[Not saying oaths] does not release the disciple's word from responsibility before the all-knowing God. Rather, precisely because the name of God is no longer explicitly called on, everything the disciple says is simply placed in the unquestionable presence of the all-knowing God. Thus disciples of Jesus should not swear, because there is no such thing as speech not spoken before God.²³⁹

The disciple's life is lived *coram deo*. Christ is at the centre of my existence; I exist through him and him alone. Therefore, because I am 'bound to Jesus in discipleship' I can simultaneously 'stand in complete truthfulness... with nothing to conceal.'²⁴⁰ Everything a person does is in front of God. The whole of reality exists within God as the ultimate reality. Everything I am, and everything I do, is from Christ and is given back to Christ as the source and centre of my existence. I am wholly dependent on my creator who is at my centre (vertically, to return to our opening section), whilst simultaneously being entirely responsible for my actions (horizontally).

There is of course asymmetry in this participation, because of the asymmetry of divine and human agency. Christ as centre is therefore simultaneously the boundary of who I am. The Christian lives entirely in the world before God, living from the centre or source of existence. The Christian cannot, however, go *beyond* this centre of created existence. God is the centre of Adam's life; Christ's revealed freedom-for is the centre of my existence. At the same time this centre also constitutes the boundary of my creatureliness. Because I receive my life *as a creature*, I cannot go beyond the life that God has created for me. This is not a barrier to my existence in the sense of a *limitation*, but it is instead what gives *meaning* to creaturely life.

God is the boundary at the centre of my life. God is *not found* at the limits of human existence, as if human knowledge has to stretch or yearn for God. God is instead at the very heart of creaturely life, given to humans in Christ's freedom-for. We exist in radical dependence on God (He is at the centre), while also acknowledging that God is always different and therefore beyond us (as limit). Christian existence and knowledge can thus be imagined as a 'wisdom of participation'²⁴¹ or 'participatory ontology.'²⁴² Fiddes' *Seeing the World and Knowing God* is useful here. Fiddes

²³⁹ DBWE 4:129; DBW 4:131.

²⁴⁰ DBWE 4:131; DBW 4:133.

²⁴¹ Paul S Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 11.

²⁴² Jens Zimmermann, 'Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Humanism', in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, ed. by Jens Zimmermann (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012), p. 33.

suggests that the Old Testament concept of wisdom is helpful for understanding the link between knowledge of God and human knowledge and action in the world. He explains that understanding the relationship between God's wisdom (or word) and the limits of human wisdom is not 'a matter of locating God merely in the "gaps" of human ignorance.'²⁴³ Rather, God is 'always on the scene, always immediately involved in the world, including all those situations where the wise *are* confident in their appraisal of the world and their consequent actions.'²⁴⁴ God is found in the centre, not at the edges of human understanding. God's wisdom does not dwell 'beyond a boundary located between two spheres of reality.'²⁴⁵ The faithful are invited to participate in God's reality which is *beyond* them, but which simultaneously is also the *centre* of their life.

This idea of Christ as centre is seen in Bonhoeffer's prison correspondence. Instead of thinking about God at the boundaries of human capacity, making him a *deus ex machina*,²⁴⁶ where humans look to God to solve problems where human strength or knowledge fail, we must

speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness 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's "beyond" is not what is beyond our cognition! Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God's transcendence. 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.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God*, p. 99.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 110.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ DBWE 8:366; DBW 8:307.

²⁴⁷ DBWE 8:366-367; DBW 8:307-308.

Act and Being in Revelation

We must now turn to the second problem presented at the beginning of this chapter. If Christian action is established in Christ's revelation, stemming from simple wisdom in response to Christ's No and Yes, and never from principles, values, or normative rules, does this risk giving Christian action a non-continuous and atomistic character?²⁴⁸ If we are simply "following Christ", does this mean that Christians can claim any action as being ethical? What does it mean for the retention of revelation, the accountability of Christian action, the avoidance of moral arbitrariness, and the direction of Christian work in the world?²⁴⁹

This issue can once again be resolved in the freedom-for that Christ offers as a pattern of life for those who follow him. I would like to discuss this in relation to Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being*.

We have already established that Christ gives himself to humanity, and in so doing brings humanity together to share in his freedom-for. Christ encountering the individual, therefore, occurs always at the same time in Christ's community; for through revelation, I am placed among others who have been brought together in Christ.²⁵⁰ The truth uncovered in revelation is a truth that we belong to one another and are responsible to one another. This truth, however, is not only a truth *about* our relation to one another, but is a truth we learn *with* and *from* one another. Living under the divine No and Yes, in the simple wisdom that God is at the centre of our lives, is something we come to know more deeply as we live with and from one another, and with one another's help. Revelation occurs, and *continues* to occur, *in relationships in the church-community*. The form of obedience to Christ's word therefore takes place in our collective learning of how to live together.

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer suggests that Christ is the subject of proclamation but also exists *as the church community* ordained for the rest of time.²⁵¹ Christ has given himself as the new humanity, so that his person, 'draws together in itself all whom Christ has won, binding and committing Christ to them and them to one another.'²⁵² In such a way, the church is not a 'human community [*menschliche Gemeinschaft*] to which Christ then comes or not, nor is it a gathering [*Vereinigung*] of such persons as those who (as individuals) seek Christ or think they

²⁴⁸ See discussion in Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, pp. 26-31.

²⁴⁹ For further discussion on how Bonhoeffer avoids moral arbitrariness and ethical normativity, see Burtneiss, *Shaping the Future*.

²⁵⁰ The simultaneity of this will be explored in the Church chapter, pp. 106-111.

²⁵¹ DBWE 2:112; DBW 2:108-109.

²⁵² DBWE 2:112; DBW 2:109.

have Christ and now wish to cultivate this common “possession” [*gemeinsamen “Besitz”*]. The church is *rather the community of faith* created by Christ alone, and where ‘Christ is revealed as... the new human, or rather, as the new humanity itself.’²⁵³

God gives the divine self in Christ to the community of faith and therefore also to each individual member of the community of faith. This occurs in such a way ‘that the acting subject in the community of faith, proclaiming and believing, is *Christ*. In the personlike community of faith, but only there, the gospel is truly proclaimed and believed.’²⁵⁴ So understood, God’s freedom is found in the church, where God has bound himself through Christ to humanity. The community of faith *really does* have the word of revelation and forgiveness at its disposal because Christ has given himself to the church community. However, this can only be the case because revelation is never understood ‘individualistically’ but as ‘something related to community.’²⁵⁵

It is only because revelation occurs in community, Bonhoeffer says, that can there be continuity of revelation:

If the individual were the hearer of the sermon, the continuity [of revelation] would still be in danger. But it is the church itself that hears the word of the church, even if I did not hear in each instance. In this manner preaching is always heard. It is outside me that the gospel is proclaimed and heard... And so the continuity does not lie in human beings, but rather it is guaranteed superpersonally [*überpersönlich*] through a community of persons.²⁵⁶

If it were *only me* who hears the revelation of Christ, then the continuity of revelation would be in danger. There can be no possibility of continuing to “have” or “live by” Christ’s word without me objectifying and turning it into a principle or ethical system. Christian action would be reduced to atomistic acts from revelation, with no continuity in the world without perversion or abstraction.

However, this is avoided because Christ only and always reveals himself *within his community*, the church.²⁵⁷ The very encounter of the person with the divine No and Yes is an encounter which *directs me to others* in responsibility, in accordance with my created nature. Christ’s word

²⁵³ Ibid. DBW has ‘in der sich Christus [gibt]... als der neue Mensch, besser: als die neue Menschheit selbst offenbart.’ I would suggest translating the passage as ‘Christ is revealed as... the new human, or *more fully*, as the new humanity itself vs. DBWE ‘Christ is revealed as... the new human, rather, the new humanity.’ Bonhoeffer expresses here that Christ is understood literally ‘better’ or *more fully* when described as the new humanity existing for-others rather than just as the new human.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

²⁵⁵ DBWE 2:113; DBW 2:109.

²⁵⁶ DBWE 2:113-114; DBW 2:110.

²⁵⁷ See Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially pp. 68-72.

lives in the community without abstraction because it is constantly received and passed to others in the freedom-for of its members. The church

is founded on the personal character of the community of faith, whose subject is Christ. For only through the person of Christ can the existence of human beings be encountered, placed into truth, and transposed into a new manner of existence. But as the person of Christ has been revealed in the community of faith, the existence of human beings can be encountered only through the community of faith... In this way other persons themselves even become Christ for us in demand and promise, in the existential limits they place on us from outside; they become, as such, also the warrant of the continuity of revelation.²⁵⁸

In the church community, we are encountered by Christ in the 'demand and promise' and the 'existential limits' others in the church place on us. We are personally and existentially affected by an encounter which comes to us from human others, bringing the word of Christ. It is this which ensures the continuity of revelation of the church, coming to one another, encountering, disagreeing, and challenging one another with the word we have each in turn received from encounter, and so on. It is *as a community of encounter* that the community of faith ensures the continuity of revelation, and how I recognise myself in the community of faith. 'I hear another human being truly tell me the gospel. Someone offers me the sacrament; you are forgiven. Someone along with the community of faith prays for me. And I hear the gospel, join in the prayer and know myself bound up in the word, sacrament, and prayer of Christ's community of faith, the new humanity... Bearing it, I am borne by it. Here I, the historically whole human being – individual and humanity – am encountered, and I believe, that is, know myself borne. I am borne (*pati*), therefore I am (*esse*), therefore I believe (*agere*). Here the circles closes.'²⁵⁹

Anna Mercedes is helpful here. Christ is not 'a static body' but exists as a chrism for others. 'Christ as chrism travels in the matrix of relationality, on a vector toward the benefit of others.'²⁶⁰ Describing Christ as such emphasises that Christ's revelation is made known and continues 'in transfer and connection.'²⁶¹ This is not random, but is a way of sharing Christian identity or blessing. As Chrism, 'Christ is inherently relational: between the bearer of the chrism and the receiver of it... Christ is perpetually given away.'²⁶² Brought into relationship with others, I bring Christ's encounter to the church; but only as I am simultaneously encountered by others in the Church. Christ's revelation exists precisely *in our connection*, and in our living for

²⁵⁸ DBWE 2:114; DBW 2:110-111.

²⁵⁹ DBWE 2:121; DBWE 2:118. The simultaneity of bearing and being borne will prove important in the Suffering chapter, pp. 197-204.

²⁶⁰ Anna Mercedes, 'Christ as Chrism, Christ Given Away', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 53.3 (2014), p. 233.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

one another in his church.²⁶³ In such a way, Christian action is made accountable but also exists in the continuity of encounter. I do not make decisions alone, but only in the community in which Christ's encounter is borne and lives.

As we will explore more fully later in this thesis, existing through encounter requires the church community to exist under judgement of its actions, in accordance with the divine No. The church can err, as it remains a human community at the same time as it is divinely instituted. Only insofar as the church takes seriously Christ's judgement (No) and grace (Yes), can Christian life and action be said to exist – and remain – in accordance with Christ's revelation.

²⁶³ *For one another, with one another and, when necessary, against one another*, see Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 166-167.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the problem of human agency in and alongside divine encounter, and the continuity of revelation. I have explored both themes through Bonhoeffer's Christology, ecclesiology and theological anthropology and Christian life under the divine No and Yes.

I have demonstrated that although encounter with Christ involves the Christian person dying to their previous self, this does necessitate a reduction in agency, but in fact releases the person into their created freedom-for others. It is through Christ's encounter that a person can view themselves, their actions, and relationships with others in and through Christ's reality, through the simple wisdom that encounter provides. Agency is therefore *freed* in Christ, not destroyed, as I am reminded that my freedom lies precisely in my responsibility for others.

It is true that there are apparent inconsistencies in Bonhoeffer's presentation of agency, manifesting generally as an emphasis on self-denial in his earlier works vs. responsibility in his later works. I have placed these two emphases within an understanding of Christ's divine No and Yes, explaining that there is indeed a need for self-denial, in the sense that the self I am denying is the self that has fallen away from Christ; but it is precisely this self-denial which allows me to hear the accompanying divine Yes, and be released into true freedom in responsibility for others. It is my argument that these are the two necessary components in the same theological pattern of life. Although Bonhoeffer may emphasise one in places, we cannot hear one without the other ringing out too.

We also considered and placed the continuity of revelation within Bonhoeffer's Christological ecclesiology and theological anthropology, especially how a non-normative approach to Christian action in conformation to Christ's revelatory encounter can avoid the pitfalls of moral arbitrariness or self-justification. In conversation with Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being*, I demonstrated that this is avoided because Christ's word is given *in community* – it is given in encounter which orients me to the other in Christ. Revelation is therefore never anything I receive alone, but only in the church as I live with and for others. So understood, the form of our obedience to Christ's word takes place in our collective learning of how to live together in a form of life made possible through encounter. Christ's revelation avoids distortion only as it continues to be given and received, in a dynamic of lived encounter. In such a way, Christian action is made accountable but also exists in continuity.

In future chapters, we will explore how self-justification or moral arbitrariness are also avoided when the church is viewed under Christ's divine No and Yes. The church is a church of proclamation; it brings the word of Christ to the world in and through encounter. However, to do so, it must take seriously its *own sin*, and its own need to come under Christ's judgement (No), to receive Christ's continued grace (Yes).²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ This will be explored in the Church chapter, especially pp. 131-136.

Agency Case Study

Christian Actions

Introduction

In the first chapter on Christian agency, we established that having been encountered by Christ, Christians live with and for one another in freedom-for. Christ's divine No judges and kills my sinful self, but only as his divine Yes simultaneously releases me into my created freedom for others. Christian agency is therefore rooted in encounter with Christ, viewing all of reality through Christ's unifying word. Only through such an understanding is the Christian person able to respond concretely to events in the world, viewing them in relation to Christ's reality, rather than applying abstract or predetermined ethical rules.

Such an approach to Christian action could easily fall victim to moral arbitrariness, where Christ's word becomes distorted or manipulated for one's own means. By responding concretely in the moment through "Christ's revelation", one could seemingly justify any action as an apparently "Christian response". For Bonhoeffer, this can only be avoided because revelation occurs *in community*. I am encountered by Christ's word in the human word.²⁶⁵ This word orients me to Christ, as it simultaneously orients me to the human other. Revelation is never something I receive alone but is something which occurs as I live in community. So understood, the form of Christian agency and obedience to Christ's revelation in the world takes place *collectively*, in the dynamic of lived encounter.²⁶⁶

Christ's word encounters us as a No and a Yes. The No forces me to reflect on where I have erred and where my sinful desire for self-justification has appeared. It is by hearing this No, that I can also receive Christ's Yes, bringing me back into right relationship with him and the church community. Christ's word is brought to me *through my interactions with others*, challenging me and judging me (the No), but simultaneously supporting me and redirecting me (the Yes), as I also challenge, support, and redirect others. The decision and direction of Christian action is therefore made possible only by a life of constant discernment in response to Christ's No and Yes *in his community*. I do not act alone, but from within the community of persons looking to Christ. The community brings Christ's word to me in judgement and grace; I bring Christ's judgement and grace to my community. Christ's word exists *in the interaction* between us, and

²⁶⁵ Scripture, sermons, preaching, the ethical claim of the other person etc.

²⁶⁶ Revelation occurring in community, we explored in the previous chapter, pp. 62-65.

our readiness to be judged and redirected in freedom-for. Christian action is borne out of such a life together.

This case study will consider an apparent tension found in Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christian action and will seek to place it within the understanding of Christian agency we have established. The conversation will take place in territory well-trodden by many Bonhoeffer readers, namely his position on pacifism vs. direct violent resistance against political evil. I will demonstrate how peace and resistance are reconciled through placing Christian action in Bonhoeffer's Christological ecclesiology and theological anthropology. More precisely, putting Christian action in the context of Christ's word of No and Yes in the church.

I will explore Bonhoeffer's position on pacifism and then later acceptance of and involvement in direct action against Hitler. Bonhoeffer's involvement in the *Abwehr* conspiracy to assassinate Hitler is sometimes overemphasised. The impression, for example, from certain politically right-wing appropriations of Bonhoeffer is that following his example means automatically 'undertaking violent resistance.'²⁶⁷ This radically overlooks his statements on pacifism, which far outweigh his involvement in active resistance, both in terms of the number of utterances and the amount of time he was committed to and called for peace. As Nickson suggests, misunderstanding Bonhoeffer's approach can make it easy for individuals to incorrectly 'seize upon a number of eminently quotable but esoteric sentences... without much regard for context'²⁶⁸ and, in so doing, misidentify certain themes as representative of Bonhoeffer's total thought.²⁶⁹

There are disagreements within Bonhoeffer studies over the extent to which Bonhoeffer was a pacifist or supporter of what Green terms a Christian 'peace ethic'.²⁷⁰ This has included discussion over whether Bonhoeffer's later conspiracy involvement represents a departure from his earlier theology of peace, or whether 'tyrannicide'²⁷¹ ought to be considered as distinct from support of violence in general.

²⁶⁷ Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance: The Word against the Wheel*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 2; cf. Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

²⁶⁸ Ann L. Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 2.

²⁶⁹ 'It is extraordinary how long scholars can keep running in circles around single words and phrases, and with Bonhoeffer they found almost immeasurable reserves of energy,' Andrew Chandler, 'The Quest for the Historical Dietrich Bonhoeffer', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 54.1 (2003), p. 89.

²⁷⁰ A term used by Clifford J. Green, 'Pacifism and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 18.3 (2005), pp. 31-47.

²⁷¹ Another term used by Green. Ibid.

In this case study, I will argue that Bonhoeffer's approach to pacifism and violence can be conformed into a 'straight line'²⁷² due to his unfailing commitment to 'Christ's peace.'²⁷³ As I will demonstrate, we face issues in reconstructing Bonhoeffer's approach to peace, including but not limited to examples of *Volk* theology earlier in his theological career, which I will discuss first.

I will then explore Bonhoeffer's peace statements and demonstrate that 'Christ's peace', although often indistinguishable to secular notions of peace, is not synonymously understood. Although Christ's peace often manifests itself in Bonhoeffer's theology as identical to worldly peace, Bonhoeffer's theology revolves around and is dedicated to the *peace of Christ* alone, not the peace of the world. We must pay attention to this distinction to understand Bonhoeffer's approach. What will become clear is that "Christ's peace" is an expression of following Christ's word in the world, responding to reality in concrete ways under the revelation of Christ's No and Yes in the church.

Having established that Bonhoeffer's approach to peace means bringing and enacting Christ's word of revelation to the world, I will consider the potential dangers of a Christocentric approach to Christian ethics. As I will demonstrate, however, although Bonhoeffer's approach to theology is never normative in the sense of applying a rule that can be known independently of the situation at hand, it also avoids moral arbitrariness or self-justification. This is avoided because Christian response to a concrete scenario, attempting to follow the will of Christ, occurs within the community of revelation.²⁷⁴

²⁷² DBWE 8:352-353; DBW 8:391-392.

²⁷³ Christ's peace is not identical to the peace of the world. It is peace as a sword that invades the world [Matt 10:34], DBWE 12:261; DBW 17:119.

²⁷⁴ Communities can of course be mistaken in discerning what God's will requires. This is why constant discernment and acceptance of God's divine No of judgement *and* divine Yes is fundamental.

A 'Straight Line'

It cannot easily be overlooked that Bonhoeffer's name appears again and again in various contexts around the world as an example of active resistance against forces of oppression, as an ally who fought 'alongside the victims of...tyranny.'²⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer emerges as inspiration for resistance movements in his own native Germany,²⁷⁶ in Latin America,²⁷⁷ Japan 'where his influence has been activated against fascist tendencies of the Japanese emperor system,'²⁷⁸ and many other places around the world,²⁷⁹ including utilisation in the USA by both the political left and right wings.²⁸⁰

And yet, as Godsey and Kelly identify,

few statements in support of the peace movement, even today can match the fire and passion of Bonhoeffer in his Berlin lecture "Christ and Peace";²⁸¹ his denunciation of the idolatry of national security at the ecumenical conference in Gland, Switzerland, in August 1932;²⁸² [or] his disturbing challenge to the churches to be advocates for peace in a sermon,

²⁷⁵ Allan A. Boesak, 'What Dietrich Bonhoeffer Has Meant to Me', in *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, ed. by Guy Carter and others (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), p. 23.

²⁷⁶ Wolfgang Huber, 'Inspiration, Controversy, Legacy: Responses to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Three Germanys', in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

²⁷⁷ Clifford Green, 'Bonhoeffer, Modernity and Liberation Theology', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 46.1 (1992), pp. 117–131; Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983).

²⁷⁸ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance*, p. 1; cf. Kazuaki Yamasaki, 'Bonhoeffer's Social Ethics and Its Influences in Japan', in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues (1517 Media, 2013), pp. 47–60.

²⁷⁹ F. Burton Nelson, 'Bonhoeffer and the Spiritual Life: Some Reflections', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 30 (1980); Gary Dorrien, 'Bonhoeffer in North America', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); John D. Godsey, 'Bonhoeffer and the Third World: West Africa, Cuba, Korea', in *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 6, eds. John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981); John W. De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984); John W. De Gruchy, 'Christian Witness in South Africa in a Time of Transition,' in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, eds. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. and Charles Marsh (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 283–293; John W. de Gruchy, 'Bonhoeffer and Public Ethics: South Africa Notes', in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), pp. 15–24; Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*; Stephen R. Haynes, 'Readings and Receptions', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Nico Koopman, 'Bonhoeffer, South Africa, and Global Contexts', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 412–427; P. GJ Meiring, 'Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa – through the Lens of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 38.3 (2017); Henco van der Westhuizen, "'To Ask Essential Questions?' Bonhoeffer, America, South Africa', *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 100 (2019); K. W. Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006).

²⁸⁰ Trey Palmisano and Reinhard Krauss, *Peace and Violence in the Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Analysis of Method* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), pp. 11–12; Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, pp. 2–8; DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance*, pp. 1–3; Clifford Green, 'Bonhoeffer: "No!" To Paul Hill', *International Bonhoeffer Society*, 83 (2003); Karen V. Guth, 'Claims on Bonhoeffer', *The Christian Century* (1902), 132.11 (2015), p. 26.

²⁸¹ DBWE 12:258–262; DBW 17:116–120.

²⁸² DBWE 11:375–381; DBW 11:350–357.

“The Church and the Peoples of the World,”²⁸³ at the ecumenical gathering in Fanø, Denmark, in September 1934.²⁸⁴

Indeed, looking also at Bonhoeffer’s published theology, such as *Discipleship*, the ‘issues of peace, non-resistance to evil, and forgiveness of enemies coalesced to such an extent that some critics saw the books as too otherworldly and impractical in how Christians had to deal with an enemy such as Nazism.’²⁸⁵

We therefore cannot with any accuracy call Bonhoeffer a theologian of resistance, as this would undermine years of devotion to peace, seen in his speeches, lectures, and other theological material.²⁸⁶ However, we similar cannot, due to his later involvement in the *Abwehr* conspiracy, name him a pacifist.²⁸⁷

We have already established that the question – “who is Christ for us today?” – ‘is the *cantus firmus* that winds through the polyphony of Bonhoeffer’s abbreviated life.’²⁸⁸ As Rasmussen correctly observes, ‘this polyphony included self-proclaimed “Christian pacifism” and, seemingly at another extreme, readiness to be the assassin of Hitler, should the die so fall.’²⁸⁹ As we consider the motifs of pacifism and violence below, therefore, we must remember that ‘Bonhoeffer’s *Christology*, and not his pacifism and not his conspiracy, is the *cantus firmus*.’²⁹⁰ In the end, calls for peace and conspiracy involvement must flow together if what Bonhoeffer said in April 1944 is true:

I am wholly under the impression that my life – strange as it may sound – *has gone in a straight line, uninterrupted, at least with regard to how I’ve led it*. It has been a continually enriching experience for which I can only be grateful. If my present situation were to be the conclusion of my life, that would have meaning that I believe I could understand. On the

²⁸³ DBWE 13:307-310; DBW 13:302-305.

²⁸⁴ John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly, ‘Editors’ Introduction to the English Edition’, in DBWE 4:14.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Of course, given the militaristic context he was writing in, Bonhoeffer’s calls for peace could be described as *a form of resistance*.

²⁸⁷ There are various forms of pacifism, from absolute, to principled, and even pragmatic. See Peter Brock, *Varieties of Pacifism: A Survey from Antiquity to the Outset of the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse: Peter Brock, 1998); Peter Brock and Nigel Young, *Pacifism in the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999). For a discussion of Bonhoeffer’s “pacifism”, see Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Bonhoeffer’s Ethics: Between Pacifism and Assassination*, Grove Ethics Series (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2011).

²⁸⁸ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 94

²⁸⁹ This was a theoretical moral position because Bonhoeffer did not actually know how to handle a gun, but it remains significant for our purposes, Larry L. Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 94; cf. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 656; Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 202.

²⁹⁰ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 94.

other hand, all this might be a thorough preparation for a new beginning, which would take place in marriage, peacetime, and with new work to do.²⁹¹

I will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer's commitment to peace and conspiracy involvement, can indeed be placed 'in a straight line', if understood through his ongoing commitment to life in encounter with Christ's word in the context of Christian personhood in the church. In so doing, I will also prove that it is unnecessary to accept Bonhoeffer's involvement in tyrannicide as morally distinguishable from a broader acceptance of violence or murder.²⁹² Green's distinction, I believe, comes too close to assigning principles to Bonhoeffer, which are alien to his approach. The proposed actions are not what we should be paying attention to, but how they are oriented to Bonhoeffer's overall Christocentric theology. So, too, any attempt to plot Bonhoeffer's resistance chronologically or systematically, for example like DeJonge, I believe risks charting changes in such a way that can obscure Bonhoeffer's thoroughgoing Christology as the standard for the total conceptual system. Although DeJonge accepts that Christ's word is at the heart of Bonhoeffer's thinking, to approach Bonhoeffer's thought as having stages, let alone then setting it into a 'sixfold typology'²⁹³ within 'three phases'²⁹⁴ is, for me, to somewhat misappropriate the dynamic Christocentric approach of Bonhoeffer's ethics.

I therefore agree with Palmisano and Krauss that we ought to reject the 'all-too-easy dichotomy between peace and violence'²⁹⁵ in Bonhoeffer's theology and approach it instead by looking at his total methodology – which is derived 'in a method that has Christ at the centre.'²⁹⁶ If this approach is taken 'peace, like violence, is the outward evidence of an ethic in operation whose movement is continually directed and reshaped in a relational experience of Christ.'²⁹⁷

²⁹¹ DBWE 8:352-353; DBW 8:391-392, emphasis mine; cf. Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, who uses the same quotation but from an older publication, p. 95 n.3.

²⁹² Green, 'Pacifism and Tyrannicide', pp. 41-46. Green's position is not helped by the fact Bonhoeffer never mentions tyrannicide; see Palmisano and Krauss, *Peace and Violence*, pp. 132-133.

²⁹³ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance*, p. 10.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Palmisano and Krauss, *Peace and Violence*, p. 13.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

Bonhoeffer's Early *Volk* Theology

It is not news that Bonhoeffer's overall theological method is difficult to reconstruct because, as Rasmussen suggests, one is 'greeted with both literary and intellectual fragmentation'²⁹⁸ across his materials. This is especially true regarding the theme of pacifism vs. violent resistance, where Bonhoeffer directly contradicts himself multiple times over a period of years. It would be difficult enough to reconstruct his thought in a movement going in one direction from pacifism in the 1930s to resistance in the 1940s, but Bonhoeffer speaks of violent resistance in positive terms earlier in his career in 1929, *prior* to any pacifist ecumenical statements, further complicating any understanding.²⁹⁹

Bonhoeffer undertook military training while at university, and then, as a curate in Barcelona in 1929, delivered a sermon on 'Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic'³⁰⁰ where he justifies war through *Volk* theology.³⁰¹ Although he speaks positively in the sermon about loving one's enemies, and describes war as sinful and murderous,³⁰² nevertheless he simultaneously justifies war in the context of the commandment of love for one's 'own people [*Volk*]', claiming that the commandment extends 'at least as far as defending [my people] as it does to the commandment not to kill one's enemy.'³⁰³ He goes on to claim that although the commandment to love is directed at all neighbours,³⁰⁴

If ever I find myself in the distressing situation of having to decide whether to expose my biological brother, my biological mother, to the hand of the attacker, or to raise my own hand against the enemy, then the moment itself will doubtless tell me which of these two is and must be my neighbor, including before the eyes of God. God gave me my mother, my people [*Volk*]. For what I have, I thank my people; what I am, I am through my people, and so what I have should also belong to my people; that is in the divine order [*Ordnung*] of things,³⁰⁵ for God created the peoples. If for a single dangerous moment I do not act, then I am doing nothing other than surrendering my neighbors.³⁰⁶

²⁹⁸ Larry Rasmussen, 'A Question of Method', in *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics*, ed. by William J. Peck (Lewison, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), p. 105.

²⁹⁹ For a biographical overview, see Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: T&T Clark, 2010); Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: A Biography*; Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, fourth edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 2014).

³⁰⁰ DBWE 10:359-378; DBW 10:323-345.

³⁰¹ See Green, 'Pacifism and Tyrannicide', pp. 33-34.

³⁰² DBWE 10:370; DBW 10:336.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ DBWE 10:371; DBW 10:336.

³⁰⁵ It is interesting that Bonhoeffer uses *Ordnung* here, where later in his Ethics he rejects the use of *Ordnung*, see DBW 6:54-55 (but then uses *Ordnung* in a marriage sermon in DBW 8:76). See discussion in this thesis, pp. 160-161.

³⁰⁶ DBWE 10:371; DBW 10:337.

He continues, that Christians who go to war will not hate their enemy and will 'pray for their enemies and for their souls when they deliver their bodies to death.'³⁰⁷

As Green states, Bonhoeffer

takes refuge in two embarrassing claims: (1) that God established in creation a divine order of peoples (Völker), and hence one's first loyalty is to one's own people, and (2) that Christians pray for their enemies even while killing them and being killed by them. Hence, he writes, 'love for my people will sanctify murder, will sanctify war'.³⁰⁸

Bonhoeffer goes on to explain that this is not just in the case for a war made in defence against an invader. Indeed, *initiating* war can be a nation's response to God: 'growth involves expansion; an increase in strength involves pushing aside other individuals,' but the call for growth and development must be heeded because 'God calls a people to diversity, to struggle, to victory. Strength also comes from God, and power, and victory.'³⁰⁹ Therefore, Bonhoeffer's logic follows, if a nation, a *Volk*, experiences God's call in its own vitality and strength, it should follow that call, even if that leads to conquering other peoples. As Green suggests, clearly 'this was not the voice of a pacifist — it is a *volkisch*, nationalistic, lebensraum philosophy.'³¹⁰

This sermon is often conveniently "forgotten" in discussions of Bonhoeffer's pacifism, and it can easily be understood why. This voice, with its use of *Volk* theology and description of God as 'eternally young and strong and triumphant',³¹¹ is the voice of a very different theologian. We must remember that Bonhoeffer was incredibly young at the time of delivering the sermon — only 22 — and, using Bethge's description, 'is not yet talking in his own language.'³¹² We have fair reason to disregard the content of the sermon to a certain extent, especially given that it is an isolated occasion of *Volk* theology directly contradicted by strong advocations for peace elsewhere. Indeed, only a year later in 1930-31, while at Union Seminary and spending time at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Bonhoeffer experiences 'a personal conversion',³¹³ turning toward the Sermon on the Mount, to a much more peace-oriented theology, and away from nationalism.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Green, 'Pacifism and Tyrannicide', p. 33; DBWE 10:372; DBW 10:338.

³⁰⁹ DBWE 10:373; DBW 10:339. Some of this language of divinely decreed hierarchy and 'diversity' also informs our later discussion of Bonhoeffer's treatment of women in the Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 148-150.

³¹⁰ Green, 'Pacifism and Tyrannicide', p. 34.

³¹¹ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 99.

³¹² Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, p. 85, referenced in Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 99.

³¹³ Glen Harold Stassen, 'Healing the Rift Between the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 18.3 (2005), p. 91; cf. Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed*, The Guides for the Perplexed Series (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), pp. 3-5. Further discussion on this conversion is found in my final chapter on Prayer, pp. 214-215.

However, the entirety of the 1929 sermon ought not be ignored entirely, as the nascent beginnings of Bonhoeffer's concrete Christological ethic can be found buried beneath some of the unsettling themes. For example, when exploring the Sermon on the Mount in relation to a Christian ethic, he asks,

Does the Sermon on the Mount really have nothing new to say to us? It has nothing "new" in the sense of new demands, but it does have something completely different to offer. The significance of all of Jesus' ethical commandments is rather to say to people: You stand before the face of God, God's grace rules over you; but you are at the disposal of someone else in the world. You must act and behave such that in each of your actions you are mindful of also acting before God, mindful that God has a certain will and wants to see that will done.³¹⁴

As we have explored in our chapter on Agency, here Bonhoeffer confirms that Christian ethical decisions are made not by following prescribed ethical rules – for example, following the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount literally – but rather are made 'before the face of God', deciphering what God's revelation commands in that moment.

Bonhoeffer elsewhere in the sermon also explicitly links Christian action to the concept of *freedom*. He says that 'Christian ethical action is action out of freedom, out of the freedom of those who have nothing in themselves and everything in God, those who ever anew have their actions confirmed and reinforced by eternity.'³¹⁵ Christian freedom is constituted never apart from *relationship with and derived from God*. The wording here, of those who have 'nothing in themselves and everything in God' engages directly with the Sermon on the Mount with words reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's exegesis in *Discipleship*.³¹⁶

Finally, here we also find the idea of having to weigh up difficult ethical choices, of bearing the guilt of the world in making a decision not between good and evil but also evil and evil, and ultimately making a decision only through one's ongoing relationship with Christ's revelation. Here, too, are theological tones familiar from throughout Bonhoeffer's works.³¹⁷

In such cases [of war], I no longer have the choice between good and evil; regardless of which decision I make, that decision will soil me with the world and its laws. I will take up arms with the terrible knowledge of doing something horrible, and yet knowing I can do no other... As a Christian, I will suffer from the entire dreadfulness of war. My soul will bear the

³¹⁴ DBWE 10:365; DBW 10:329.

³¹⁵ DBWE 10:366; DBW 10:330.

³¹⁶ DBWE 4:101-107; DBW 4:99-107.

³¹⁷ For example, DBWE 8:38-40; DBW 8:20-23; DBWE 6:135-136; DBW 6:126-127.

entire burden of responsibility in its full gravity. I will try to love my enemies against whom I am sworn to the death, as only Christians can love their brothers... and finally I will recognize that Christian decisions are made only with the ongoing relationship with God, within a constantly renewed surrender of oneself to divine will.³¹⁸

And yet in the very middle of this passage³¹⁹ is where we find Bonhoeffer's galling statements regarding the Christian sanctification of murder.³²⁰

Interesting to my thesis is assessing what is *lacking* in Bonhoeffer's 1929 sermon – themes which are central to his presentation of Christian ethics elsewhere.³²¹ First, missing here is the context of the *church community* in the making of ethical decisions. Second, although in the passage above we have a sense of *guilt* associated with making difficult decisions, absent is the notion of the Christian person working under the divine No of Christ, in addition to the Yes of doing God's will. Instead, what is prioritised is the Christian working under the divine will in a confident, positive manner, without the accompanying recognition of our being under divine judgement and the need to repent of where we inevitably err.

For example, Bonhoeffer says,

Christians act according to how God's will seems to direct them, without looking sideways at others, that is, without considering what is usually called morals. No one but Christians and God, however, can know whether they are indeed acting rightly or wrongly. Ethical decisions lead us into the most profound solitude, the solitude in which a person stands before the living God. Here no one can help us, no one can bear part of the responsibility; here God imposes a burden on us that we must bear alone. Only in the realization that we have been addressed by God, that God is making a claim on us, does our self [Ich] awaken. Only through God's call do I become this "self", isolated from all other people, called to account by God, confronted, alone, by eternity. And precisely because I am face to face with God in this solitude, I alone can know what is right or wrong for me personally. There are no acts that are bad in and of themselves; even murder can be sanctified. There is only faithfulness to or deviation from God's will. There is no law with a specific content, but only the law of freedom, that is, bearing responsibility alone before God and oneself.³²²

In this passage, Bonhoeffer claims that Christians act according to God's divine will. With a similar emphasis to his ethics elsewhere, he claims that there are no laws for which a Christian

³¹⁸ DBWE 10:372; DBW 10:338.

³¹⁹ In the space where the ellipsis is in the quotation immediately above.

³²⁰ Green, 'Pacifism and Tryannicide', p. 33; DBWE 10:372; DBW 10:338.

³²¹ Themes which would perhaps have helped Bonhoeffer avoid some of the unfortunate conclusions he reaches in this sermon.

³²² DBWE 10:367; DBW 10:331-332.

can follow, but only God's will alone. What is interesting here also is that Bonhoeffer speaks about Christians being called into solitude. In God's call – or Christ's encounter – Christians are isolated 'from all other people', 'into the most profound solitude' to 'stand before the living God.' This is not dissimilar from Bonhoeffer's statements elsewhere, that a Christian dies to himself in the call of Christ and stands before Christ alone.

What is different is that the other 'side' of this theological movement, that we discussed in the previous chapter, is missing. The Christian is called into freedom, which requires breaking from their previous selves. But there is no statement here of the corresponding call *into community, or into responsibility*. Missing is the "*for*" orientation of Christian freedom, that freedom in ethical responsibility is something one does not have alone but only in community.³²³

There is also a sense in which the divine No is missing from this sermon. Bonhoeffer speaks confidently about the Christian ability to make ethical decisions, indeed even going so far as to compare Nietzsche's "Overman"³²⁴ to the free Christian of Pauline and Lutheran theology, saying that

Christians create their own standards for good and evil; only Christians themselves provide justification for their acts, just as they alone bear responsibility for them. Christians create new tables, new decalogues, as Nietzsche said of the Overman. Indeed, Nietzsche's Overman is not, as he imagined, the opposite of the Christian; without realizing it, Nietzsche imbued the Overman with many of the features of the free Christian as described and conceived by both Paul and Luther. Traditional morals... can never provide the standards for the action of Christians.³²⁵

Christians can create new tables and decalogues, and their own standards for good and evil, Bonhoeffer says.³²⁶ Here there is no sense in which these standards are *judged* or require constant checking *under the divine No*, in order to make a decision in relationship with Christ's divine Yes.

³²³ This is difficult to account for, given that this notion freedom-for is present in Bonhoeffer's earliest writings, including *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1:49-56; DBW 1:29-34. This is not the only occasion where Bonhoeffer's writings appear inconsistent with his broader theology, as we will explore in the Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 139-168. It is my argument there that we can confront anomalies in Bonhoeffer's work *by inhabiting the freedom-for* he calls for more broadly.

³²⁴ DBWE translators use "Overman" for Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, in line with Walter Arnold Kauffmann's translation, who felt the previous English translation "Superman" did not fully capture the notion of superiority and transcendence *over others* to the same extent as the German. See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Arnold Kaufmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

³²⁵ DBWE 10:366-367; DBW 10:331.

³²⁶ Paraphrasing Luther. See A. Raath, 'Writing "new" Decalogues: Martin Luther's Development of the Pauline-Augustinian Tradition of Natural Law', *Koers - Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*, 70.3 (2005), pp. 425-454.

Therefore, in this sermon we have many similar themes to those we find throughout Bonhoeffer's materials – the rejection of Christian ethics as timeless principles, that there 'are not and cannot be Christian norms and principles of a moral nature.'³²⁷ And yet, Bonhoeffer's ethical approach here is "filled" with content we may find unfamiliar and disturbing. The next paragraph from his statement that there are no Christian norms, for example, declares that ethics are 'a matter of blood and a matter of history.'³²⁸ What *is common* is that ethics are to remain contextual and responsive to concrete events. But what quickly changes are Bonhoeffer's views on *Volk* theology, and the need for Christian ethical action to occur *in the church* and under the divine No (and Yes). What I will demonstrate in the rest of this case study is that Bonhoeffer's Christocentric approach to Christian ethics remains consistent (even including this sermon), but what develops is his placement of ethics within the church community under the divine No and Yes.³²⁹

³²⁷ DBWE 10:360; DBW 10:323.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Bonhoeffer's developing ecclesiological placement of Christian ethics is something theologians often place in the context of Bonhoeffer's 'conversion' to 'becoming a Christian.' See Prayer chapter, pp. 214-215.

Christ's Peace

Absolute pacifism is understood as opposition to violence in any form – it is a *principled* stance applied to all contexts. As I will demonstrate below, Bonhoeffer's approach to Christian ethics cannot be described as one of "principle". The worldliness (*Weltlichkeit*) of Bonhoeffer's ethics, as Palmisano and Krauss suggest, 'requires that *context*, and not principle, provides the shape in which Christ is formed in the world.'³³⁰ Therefore "pacifism" is not the appropriate term to use for Bonhoeffer's approach to "peace".

Instead, Green uses 'peace ethic' to describe Bonhoeffer's theology. Green describes this as inseparable from [Bonhoeffer's] way of reading the New Testament... his Christology, and his understanding of discipleship, and for him it belongs to the essence of the gospel and the church... his ethical reflection about tyrannicide and the coup was likewise rooted in the heart of his theology, that it was not based on a principle justifying violence, and did not mean he had abandoned his Christian peace ethic.³³¹

We can therefore understand Bonhoeffer's call for peace and later involvement in the resistance – a strange as it may seem – through a consistent Christocentric peace ethic.

Let's consider 'the most unequivocal and emphatic of his statements on peace that we possess',³³² namely the three ecumenical addresses made between 1932 and 1934. In his 1932 address to the International Youth Conference in Gland,³³³ Bonhoeffer begins with the pronouncement that '[t]he Church is dead.'³³⁴ It is dead because it does not 'speak, does not defend itself.'³³⁵ It no longer hears, nor speaks the word of God. But, Bonhoeffer says, it is not *quite* completely dead. God calls the dying church back into life. It can achieve new life if it hears Christ's word again and is not afraid to speak it to the world:

We come together in order to hear Christ! Have we heard him? I can only ask here. Each of us must answer for himself. Yet I still want to say this: is it not precisely the sense of these meetings, that where we encounter a person who appears so totally strange and incomprehensible to us in his concerns and who still claims our attention, that there we hear the voice of Christ, in the voice of the brother, and that there we do not withdraw from this voice but rather take it completely seriously, hear it, and love the other precisely in his

³³⁰ Palmisano and Krauss, *Peace and Violence*, p. 81.

³³¹ Green, 'Pacifism and Tyrannicide', p. 33.

³³² Palmisano and Krauss, *Peace and Violence*, p. 95.

³³³ DBWE 11:375-381; DBW 11:350-357.

³³⁴ DBWE 11:375; DBW 11:350.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

foreign nature? This is how Christ encounters us at such conferences, in that brethren encounter one another in all openness and truthfulness and need and ask to be heard by the others. *Not as the community of those who know but rather as the community of those who are looking for the words of their Lord and look everywhere to see whether they might hear it, not as the knowledgeable, but as those who are seeking; we are here as the starving ones, the waiting ones, as the needy, the hopeful, and so are we bound together.*³³⁶

The World Alliance seeks to hear the Lord; to hear the call of 'Christ obediently in faith within it, and know that *through this call they are responsible to the world.*'³³⁷

It is in this context that Bonhoeffer says, 'today there should no longer be war – the cross does not want it',³³⁸ and that '[t]he church of Christ stands against war in favor of peace among the peoples, between nations, classes, and races.'³³⁹ Peace is the word the church speaks *today*. Important to note is that this is not peace as *principle*, but peace spoken and commanded in a response to a *specific context*. It is peace spoken by those who have heard Christ's word as it is *given to the church*, received within the community by those who 'are looking for the words of their Lord and look everywhere' to find it. It is peace spoken by those who are not 'the knowledgeable, but as those who are seeking.' Above all, it is peace spoken by those 'bound together', who do not speak peace alone but only after having heard it first spoken as Christ's word 'in the voice of a brother' (or sister). Peace is therefore heard *in the church*, received not in confidence or self-justification, but as those who seek Christ in the words of their community. Peace is declared never once and for all, but only in a posture of discernment, encounter, and response. This "peace" is not a worldly peace – but the peace that *Christ* brings to the world through his word.

The address at Fanø in the summer of 1934 contains even more passionate proclamations of peace.³⁴⁰ However, it remains contextual in its declaration. This is supported by correspondence from the time,³⁴¹ and testimony from Bonhoeffer's contemporaries.³⁴² Winfried Maechler,

³³⁶ DBWE 11:377; DBW 11:352-353. Emphasis mine. We can hear echoes of the Beatitudes and simple wisdom here, discussed in the previous chapter.

³³⁷ DBWE 11:378; DBW 11:353. Emphasis mine. A better translation of the DBW would be 'responsible *for* the world.'

³³⁸ DBWE 11:380; DBW 11:356.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ DBWE 13:307-310; DBW 13:302-305.

³⁴¹ Referring to Fanø address, Bonhoeffer writes a letter to Th. De Fèlice that he has 'altered the content in accordance with the present affairs,' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Brief an Th. De Fèlice, 12.8.1934' *Dokumente zur Bonhoeffer Forschung*, ed. Jørgen Glenthøj (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969), p. 228.

³⁴² Interviews with Dr Herbert Jehle, Charlottesville, Virginia, March 1, 1968; Franz Hildebrandt, Edinburgh, Scotland, September 17, 1968; Gerhard Jacobi, Oldenburg, West Germany, 1968; Winfried Maechler, West Berlin, February 22, 1969; Julius Rieger, West Berlin, February 21 1969; Albrecht Schoenherr, East Berlin, February 25, 1969, referenced in Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 103.

himself a pacifist, remembered ‘protracted discussions with Bonhoeffer about the rapidly degenerating international situation.’³⁴³ Maechler saw Bonhoeffer’s speech at Fanø as a ‘rallying of forces “now” to create peace in a precarious moment.’³⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic therefore remains provisional. It is proclaimed in reference to the current context Bonhoeffer, Germany, the ecumenical church, and the world were experiencing.

At Fanø, Bonhoeffer says, the ecumenical church is concerned not with the matters of nationalism or politics. Rather the church is concerned alone with ‘the commandments of God, and regardless of consequences it transmits the commandments to the world.’³⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer spends much of the sermon asserting peace as the commandment of the church and the will of Christ. However, this peace is not identical to peace understood by the world. Instead, Bonhoeffer asserts that the peace the church speaks has a very particular form – the form of *Christ’s peace* spoken as a living commandment to the world at a moment in time.

There shall be peace because of the church of Christ, for the sake of which the world exists. And this church of Christ lives at one and the same time in all peoples, yet beyond all boundaries, whether national, political, social and racial.... His commandment of peace is more holy, more inviolable than the most revered words and works of the natural world.³⁴⁶

A distinction becomes apparent: the ‘peace’ Bonhoeffer calls the ecumenical church to take a position on is the peace which comes from encounter with Christ. This peace may look identical to understandings of peace outside of revelation, but this will not always be the case, because the two are not from the same source. One belongs to the world, and the other to Christ and his revealed word.

The peace Bonhoeffer calls for is the concrete command of Christ and not the timeless statement of peace as a principle. Otto Dudzus, commenting on the Fanø address, correctly reminds us that the speech is

lacking [the] ‘ifs,’ ‘whens,’ ‘hows,’ and other qualifiers of absolute pacifism, [it] was the language of proclamation and demand, of grace and its claims. There is a very good reason... the Fanø address was a sermon. The attainment of peace is not up for discussion; it is simply the command of Christ which must be obeyed.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ Interview with Winfried Maechler, in Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 104.

³⁴⁴ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

³⁴⁵ DBWE 13:307; DBW 13:302.

³⁴⁶ DBWE 13:308; DBW 13:303.

³⁴⁷ Interview with Otto Dudzus, Cologne, West Germany, October 11, 1968, in Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 105.

The distinction between “Christ’s peace”, spoken in response to Christ’s word and directed to concrete situations, vs. the “peace of the world”, appears again in ‘Christ and Peace’, a lecture given in December 1932 for the ecumenical group of the German Christian Student Association.³⁴⁸

‘Once again’, Bonhoeffer says, ‘the human authorities who sought to build peace upon a political foundation find themselves shipwrecked,’³⁴⁹ as ‘long as the world is free of God, there will be wars.’³⁵⁰ Christ does not interfere with national security or peace, Bonhoeffer says. Instead,

Christ was much more concerned that we should love God, that we become disciples of Jesus, as we are called to do through the promise of the Beatitudes, and that we thus become witnesses for peace.³⁵¹

The peace to which Christians bear witness is not the peace associated with specific political or historical forms. Instead, Bonhoeffer says, as discipleship is ‘based entirely on simple *faith*, and inversely, faith is only true in discipleship. So these words are addressed to the faithful, but the world is judged by Christ’s witness to peace.’³⁵² What does this mean? It means that there is a difference between “peace” as the world understands it (outside of faith) and Christ’s peace, which is heard, known, and proclaimed in faithful encounter with the word. This is the peace that Bonhoeffer remains obedient to throughout his life. It is a peace which comes from Christ, and is only ever concrete, contextual, and responsive to reality. It is not static, principled, or absolute. This peace is therefore not necessarily identical with peace as it is understood in the world – although it may appear so in the context of these ecumenical statements. So understood, as paradoxical as it may seem, enacting Christ’s peace as commandment received in the church and spoken to the world *could take the form of active resistance* if that is what is called for in a specific, extraordinary context.

A section of this lecture helps us more fully understand the split between principled pacifist action, and the peace which invades the world from Christ. Indeed, Green identifies this section of the 1932 lecture as being the kernel for understanding Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic.³⁵³

True peace can only be in God and come from God. This peace is a gift given to us with Christ, that is, peace is inseparably bound up with the gospel... Jesus said: “I have not come to bring

³⁴⁸ DBWE 12:258-262; DBW 17:116-120.

³⁴⁹ DBWE 12:258; DBW 17:116.

³⁵⁰ DBWE 12:259; DBW 17:117.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid. Emphasis original.

³⁵³ Green, ‘Pacifism and Tyrannicide,’ p. 91.

peace, but a sword." [Matt 10:34]... in the struggle between the gospel and... earthly powers, the Christian becomes separated from father and mother.³⁵⁴

Bonhoeffer, Rasmussen says, here cuts 'a wide swathe between an ecclesiological pacifism of the cross'³⁵⁵ and what Bonhoeffer identifies as secular pacifism. Christ's peace cuts through worldly relations like a sword, dividing itself from secular concepts of peace. Christ's peace encounters the Christian as a peace which disrupts all pre-conceived norms, laws, principles, institutions, and even the most of intimate familial relations. Rasmussen correctly identifies that the Bonhoeffer responsible for this lecture is 'more militant and courageous than ever and wholly single-minded.'³⁵⁶ This lecture is a desperate plea for Christian obedience to Christ's peace. Does this therefore mean that it is a move to absolute pacifism? The answer from the text is a profound no – the goal here is not pacifism but *peace*. The basis and *legitimacy* of the command is in Christ alone. Bonhoeffer therefore speaks *to* the world, commanding peace which comes from *Christ* and nothing and no one else.

Although Bonhoeffer here speaks of separation of the Christian 'from father and mother,' I would argue this does not imply the same isolationist tone of his 1929 sermon. Bonhoeffer here is addressing an ecumenical group within the context of the church. He is speaking to his fellow faith community bringing the word of God to them in encounter. These sermons and addresses between 1932 and 1934 do not therefore simply *describe* Bonhoeffer's approach to Christian ethics but also embody them. He is bringing the word of Christ to the ears of the church. This word comes as a No – separating them from their previous political or personal identities – but only as it simultaneously calls through them in the Yes back into those relationships, back into the world, *to view the world through Christ's command*, and to declare what he wills.³⁵⁷ The split Bonhoeffer describes here is the split between discipleship, constituted in a life of active discernment in faith for *Christ's peace*, and notions of secular or worldly peace.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of 'peace' is Christocentric, based on encounter, concrete obedience, and responsibility. It is not the absolute pacifism of some of his contemporaries at the time, even if it takes a similar form and calls for analogous outcomes in many contexts. This of course does not take away from the legitimacy of calls for peace within these documents. Peace – Christ-derived but world-directed – was Bonhoeffer's genuine commandment at that time. So too, Bonhoeffer's later active resistance, although not peaceful in the eyes of the world, was no less a 'peace ethic' when considered in the framework of his broader Christology.

³⁵⁴ DBWE 12:261; DBW 17:119.

³⁵⁵ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 103.

³⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 103-104.

³⁵⁷ We will explore the relationship of the church to the world in the next chapter, pp. 124-130.

But Discipleship?

And yet, there are ‘almost absolutist pronouncements’³⁵⁸ on peace in *Discipleship*.³⁵⁹

Jesus’ followers are called to peace. When Jesus called them, they found their peace. Jesus is their peace. Now they are not only to have peace, but they are to make peace. To do this they *renounce violence and strife*. Those things never help the cause of Christ. Christ’s kingdom is a realm of peace, and those in Christ’s community greet each other with a greeting of peace... They preserve community when others destroy it. They renounce self-assertion and are silent in the face of hatred and injustice. That is how they overcome evil with good. That is how they are makers of divine peace in a world of hatred and war.³⁶⁰

To take seriously what we said above, we must remember discipleship is not about pursuing prescribed Christian actions. Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* is not written as a timeless instruction. As Palmisano and Krauss suggest, Bonhoeffer’s ethical methodology is apparent from the first paragraph of the introduction to the work: ‘the echo of his ever probing question “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”’ is rendered [there]... in two questions: “What did Jesus want to say to us?” and “What does he want from us today?” Although *Discipleship* has become a timeless work.... It is truly applied theology in a crucial historical moment.’³⁶¹

Peace is prioritised in *Discipleship* – but out of an orientation to Christ. Peace itself is not the standard of ethical judgment, but Christ. As Palmisano and Krauss remind us,

context remains critical to the way in which Bonhoeffer thought about the theological task, emphasis on peace makes sense at the time in which *Discipleship* was written, and as a nonviolent, peaceable solution remained a viable option in the international ecumenical church. Peace was the command that Christ was speaking to his church.³⁶²

Later active resistance does not therefore represent a departure from nor a reworking of his theology – which is always and fundamentally Christ-oriented. Although Rasmussen might be correct in his assessment that all ‘the twisting possible cannot make the author of *The Cost of Discipleship* a volunteer for assassinating even Adolf Hitler,’³⁶³ I argue this is a case of a change in *context* rather than in theological approach. ‘Somewhere modifications have taken place,’³⁶⁴ Rasmussen says, but the same devotion to Christ and Christ’s encounter in the moment remains.

³⁵⁸ Mark Devine, *Bonhoeffer Speaks Today: Following Jesus at All Costs* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), p. 137.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ DBWE 4:108; DBW 4:107-108.

³⁶¹ Palmisano and Krauss, *Peace and Violence*, p. 97.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, p. 120.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

By focusing on Bonhoeffer's pacifism vs. active resistance in response to the Nazi regime, we may be left with the impression that Christian ethical decisions occur only in times of severe ethical conflict. However, this would be to misunderstand Bonhoeffer, who, Phieler says, 'constantly emphasized that the reach of basic ethical statements is far too short to grasp the whole of human life.' Instead, it is the concept of 'whole life' which is key for him.³⁶⁵ 'Bonhoeffer's ethical approach is first and foremost an acceptance that one's whole life is grasped in Jesus Christ. Christian ethical decisions are 'total and personal.'³⁶⁶

As we explored in the Agency chapter, Christian life is constituted in encounter with Christ, directing us in our freedom-for others. Christians, brought into the community of the church by Christ's encounter, continue to hear the word of Christ in the words of their human community, encountering us, judging us where we have gone wrong, and hearing the word together in order to discern the will of Christ anew in the world. This is not done 'once and for all' or in response only to emergency situations, but rather in *daily life under the word*.³⁶⁷

As Bethge says, Bonhoeffer never attempted to

'mould' [modellieren] the Christian message, to adapt it or even *bend it to fit* the conditions of the modern age. Rather, he was constantly searching for the substance of the message... in each generation, we have to look afresh at the cross and resurrection under the changed conditions of our own generation, and ask what it is that is given to us here.³⁶⁸

Christian life consists of discerning what has been given to us, being encountered with where we have erred, and how we can be transformed by Christ in our total being. Discipleship is therefore never a case of following a particular set of ethical commands, but is a life lived together in response to Christ, including a willingness to be proven wrong at every step, and be brought back into Christ's encounter.

Christian ethical actions take place from within this *way of life* – of praying, reading scripture, learning from other Christians, hearing what obedience has demanded in the past, and allowing oneself to be ethically called upon in the moment. It involves ridding oneself of set pre-conceptions of appropriate "behaviours" and instead be encountered by a situation, opening up

³⁶⁵ Gabriele Phieler, 'Ethics Is Not Everything', in *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, ed. by Guy Carter and others (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), p. 73.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 74.

³⁶⁷ Hence Bonhoeffer's suggestion of daily prayer and intercession, as we will explore in the Prayer chapter, pp. 231-235.

³⁶⁸ Bohn, 'Bonhoeffer's Religionlessness', pp. 60-61.

oneself to hear Christ's word in our community, through the words of others, scripture, and prayer. This is what it is to hear and respond to Christ's call in the concrete situation.

Such an approach means Christian action can be truly diverse – or change, as Bonhoeffer's own dedication from peace to active resistance does – while being united in the same Christic focus. As Bonhoeffer writes in a circular letter to his former seminarians, some brethren may be at home, some at war, some in community, some alone, some waiting in patience, some acting in the world, but 'it is everywhere the same work, and each of us is aware of the others and is thinking of them.'³⁶⁹ Because Christian action is unified in its response to Christ, different works are not valued as better or worse. What matters is not the action itself, but the knowledge that all action is united in Christ, and therefore also in community. Our actions are unified so long as we remain in a life of encounter within our community, in the knowledge that we never act alone but in and through a community of encounter.³⁷⁰

As Rowan Williams reminds us, 'Christian faith has its beginnings in an experience of profound contradictoriness.'³⁷¹ The 'goal of Christian life becomes not enlightenment but *wholeness* – an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre for God's creative work.'³⁷² Christians will remain confused and conflicted, unable to grasp the entire fullness of Christ's action in history. *But* Christians will continue to return to Christ and other Christians in daily encounter to find a way forward. In Christ, Williams says, we are given a new *life*. 'The new life is not a possession. It is, simply, a new *life* – that is to say, a new world of possibilities, a new future which is to be constructed day by day.'³⁷³ New life implies growth, movement, change, and a continued exploration of what God wants for us, the knowledge of which we have received and will continue to receive as we continue to live.

It is such an understanding, I believe, that cuts through the apparent seeming inconsistency of Bonhoeffer's approach to pacifism and active resistance. To live a Christian life is to accept that one eventually will become involved in contradiction, because Christians do not follow a set of normative rules but rather follow Christ who lives and encounters us in the here and now.

³⁶⁹ 'DBWE 14:214; DBW 14:194.

³⁷⁰ Which involves encountering us with the No of where we and the broader church community errs. The church must live in a state of repentance to avoid self-justification, as we will explore in the next chapter, pp. 131-136.

³⁷¹ Rowan Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, new edition (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), p. 1.

³⁷² Ibid. p. 2. Emphasis mine.

³⁷³ Ibid. p. 7

Chapter 2: Church

Introduction

Although still a less popular hook upon which to metaphorically “hang” Bonhoeffer’s theological corpus, ecclesiology has replaced Christology as ‘the ultimate foundational *res* of [Bonhoeffer’s] theology’³⁷⁴ for certain theologians. It is fairly easy to see why.³⁷⁵ Indeed, I agree with Tom Greggs’ ‘contentious claim,’³⁷⁶ that Bonhoeffer’s theology ‘is resolutely and continuously ecclesiologicaly oriented... [and] founded.’³⁷⁷ From his ‘earliest writings, Bonhoeffer demonstrated a concern to resist the focus on the individual, in isolation from the social and historical context.’³⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer wrote his doctoral dissertation as a theological study on the church,³⁷⁹ his notion of the Christian person is embedded entirely within an understanding of the church-community in conformation with Christ,³⁸⁰ his ethical explorations presuppose an ecclesial context,³⁸¹ and his final searching questions while imprisoned are on the nature of the church in a post Christian era.³⁸² As Emerton suggests, ecclesiology is ‘a theological theme that runs like a scarlet thread through [Bonhoeffer’s] life and thought,’ and ‘acts to tie together his theological oeuvre from first to last.’³⁸³

I accept that Bonhoeffer’s theology has a consistently ecclesial focus, and I also acknowledge Greggs’ conclusion that ecclesiology ‘shapes in interesting ways the doctrines which have their immediate derivative *res* in [Bonhoeffer’s] ecclesiological account.’³⁸⁴ However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, an understanding of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology must be placed within his Christology and Christologically informed theological anthropology. Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology cannot be spoken of without simultaneously speaking of its Christ-founded and -oriented nature. The church community cannot be understood without it being recognised as made up of *persons*³⁸⁵ conformed to Christ, with neither the community nor the individual being

³⁷⁴ Tom Greggs, ‘Bearing Sin in the Church’, p. 79.

³⁷⁵ Studies of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology include Halbach, *Bonhoeffer and the Racialized Church*; Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World*; Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson, *Christ, Church and World*; David Emerton, *God’s Church-Community*.

³⁷⁶ Greggs, ‘Bearing Sin in the Church’. p. 79.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ann L. Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 84.

³⁷⁹ DBWE 1.

³⁸⁰ DBWE 1:49-51; DBW 1:29-31.

³⁸¹ DBWE 6:60-70; DBW 6:46-57.

³⁸² DBWE 8/DBW 8, as mentioned by Tom Greggs, ‘Bearing Sin in the Church’, p. 79.

³⁸³ David Emerton, *God’s Church-Community*, p. 2.

³⁸⁴ Greggs, ‘Bearing Sin in the Church’, p. 79.

³⁸⁵ The church is a collective person, DBWE 1:78-80; DBW 1:49-51.

prior to the other. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology also demands being set within a dynamic of Christ's unfolding reality in the world. It is Christ's body on earth established *once and for all*, and yet is also *developing* in the world, pointing to Christ's final reconciliation. The church-community truly lives *in* the world, but *simultaneously* lives in the 'new creation'³⁸⁶ of Christ. To use Bonhoeffer's terms, the church lives in the present fallen world but views it from 'the end.'³⁸⁷

The importance of setting Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology in his Christology and theological anthropology becomes clear when we realise that there are apparent inconsistencies in the ecclesial presentation across his corpus. The interrelated issues I focus on in this chapter are, first, the visibility or invisibility of the church, and second, the relationship of the church with the world. Bonhoeffer's presentation of the church seems to change, especially when comparing his early materials, such as *Sanctorum Communio*, and Finkenwalde writings, *Life Together* and *Discipleship*, against his later works, including his *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In this chapter, I am going to demonstrate that the apparent inconsistency or change of direction is made understandable³⁸⁸ through Bonhoeffer's Christology and theological anthropology.

In the Finkenwalde materials, Bonhoeffer describes the church as a radically visible entity. The church is Christ's presence on earth, it is 'his body crucified and risen, here is the humanity he assumed.'³⁸⁹ The church is visible because it is 'a body... in a unique sense.'³⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer says,

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, and understood. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or even hearts; he needs actual, living human beings who follow him. That is why he called his disciples into following him bodily. His community with them was something everyone could see. It was found and held together by none other than Jesus Christ, the incarnate one himself. It was the word made flesh who called them, who had created the visible, bodily community. Those who had been called could no longer remain hidden; they were the light which has to shine, the city on a hill which is bound to be seen. Over their community stood visibly the cross and suffering of Jesus Christ.³⁹¹

³⁸⁶ 2 Cor. 5:17. I will be looking at recent Pauline apocalyptic scholarship in this chapter as a lens for Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church living in Christ's 'new creation.'

³⁸⁷ DBWE 3:22; DBW 3:22. Ecclesiology is therefore partly understood eschatologically/apocalyptically, as I will explore in this chapter, pp. 124-130.

³⁸⁸ I purposefully avoid the term 'resolve' here, as this would be to make static a theological vision which is concerned with the *dynamic* unfolding of Christ's reality on earth, as the church-community is conformed to him and points to his future Parousia.

³⁸⁹ DBWE 4:218; DBW 4:232.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ DBWE 4:226; DBW 4:241-242. DBW 4:242 has 'Die Gerufenen konnten nicht mehr verborgen bleiben, sie waren das Licht, das leuchten muß, die Stadt auf dem Berge, die gesehen werden muß.' Bonhoeffer uses here 'muss gesehen werden', an indicative statement rather than an imperative. The city on the hill cannot be hidden – it must be seen.

The community of Christ is to be distinctive; it is salt to preserve the world,³⁹² it is a light on the hillside.³⁹³ It must be these things, and *visibly* so, otherwise it is not the church.³⁹⁴

The church is therefore *visible* according to Bonhoeffer, but this visibility points to an invisible reality established solely in Christ. The community is, Bonhoeffer says, 'held together by none other than Jesus Christ, the incarnate one himself,' it is the word made flesh who 'create[s] the visible, bodily community.' The church therefore is a physical body in time but *really* it is 'the body of Christ.' As I will explore at the beginning of this chapter in the work of Hegstad,³⁹⁵ Healy,³⁹⁶ Bradbury³⁹⁷ and others, Bonhoeffer appears to fall prey here to an ecclesiological vision where the idealised, eternal community of Christ is described and projected onto the visible church, and the fallible, sinful aspects of the church are either ignored or diminished in favour of this perfected vision. In the Finkenwalde material, Bonhoeffer presents us with a visible church-community, yes. But this visible community is the sanctified body of Christ, which will presumably shed itself of its false human parts, after passing through the world to its final deliverance. In his words, the church 'is merely passing through its host country... towards its heavenly home.'³⁹⁸ We are presented with what seems a highly idealised notion of the body of Christ, very far from the sinful nature of the historical church.

Linked to the issue of (in)visibility, is the relationship of the church with the world. Not only is the church-community of Christ visible, but it is also called out from and made distinct from the world as *Ekklēsia*.³⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer describes this separation at the beginning of his exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount.

The crowd sees: there is Jesus with his disciples, who have joined him. The disciples – not so long before, they themselves were fully part of the crowd. They were just like all the others. Then Jesus' call came. So they left everything behind and followed him. Since then they have

We need to assess in this chapter how Christians must be visible and *for whom* they are visible. Compare to life lived as commandment in DBWE 3:91; DBW 3:85-86.

³⁹² DBWE 4:111-112; DBW 4:110-112.

³⁹³ DBWE 4:112-114; DBW 4:112-114.

³⁹⁴ If salt stops being salt, it is no longer effective and must be thrown away. 'That is the threatening judgment which hangs over the disciples' community... The call of Christ means being salt of the earth or being destroyed,' DBWE 4:112; DBW 4:112; cf. 'The call itself has made them light. It cannot be any other way... To flee into invisibility is to deny the call. Any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows him.' DBWE 4:112-113; DBW 4:112-113.

³⁹⁵ Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, Church of Sweden Research Series (Eugene, Oregon: James Clarke & Co, 2013).

³⁹⁶ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*.

³⁹⁷ John Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming: A Theology of Church Reform and Renewal*, Ecclesiological Investigations, first edition (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012).

³⁹⁸ DBWE 4:250-251; DBW 4:266-267.

³⁹⁹ I use *Ekklēsia* in the sense of a congregation 'called out' by God. For more on the etymology and history of *Ekklēsia*, see Ralph J Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia in the Early Jesus Movement* (Baltimore: BRILL, 2017).

belonged to Jesus – completely. Now they go with him, live with him, follow him... something has happened to them which has not happened to the others.⁴⁰⁰

Jesus' call to enter discipleship separates the church from the world. The church belongs no longer to 'the crowd' but entirely 'to Jesus.' According to Bonhoeffer, the 'space' reclaimed for Christ in the church exists entirely 'in Christ' and is no longer under the dominion of the world. This newly created community, 'is no longer subject to the world.'⁴⁰¹ All who belong to 'the body of Christ have been freed from and called out of the world.'⁴⁰²

We must consider two consequences of *Ekklēsia*:

First, the call out from the world changes not just the church's relationship with the world at large but all relationships *within the world*, even the most intimate. Church members must

know that there can be no unmediated relationships, even in the most intimate ties of their lives, in the blood ties to father and mother, to children, brothers and sisters, in marital love, in historical responsibilities. Ever since Jesus called, there are no longer natural, historical, or experiential unmediated relationships for his disciples. Christ the mediator stands between son and father, between husband and wife, between individual and nation, whether they can recognize him or not.⁴⁰³

The church does not have direct access to the world, because every relationship is mediated through Christ.

Second, Bonhoeffer suggests that this separation between the community and the world is already complete. The 'church lives its own life in the midst of the world.'⁴⁰⁴ Although the church remains at work in the world, it has been rescued from it and taken into God's possession for all time.

God has now taken complete possession of those whom God has gained in Christ. The circle has been closed. In the Holy Spirit we have become God's own. Secured from the world by an unbreakable seal, the community of saints awaits its final deliverance. The church-community moves through the world like a sealed train passing through foreign territory [Wie ein versiegelter Zug im fremden Lande, so geht die Gemeinde durch die Welt].⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ DBWE 4:100; DBW 4:99.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² DBWE 4:236; DBW 4:252.

⁴⁰³ DBWE 4:95; DBW 4:90.

⁴⁰⁴ DBWE 4:250; DBW 4:266.

⁴⁰⁵ DBWE 4:260; DBW 4:276. The DBW comparison of equation construction 'Wie... so' makes feel this statement feel even more impactful than the DBWE.

The church-community, Bonhoeffer says, has its own 'territory with an authority of its own, a space set apart.'⁴⁰⁶

The combination of both – that the church has no immediate relationship with the world and that this separation is complete – leads to a sense that, for Bonhoeffer, the church is not only set apart from the world, but also set *against the world*. Life in the 'spirit', is set against "foreign" life in the 'flesh'. As Bonhoeffer says in *Discipleship*, referencing Matthew 6.24, no one can serve two masters: 'if you love the world, you hate God; if you love God, you hate the world.'⁴⁰⁷

Therefore, although the church remains in the world, this is 'not because of the given goodness of the world, nor even because of the responsibility for the course the world takes. The church exists in the world solely for the sake of the body of Christ who became incarnate.'⁴⁰⁸ The church is sealed in Christ and views the world only through Christ's mediatorship. The church 'claims a space in the world'⁴⁰⁹ for Christ's proclamation, to whom it belongs entirely, but lives entirely separately – and in opposition – to the crowd it has left behind. It encounters the crowd through and for the sake of Christ alone.

Taken together, *Discipleship* seems to offer a highly idealised and worrisome ecclesiology; of a visible church which exists only in relation to its invisible and perfected parts; and a church which operates in the world but which in truth is sealed from and in opposition to it.

In *Letters and Papers*, Bonhoeffer reflects on his Finkenwalde writings⁴¹⁰ with the following letter to Eberhard Bethge.⁴¹¹ A very different ecclesiology seems to be present compared to the material above.

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.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁶ DBWE 4:253; DBW 4:269.

⁴⁰⁷ DBWE 4:164; DBW 4:170.

⁴⁰⁸ DBWE 4:244; DBW 4:260.

⁴⁰⁹ DBWE 4:229; DBW 4:245.

⁴¹⁰ This letter has been used as evidence of Bonhoeffer criticising his earlier Finkenwalde theology. For example D. Hopper, *Bonhoeffer's 'Love of the World', 'The Dangers of That Book' and the Kierkegaard Question*, Unpublished Paper American Academy of Religion 1989 (Bonhoeffer Society Archive, Union Theological Seminary, New York) cited in Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, pp. 94-97. Nickson disagrees, 'Hopper's analysis of Bonhoeffer's comments in the letter from Tegel, lacks balance, in that it focuses on the phrase 'the dangers of that book,' without giving due weight to Bonhoeffer's affirmation that 'I still stand by what I wrote,' p. 97.

⁴¹¹ The importance of this letter for understanding Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is discussed in John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 262.

⁴¹² DBWE 8:485; DBW 8:451.

I remember a conversation I had thirteen years ago in America with a young French pastor. We had simply asked ourselves what we really wanted to do with our lives... [I said] something like: I want 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.* Later on, I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself – whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader.... A just or unjust person, a sick or healthy person – then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and *this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of one's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities* – then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is metanoia. And this is how one becomes a human being.⁴¹³

It is interesting to note that the word “church” isn’t used at all in the letter, although implied throughout. ‘In the last few years,’ Bonhoeffer says, he has come to know more and more about the profound ‘this-worldliness’ of Christianity, and the importance of living ‘fully in the midst of one’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities.’ Bonhoeffer suggests here a radical in-world notion of Christianity, with no separation or seeming visibility of the church. The Christian exists entirely through their working and living in the world. Being a Christian is therefore not associated with ‘living a saintly life’ (in the cloisters away from the messiness and sinfulness of the world). Instead, to learn to have faith is to live as a *human* in the world, renouncing the idea of ‘making something of oneself’, and instead throwing oneself and one’s personhood ‘completely into the arms of God.’ Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology here is about the type of “human” our encounter with Christ releases us to be.

What comes out in this letter is an (implicit) ecclesiology guided by Bonhoeffer’s broader Christological and theological anthropological concerns. The church is not identified through its visible position in society. Instead, the church is characterised by its distinctive way of being in the world, namely its being for others in conformation with Christ’s personhood. This type of personhood involves living entirely *in the world* because it means being free-for others. Faith therefore requires living as a human being in the image of personhood Christ gives us. In other words, the church is the church precisely by being free and responsible to others in the world.

⁴¹³ DBWE 8:485-486; DBW 8:541-542. Emphasis mine.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer's earlier material on the visibility of the church, and his later material on its worldliness, can be read together through his Christologically rooted ecclesiology and theological anthropology. When read through such a lens, we can view his works as representing different emphases within a greater whole. Indeed, as Bonhoeffer says in this letter, although he sees the dangers of *Discipleship*, he 'still stand[s] by it.'⁴¹⁴ He credits this to his discovery – and continued discovery – of learning to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life,' simultaneously living entirely in the 'arms of God.'⁴¹⁵

Invisible belief, visible obedience

We have already discussed that through Christ's call, persons are conformed to the image of Christ, in which we were created.⁴¹⁶ Being encountered means being called out of our sinful, isolated existence, but only as it simultaneously calls us back into our created freedom-for. Christ's encounter with us involves our being judged and called out of our fallen life 'in death'⁴¹⁷ but only as it reveals our true situation as creatures.

Such an understanding of Christian life in conformation to Christ's freedom-for has important ramifications for our understanding of the visibility of the church. I will demonstrate how Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology can be made consistent if we focus on this understanding of creaturely freedom in filial responsibility. In divine encounter, I am called into faith in Christ, only as I am simultaneously called into responsibility for others.⁴¹⁸ To become a Christian and to enter the church community are therefore simultaneous events.⁴¹⁹ Indeed, to be encountered is to realise that *I am already in the church community*.⁴²⁰ I am freed by Christ into my creaturely existence, which is precisely to be in relationship with others and have ethical responsibility for the world.

Being encountered by Christ's divine word is therefore invisible but also – crucially – visible. I am called to be responsible for – or 'obedient'⁴²¹ – to others. The church is visible as a community faithful and obedient to Christ. I will demonstrate that visible 'obedience' is not a by-product or *consequence* of 'believing.' Rather, encounter with Christ contains both the invisible *and* visible simultaneously. I cannot be obedient without believing; I cannot believe

⁴¹⁴ DBWE 8:486; DBW 8:542.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ See Agency chapter, pp. 42-51.

⁴¹⁷ DBWE 3:91; DBW 3:85.

⁴¹⁸ DBWE 1:48-56; DBW 1:28-34.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid

⁴²⁰ DBW 1:158-161; DBW 1:101-102.

⁴²¹ I will explore the simultaneity of belief and obedience in *Discipleship* to guide my presentation here: DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:52.

without obedience. To have faith is to realise I am a creature in relation to others; to be a creature in relation to others is to have faith in and be conformed to Christ. I will explore the simultaneity of obedience and faith and demonstrate how this overcomes any misunderstanding of an invisible church standing in opposition to or in priority over the visible entity of the church in the world. Christ requires a *visible* body on earth, made up of Christians *invisibly* conformed to him, *visibly* demonstrating this conformation in responsible relationship to others, bringing others into *invisible* encounter with Christ, and so on. Neither the invisible nor the visible precedes the other. Both exist simultaneously as the Christian person is encountered and re-encountered in the world within the church community.

To further understand the simultaneous nature of believing (invisible) and obedience (visible), I will ask for whom actions are visible. For Bonhoeffer, the visible actions of the disciple are not seen by themselves, but rather all actions are done in orientation to Christ alone. It is this dedication to Christ alone, following the one who goes ahead, which prevents any separation of faith and obedience in the church. I can do extraordinary things, but only because of the extraordinary one who goes ahead of me.⁴²² Focusing initially on passages from *Discipleship*, I will then discuss the role of the church as a divine mandate in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, demonstrating that the church remains the church only to the extent that it looks to Christ.⁴²³ It is such an understanding that can bring together the passages we explored above.

The Mediator

In the *Discipleship* passages above, it is clear that Christ's encounter changes the church's relationship with the world. However, as I will demonstrate, Christ does not *distance* my relationship with the world and other people, but rather enables me to see the world for what it is – through Christ's reality. By viewing the world through Christ as mediator (Der Mittler), I am made able to love and respect others, viewing them as human beings created in Christ, rather than as objects to coerce and control.⁴²⁴ I receive the world back through Christ alone as the mediator; but through Christ, I *really* have the world.

I will establish that in being encountered by Christ, what is important is the change in my relationship to the world, relating to others through Christ the mediator, and not whether this

⁴²² DBWE 4:146-152; DBW 4:150-156.

⁴²³ DBWE 6:388-394; DBW 6:392-398.

⁴²⁴ DBWE 5:39; DBW 5:27.

results in a visible change in behaviour that I and others regard as obviously “Christian”. There is a difference between a *willingness to make visible one’s relationship to Christ*, and visibility that is done for oneself and one’s position in the world. I will explore this by looking at Bonhoeffer’s discussion of Abraham and Isaac,⁴²⁵ and show that the “visibility” Bonhoeffer talks about in relation to the church is about faith and obedience to Christ, viewing the world through the mediator, and not visibility *for visibility’s sake*. This will prove essential for our understanding of the status or privilege of the church in the world.

Having explored the (in)visibility of my receiving others as they are given to me through the mediator, I will discuss how this change in relationship with the world through Christ relates to Bonhoeffer’s apocalyptic Christological vision. As Bonhoeffer says in the Abraham and Isaac passage,

Externally everything remained the same. But the old has passed away; see everything has become new. Everything had to go through Christ.⁴²⁶

Encounter means being called out of the old world. The old world externally remains the same, but for the one in encounter, it ‘has passed away.’ Abraham re-receives the world, viewing it through something ‘new’ in Christ.

“Called out” and “Called in”

Having discussed how Christ’s encounter changes one’s relationship with the world, receiving it through Christ the mediator, I will further explore Bonhoeffer’s Christology and theological anthropology in their apocalyptic orientation, and how this impacts Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology.⁴²⁷

What I will demonstrate is that for Bonhoeffer, the Christian is called *out* of their previous relationships with the “old” world. At the same time, they are called back *into the world* in free responsibility. I am “called out”, but only as I am also simultaneously “called in”. Through Christ’s encounter, I can see the world for what it *really* is; that it exists entirely in relation to

⁴²⁵ Genesis 22:1-19.

⁴²⁶ DBWE 4:98; DBW 4:32.

⁴²⁷ For more on Bonhoeffer’s apocalypticism, see Philip G. Ziegler, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer - An Ethics of God’s Apocalypse?’, *Modern Theology*, 23.4 (2007), pp. 579–594; Philip G. Ziegler, “‘Voices in the Night’: Human Solidarity and Eschatological Hope”, in *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer’s Theology Through His Poetry*, ed. by Bernd Wannenwetsch, first edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2012), pp. 115–146; Philip G. Ziegler, “‘Completely Within God’s Doing’: Soteriology as Meta-Ethics in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”, in *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer’s Theology and Ethics*, by Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler, first edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), pp. 101–117; Ziegler, *Militant Grace*; Philip G. Ziegler, ‘Parabolic Life: Toward an Ethics of God’s Apocalypse’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 34.4 (2021), pp. 426–438; Emerton, *God’s Church-Community*; Greggs, ‘Bearing Sin’; McBride *The Church for the World*.

Christ's reality, already brought about in Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, but also pointing to future completion. I can see the "old" world through the "new".

Such an understanding avoids a competitive or oppositional relationship between the church and the world. It is not that the church stands in opposition to the world. Indeed, the church is called *out* of oppositional thinking, and *into* viewing the whole world in the "new creation" – as the reality for which Christ became incarnate, died, and rose. The church exists within the old creation (a world that operates without knowledge of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection), but it knows that this world now really exists in relation to Christ. The church therefore exists in the "old" but only as it exists simultaneously in the new creation of Christ *which has already been brought about*. I will explore this relationship of church and the world using Pauline apocalyptic scholarship,⁴²⁸ demonstrating that Bonhoeffer has the same apocalyptic concerns underlying his Christology and theological anthropology, which inform his ecclesiological presentation.⁴²⁹

In the Agency chapter, we explored how the Christian person exists under the divine No and Yes of Christ.⁴³⁰ In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the church (and other divine mandates) exists in the world under the *same* No and Yes. Christ's encounter involves our being judged and called *out* of our fallen life 'in death'⁴³¹ but only as he also calls us *into* our true situation as creatures, freely responsible to the other. I am entirely *judged and destroyed* (in the divine No),

⁴²⁸ For example, the works of J. Louis Martyn, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Corinthians 5:16', in *Christian History and Interpretations: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. by W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 269–287; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); J. Louis Martyn, 'The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians', *Interpretation* (Richmond), 54.3 (2000), pp. 246–266; J. C. Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Dr Martinus C. de Boer, 'Paul, Theologian of God's Apocalypse', *Biblical Interpretation*, 56 (2002), pp. 21–33; Dr Martinus C. de Boer, *Paul, Theologian of God's Apocalypse: Essays on Paul and Apocalyptic* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020); Thomas E. Boomershine, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages in Paul, Jesus, and Mark: Rhetoric and Dialectic in Apocalyptic and the New Testament', in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. by Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (Sheffield: JSOT press, 1989), pp. 147–168; Alexandra R. Brown, *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009); James P. Davies, *The Cascade Companion to the Apocalyptic Paul* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021); Nancy Duff, 'The Significance of Pauline Apocalyptic for Theological Ethics', in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. by Marion L. Soards and Joel Marcus (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 279–296; David W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:5*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992); Robin Scroggs, 'Eschatological Existence in Matthew and Paul: Coincidentia Oppositorum', in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. by Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (Sheffield: JSOT press, 1989), pp. 125–146; Richard E. Sturm, 'Defining the word "Apocalyptic": A Problem in Biblical Criticism', in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. by Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (Sheffield: JSOT press, 1989), pp. 17–49.

⁴²⁹ I do not see the need to designate apocalyptic as a separate theological theme within Bonhoeffer's work. Rather, it is a way of understanding his Christological, ecclesiological, and theological anthropological presentation.

⁴³⁰ Agency chapter, pp. 46–51.

⁴³¹ DBWE 3:91; DBW 3:85.

but only as I am simultaneously *released and conformed* to Christ at the heart of creation (the divine Yes). The church exists under judgment. It is judged and destroyed, but only as it is simultaneously released into conformation with Christ, as a dynamic witness to Christ in the world

I will argue, in line with McBride, that for Bonhoeffer the church exists in a state of *repentance*.⁴³² witnessing to and repenting of the world's sin (under the divine No), but also bringing the world into conformation with Christ's self (the divine Yes). For Bonhoeffer, the church's special commandment as a mandate is *proclamation*.⁴³³ It proclaims God's divine word as No and Yes. It does this not for itself, but out of its responsibility for the world, as a witness to Christ's reality. This helps us understand the church's relationship with the world. The church is set to work, taking on responsibility, and repenting of the world's sin under the divine No, but only as it also prepares the way for the world to see itself not only as judged but also forgiven and reconciled to God in the divine Yes. It exists under the divine No and Yes, bringing the world into recognition of the same No and Yes. Or in apocalyptic phrasing, it exists in the "new creation", mourning the old creation; but only as it simultaneously works in the old creation, bringing it into the new.

⁴³² As per McBride, *The Church for the World*, pp. 14-17, 42-43, 60-66 ; Jennifer M. McBride, 'Reformation through Repentance', pp. 178-83. See also Jennifer M. McBride, 'Concrete Implications of an Ecclesial Witness Based on Repentance', in *Evangelical Ethics: A Reader*, ed. by David P. Gushee and Isaac B. Sharp (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), pp. 137-45; Greggs, 'Bearing Sin in the Church', pp. 79-93.

⁴³³ DBWE 6:395-397; DBW 6:398-400.

Criticism of the Visible and Invisible Church

As Bradbury comments, '[t]he Church exists. This fact is one of the most inconvenient for anyone attempting to engage with the theology of the church.'⁴³⁴ There are churches across the world gathering to worship, engage in preaching, and take part in sacraments. There are also buildings which 'litter the landscape', 'structures – councils and gatherings of people who claim to be the church.'⁴³⁵ Defining the church, given this diversity, is incredibly difficult.⁴³⁶ We therefore need to avoid simple definitions or too-neat systems of identification. Unfortunately, as Healy suggests, this is exactly what is often offered in ecclesiology.

To the extent that modern ecclesiology is governed by an abstract, rationalistic, and overly theoretical approach, it makes it difficult for theologians to acknowledge the realities of the church's concrete identity. Ecclesiology is misguided if it attempts to construct, on the basis of a single model or principle, a systematic blueprint for the church that applies normatively always and everywhere. Such a blueprint can be very powerful and replete with profound theological language. Yet it may well prove to be a harmful response to the ecclesiological context and thus practically and prophetically false.⁴³⁷

Such 'blueprint'⁴³⁸ ecclesiological models idealise and "eternalise" the nature of the church. As Bradbury suggests, the abstract 'notion of the invisible church ends up functioning as an almost platonic ideal of the church, which the real historical church must attempt to emulate.'⁴³⁹ The church as we experience it in the world, in all its diversity and flaws, ends up *not actually being the "Church" at all*.⁴⁴⁰ Instead, the true Church is the eternal, perfected Church of Christ to which the current church can only point. The difficulty is that the "Church" is turned 'into an abstracted, idealized one, rather than any church in which we worship or practice our faith and grow.'⁴⁴¹ There can be no sense of change, development, dynamic faith, or reform. Indeed, the current church ceases to matter at all except in relation to the "true" Church standing prior to it.

⁴³⁴ John Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming*, p. 1.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Paul Minear finds c.100 images used to speak of the church in the New Testament alone; Paul Sevier Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament: The New Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004).

⁴³⁷ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, p. 50.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming*, p. 4.

⁴⁴⁰ For the sake of clarity, in this section I am using 'Church' to describe the eternal, perfected Christian community and 'church' for the historical, flawed community that can only point to future perfection.

⁴⁴¹ Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming*, p. 4.

Healy believes that ecclesiology has become too systematic and theoretical, focusing on 'discerning the right things to think about the [C]hurch rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church is.'⁴⁴² Healy blames reformational thinking for this.⁴⁴³ During the Reformation, there developed a doctrine of the visible and invisible church. Reformers looked at the hierarchy and institution of the catholic church and found it difficult to reconcile such a view of the church as the body and bride of Christ.⁴⁴⁴ In dialogue with scriptures and early church fathers,⁴⁴⁵ there therefore developed a profound sense of the *mystery* of the church. That behind the sinful and often corrupt visible church – which could falter and fail – was the invisible Church, founded in and oriented to Christ.

Less-sympathetic depictions of Luther and subsequent Reformed thinkers describe this theology as reductive.⁴⁴⁶ The human actions of the church and its historical context are disregarded in favour of a high ecclesiology which has little to do with lived experience. In addition, the reality of sin within church members and the church itself are too often forgotten. For Healy and others, this creates a static duality, setting the visible, external empirical features of church against the invisible, internal and eternal aspects.⁴⁴⁷ Such a distinction privileges 'abstract predestinarianism over the concrete lives and structures of church communities.'⁴⁴⁸ This is particularly important to consider before discussing the nature of the church that Bonhoeffer presents, since Bonhoeffer is highlighted as a proponent of such a dualistic ecclesiology by certain theologians.⁴⁴⁹

Hegstad criticises exactly this in Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*. According to Hegstad, although Bonhoeffer emphasises the empirical visible reality of church, 'his view of the church being the body of Christ leads to a dividing of the true [C]hurch and the empirical church. As a

⁴⁴² Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*. P. 3

⁴⁴³ See *ibid.* pp. 25-51 for Healy's discussion of Barth, and other models and examples.

⁴⁴⁴ Paul Avis, 'The Church and Ministry', in *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. by David M Whitford (London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2012), pp. 143–156.

⁴⁴⁵ For example, Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

⁴⁴⁶ Healy, *Church World and the Christian Life* p. 4; cf. discussion of Reformed Theology in relation to invisibility/visibility in Cynthia L. Rigby, 'The Christian Life', in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 96–114.

⁴⁴⁷ Avis, 'The Church and Ministry', pp. 145-148; Bradford Littlejohn, 'Believing in the Church: Why Ecumenism Needs the Invisibility of the Church', *Religions*, 2019, p. 1; Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming*, pp. 31-53.

⁴⁴⁸ Such an understanding arguably does injustice to reformation theology. Luther was very clear that 'without place and body there is no church' (WA 7.719). Similarly, in Calvin's Institutes, he became increasingly concerned to stress the visible nature of the church. In his second edition in 1539, he retains his theology of election but also says: 'you cannot have God your Father unless you have the Church your Mother. The invisible Church cannot nurture, guide, and teach us.' See discussion in Avis 'The Church and Ministry', pp. 145-148 and Paul D. L. Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective*, Second edition. (London: T & T Clark, 2002).

⁴⁴⁹ For example, by Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church*. See also Ola Tjørhom, *Visible Church - Visible Unity: Ecumenical Ecclesiology and 'The Great Tradition of the Church'* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004).

social entity, the church is visible; as the body of Christ, it is invisible. First and foremost, the sinfulness and imperfection of the empirical church makes it necessary to distinguish the church from the [C]hurch beyond the empirical.’⁴⁵⁰ Hegstad believes Bonhoeffer and Barth,⁴⁵¹ by christologically anchoring the idea of church as the body of Christ, are led into a duality – distinguishing between ‘the human, empirical church and the super-empirical *true [C]hurch*.’⁴⁵² It is to this criticism of the (in)visibility of the church that I turn first.

⁴⁵⁰ Hegstad, *The Real Church*, p. 26.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. pp. 26-30. Similar criticisms are raised in Healy *Church, World and the Christian Life* and in Nicholas M Healy, ‘The Logic of Karl Barth’s Ecclesiology: Analysis, Assessment and Proposed Modifications’, *Modern Theology*, 10.3 (1994), pp. 253–270.

⁴⁵² Hegstad, *The Real Church*, p. 27.

The Visible and Invisible Church Community

We must explore whether these criticisms regarding the visible and invisible church are a fair assessment of Bonhoeffer, especially the suggestion that he does harm to the historical and human aspect of the church in favour of its perfected nature in eternal community in Christ.⁴⁵³ It is true that Bonhoeffer has a sense of the visible and invisible dimensions of the church and that he pays attention to the church as a 'simultaneously human [historical community] and a reality of God's revelation.'⁴⁵⁴ However, as Halbach suggests,

Bonhoeffer never tries to dress the church up, nor does he ever give up on God's working through the historical Christian church as the community of Christ. In *Sanctorum Communio* he writes that it is only 'as a concrete historical community, in the relativity of its forms and in its imperfect and modest appearance, that it is the body of Christ, Christ's presence on earth.'⁴⁵⁵

Taking Halbach's lead and focusing initially on *Sanctorum Communio*, it is true that, for Bonhoeffer, 'only the concept of revelation can lead to the Christian concept of the church.'⁴⁵⁶ The church cannot be proven on 'general grounds,'⁴⁵⁷ nor is it possible to "deduce" faith in the church.⁴⁵⁸ The true nature of church is therefore in an important sense *invisible*, in that it is divinely revealed. It is only by acknowledging 'the claim of revelation'⁴⁵⁹ that one can gain faith in the church. Indeed, '[t]he reality of the church is a reality of revelation, a revelation that essentially must be either believed or denied... judging the claim of the church to be God's church-community can be found only by stepping inside it, by bowing in faith to its claim.'⁴⁶⁰

The church is therefore invisible as divinely revealed. However, for Bonhoeffer, this invisibility is in no way separable from or prior to the visible, human, and historical church. Bonhoeffer warns in *Sanctorum Communio* that we misstep when we seek to account for the church in the following two ways:

[One] historicizing and the other religious; the former confuses the church with the religious community, the latter with the Realm of God. The former overlooks the fact that the new basic-relations established by God actually are real, and points instead to the "religious

⁴⁵³ See criticisms above from Hegstad, *The Real Church* and Ola Tjøhom, *Visible Church*.

⁴⁵⁴ Halbach, *Bonhoeffer and the Racialized Church*, p. 12.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ DBWE 1:134; DBW 1:85.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ DBWE 1:127; DBW 1:82.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ DBWE 1:127; DBW 1:80. Emphasis original.

motives" that in fact lead to empirical community (the missionary impulse, the need to communicate, etc.). This view, however, plainly is condemned by... John's Gospel that "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:15).⁴⁶¹

[The religious misunderstanding does not take seriously that human beings] are bound by history; this means that historicity either is objectified and deified... or simply is regarded as accidental as subject to the laws of death and sin. Doing so, however, does not accept, but circumvents, God's will that all God's revelation, both in Christ and in the church, be concealed under the form of historical life.⁴⁶²

Both approaches fail, Bonhoeffer says, to understand the reality of the church 'simultaneously as a historical community and one established by God.'⁴⁶³

Church through encounter

To take seriously that the church is known only through revelation, but that this includes the visible (historic and human) and invisible (divinely instituted), we must understand the church in relation to the Who at the centre of revelation.⁴⁶⁴ The church comes into being through the revelation of Christ. As Nickson says, for Bonhoeffer, to speak of community 'is to speak not primarily of structures or institutions, but of persons... the concept of person is fundamental to Bonhoeffer's conceptualisation of Christian community.'⁴⁶⁵

Divine revelation means being encountered by Christ's word and being conformed to his free responsibility for others. The person is encountered by Christ's divine word through the human word of scripture, preaching, or an ethical claim. The divine word, which empowers the human word, confronts the person as an inescapable claim. The Christian person is therefore created 'in the moment of being moved – in the situation of responsibility, passionate ethical struggle, confrontation by an overwhelming claim... the real person grows out of the concrete situation.'⁴⁶⁶ It is this moment of ethical encounter in time that frees the human person to conform to Christ's freedom-for and thus return to their personhood as God originally

⁴⁶¹ DBWE 1:125; DBW 1:79.

⁴⁶² DBWE 1:125-126; DBW 1:79.

⁴⁶³ DBWE 1:139; DBW 1:86: 'The relation of Christ to the church is twofold. Christ is the foundation, the cornerstone, the pioneer, the master builder... the church is at once already completed and still in the process of growing.' See also DBWE 1:127, 143; DBW 1:80, 88-89.

⁴⁶⁴ DBWE 12:303-305; DBW 12:283-285.

⁴⁶⁵ Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 86.

⁴⁶⁶ DBWE 1:49; DBW 1:29.

intended.⁴⁶⁷ In divine encounter, I am called into faith and to conform myself to my created freedom in the image of Christ. This can only occur, however, as I am simultaneously called into responsibility for others, as the content of my created freedom. As Bonhoeffer says, the more clearly 'the barrier [of divine encounter] is perceived, the more deeply the person enters into the situation of responsibility.'⁴⁶⁸ To become a Christian is to be encountered by Christ in his divine revelation. *Simultaneously*, to become a Christian is to enter community with others, recognising myself as existing only in relation to others.⁴⁶⁹

To be a Christian is therefore *to exist in the church*, which is simultaneously divinely instituted *and* historically taking up space. The church is made up of persons encountered by Christ and brought into relationship with others in free responsibility. The church exists through revelation which orients me to Christ but simultaneously to the human other.

Recognising the church is therefore only possible through revelation, but this revelation does not set the invisible notion of church over against the visible (as Hegstad might claim).⁴⁷⁰ There are not two planes of existence within the church, one human and the other divine.⁴⁷¹ Just as Christ is fully human and fully divine, not half one and half the other, the church *is simultaneously fully divine/invisible and fully human/visible*. Entering the church requires being encountered by Christ's word through the human other. Encounter reveals that I exist as a person in relation to the other. I recognise myself in the image of Christ, *which is precisely to be in relationship to others in community*. There is no sense of division of invisible and visible, or the divine and the historical.

Importantly, for Bonhoeffer, we also cannot separate the invisible and visible aspects of the church *chronologically*. It is not as if the moment of divine encounter (invisibly) *then moves me to behave in such a way* in time (visibly). The moment of encounter by the divine You does not intellectually reinvigorate my faith to Christ, which then influences me to behave in a certain way. Rather, divine encounter changes my personhood and my way of being in and understanding the world.

The encounter with Christ, made possible by the human other, reveals to me that I am in fact *already and always have been in relationship to others*. I am not encountered by Christ and *then*

⁴⁶⁷ For a fuller description, see Agency chapter, pp. 39-45.

⁴⁶⁸ DBWE 1:49; DBW 1:29.

⁴⁶⁹ DBWE 1:50-51, 56, 65, 178; DBW 1:30-31, 34, 39, 117.

⁴⁷⁰ See criticisms in previous section.

⁴⁷¹ I am working within an understanding of non-competitive divine and human relations here, a topic covered in the Agency chapter, pp. 36-45.

become a social creature; I am encountered by Christ and realise *I have always been a social creature*. Indeed, to be encountered in the first place requires me to respond to Christ as a social creature.

The church must therefore be understood simultaneously as a divinely instituted *and* historical social entity. To explore this further, I will present Bonhoeffer's description of the simultaneity of belief and obedience.

‘Only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe’⁴⁷²

For Bonhoeffer, faith is, as Gregor says, ‘not merely a cognitive relation of assent to correct doctrine but rather a whole-person response to the call of Christ. Faith is inseparable from the obedient response of following after Christ in concrete, everyday existence.’⁴⁷³ Being encountered by Christ and becoming a Christian can never therefore just be an intellectual assent to his revelation; it *must* involve the whole of one’s being.

Encounter with Christ reveals the freedom I was created in; a freedom which involves responsibility in conformation with the one calling me. Faith therefore requires obedience, because my faith in the revealed Christ requires me to realise and embody the free responsibility at the centre of my created being. But obedience also requires faith, because I cannot return to my created free responsibility without faith in Christ’s revelation. It is the simultaneity of belief and obedience in Bonhoeffer’s work to which I now turn, before explaining why this is proves important for our understanding of the church.

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer speaks about the relationship between belief and obedience; namely that ‘*only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe*.’⁴⁷⁴

Bonhoeffer begins by describing the first of these statements, that only believers can obey. This, he says, is something ‘we think we can understand.’⁴⁷⁵ It seems self-evident that obedience follows from belief. However, a problem occurs if we separate belief from obedience chronologically, as if belief *leads* to obedience. The issue runs as follows:

Of course, obedience follows faith, the way good fruit comes from a good tree, we say. First there is faith, then obedience. If this meant only that faith alone justifies us and not deeds of obedience, then it is a firm and necessary precondition for everything else. But if it means a chronological sequence, that faith would have to come first, to be later followed by obedience, then faith and obedience are torn apart, and the very practical question remains open: When does obedience start? Obedience remains separated from faith. Because we are justified by faith, faith and obedience have to be distinguished. But their division must never

⁴⁷² DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:52.

⁴⁷³ Brian Gregor, ‘Following-After and Becoming Human: A Study of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard’, in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, ed. by Jens Zimmermann (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012), p. 153.

⁴⁷⁴ DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:52, ‘*Nur der Glaubende ist gehorsam, und nur der Gehorsame glaubt.*’ It is a shame that the ‘G’ alliteration, further emphasising the alignment of the two statements together, doesn’t carry over to the English!

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

destroy their unity, which lies in the reality that faith exists only in obedience, is never without obedience. Faith is only faith in deeds of obedience.⁴⁷⁶

Obedience must be *distinguished* from faith, Bonhoeffer says, as it is only faith and not our deeds which justify us. It is Christ's word spoken over us which redeems, not our accompanying work or response to it. However, to separate obedience and belief chronologically is to do damage to their underlying unity. Faith is a prerequisite of obedience, but obedience is also a precondition of faith. Although they are *distinguishable*, they are inseparable.

Bonhoeffer explores why this must be the case, by focusing on the other side of the equation: that only 'the obedient believe.'⁴⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer states that a 'concrete commandment has to be obeyed in order to come to believe, a first step of obedience has to be taken so that faith does not become pious self-deception.'⁴⁷⁸ I must take an external step out of my sinful existence in order to receive faith, so my faith does not become self-deceiving or -justifying. As Bonhoeffer says, 'anyone can take that step. People are free to do that.'⁴⁷⁹ For example,

Peter cannot convert himself, but he can leave his nets. In the gospels that first step consists of a deed which affects all of one's life... Come to the church! You can do that on the strength of your human freedom. You can leave your house on Sunday and go to hear the preaching. If you do not do it, then you wilfully exclude yourself from the place where faith is possible.⁴⁸⁰

A person takes a step in their own freedom in order to receive the word of Christ. However, Bonhoeffer says, this deed remains dead because it *by itself* cannot lead to Christ. Our deeds, if done from our human capacities alone and not in response to Christ, become a new *lifestyle*, but not a new *life*. It is only Christ who can bring disciples into a new life in conformation with him. The works must be *done*, Bonhoeffer says, but they do not bring us to Christ without faith in Christ's word.

The first step truly matters, then, Bonhoeffer says, but it must be taken *in the right way*. It is taken

in the right way only when we do not look to the necessity of our works, but solely with a view to the word of Jesus Christ, which calls us to take the step. Peter knows that he cannot climb out of the boat by his own power. His first step would already be his downfall... Christ

⁴⁷⁶ DBWE 4:63-64; DBW 4:52.

⁴⁷⁷ DBWE 4:64; DBW 4:53.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ DBWE 4:64-65; DBW 4:53-54.

has to have called; the step can be taken only at his word. This call is his grace, which calls us out of death and into the new life of obedience.⁴⁸¹

The step must be taken *already in recognition of Christ's call* for it to be effective. Taking and recognising the step as Christ's encounter, we take a position from which we can gain faith in Christ *who has already called us*. Peter must take a step of obedience to receive faith in Christ. He must climb out of the boat to receive Christ's word. And yet, simultaneously, *to make this step*, Christ needs to already have called. The first step cannot be taken without Christ's word, or it would not bring us into new life.

Bonhoeffer continues,

it is, indeed, the case that the first step of obedience is itself an act of faith in Christ's word. But it would completely misrepresent the essence of faith to conclude that that step is no longer necessary, because in that step there had already been faith. On the contrary, we must venture to state that the step of obedience must be done first, before there can be faith. The disobedient cannot have faith.⁴⁸²

The first step of obedience is itself an act of faith in Christ; the step is done in recognition of Christ's word. But this does not mean that the step *itself* does not matter. The step of obedience, itself done in response to Christ's word, must still be done *in order to have faith*. Christ calls our whole beings, not just our hearts or minds. I am called out of my isolated sinfulness to believe in Christ; but to believe in Christ is also to change my freedom in relation in the world. I must step out in obedience to believe; I must believe to step into obedience.

We must therefore hold the two concepts of belief and obedience together in our understanding of Christian personhood. This same sense of holding together two unified but distinguishable concepts will also inform us about the nature of the church and how to bring together the visible/invisible, divine/human parts together into the body of Christ.

The 'Who' Question

My argument is that the same resistance to chronological thinking found in Bonhoeffer's presentation above of obedience and faith (or faith and obedience) is informative for our understanding Bonhoeffer's concept of the church community and its invisibility and visibility.

⁴⁸¹ DBWE 4:66; DBW 4:55.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

As Bonhoeffer says in *Sanctorum Communio*,

Community with God by definition establishes social community... It is not that community with God subsequently leads to social community; rather neither exists without the other...

[The] formal concept of person can be conceived only in terms of community.⁴⁸³

My encounter with Christ and becoming a Christian person does not *lead me* to enter the visible, physical church, Bonhoeffer says. The social community is not a human consequence or response to divinely revealed community. The establishment of a relationship between people and God is simultaneous with the establishment of a relationship between those people.

Therefore, the visible/human church comes into being *at the same time* as the invisible/divine church.

Bonhoeffer explains this simultaneity of being divinely encountered and entering the church community through his description of the 'Who' question. Having been encountered by the divine You through the human you, I am able to seek and understand the Who at the centre of reality. Having been encountered, I turn away from my sinful attempts to understand the world – the how and why⁴⁸⁴ – and conform myself instead to the Who of Christ in free responsibility.

However, this does not mean that I am encountered (belief) and *then enter the visible church* (obedience). This cannot be the case, Bonhoeffer continues, because the ability to even *ask* the 'Who' question is only possible *if one finds oneself already encountered*:

one can legitimately ask *who* only after the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place... That is, the question of *who* can only be asked on condition that the answer has already been given. And this in turn means that the Christological question can only be asked, as a scholarly question, within the sphere of the church... There is only one possibility for me to be truly searching for God – that I already know who God is. There is no such thing as blindly setting out to search for God. I can only search for what has already been found.⁴⁸⁵

To ask the question of Who and enter into the community of the church in free responsibility is to simultaneously realise that *one is already in the church*.

Revelation is therefore always and only 'something related to community,'⁴⁸⁶ as divinely instituted and historically grounded. I become a Christian person *and* I am in the church.

⁴⁸³ DBW 1:63; DBW 1:37.

⁴⁸⁴ DBWE 12:302-3; DBW 12:282-284.

⁴⁸⁵ DBWE 12:303; DBW 12:283-284. This is important for our understanding of prayer, pp. 220-221.

⁴⁸⁶ DBWE 2:113; DBW 2:109.

Revelation does not *lead* to the historical church community; the historical church community *is* the community of revelation.

For Bonhoeffer, therefore, although the church is a community of revelation, it is not as if the 'invisible' stands prior to the visible. The invisible encounter with Christ calls me into visible concrete community. I receive Christ's encounter invisibly but also visibly. The visible and invisible, or divine and human functions, of the church are therefore *simultaneous*. I cannot exist through the invisible or visible parts of the church separately, just I cannot be a Christian solely in believing or being obedient. Christ requires me to respond in faith *and* obedience to his person, conforming myself to him which is also to be free-for my human other.

Ever and again

As we have already established in the Agency chapter, becoming a person in conformation with Christ and entering church community does not just happen once.⁴⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer says,

The individual becomes a person ever and ever again through the other, in the 'moment.' The other person presents us with the same challenge to our knowing as does God. My real relationship to another person is oriented to my relationship to God. *But since I know God's 'I' only in the revelation of God's love, so too with the other person; here the concept of the church comes into play.*⁴⁸⁸

The church community is therefore *dynamic*, created and re-created in time. My relationship to another person in time is made possible through and oriented to my relationship with Christ.⁴⁸⁹ At the same time, for Bonhoeffer, my *knowing Christ* is made possible by being encountered by his word spoken in the mouth of another human (historically, in time) *in the place where Christ has given himself to be* (eternally).

As Bonhoeffer says in his Christology lectures, it is in the church,

where Christ has revealed himself as the word of God, the human...asks the question: who are you, Jesus Christ?... the answer is given. The church receives it every day anew.⁴⁹⁰

The church does not exist once-for-all-time, with the human or historical aspect being a temporary and inconvenient aspect, which will eventually be cast off to reveal the permanent and eternal truth of Christ. Rather, the historical community *is essential*. It is in the church, in

⁴⁸⁷ Agency chapter, pp. 44, 62-65. See also second half of this chapter for more on relation of ultimate and penultimate, pp. 127-130.

⁴⁸⁸ DBWE 1:55-56; DBW 1:34.

⁴⁸⁹ I will explore this further below in the role of Christ as mediator, pp. 119-123.

⁴⁹⁰ DBWE 12:304; DBW 12:284.

time, where one is brought into relationship with and conformed to Christ. As we explored in the Agency chapter, it is because revelation occurs in community that there can be continuity in revelation.⁴⁹¹ Christ's revelation is received in the church and passed to others in the freedom-for relationship of its members. The church is therefore not a static body, but a community of encounter with Christ, living through the word Christ has given and continues to give to his church. It is inseparable from an understanding of Bonhoeffer's Christology and personhood.

The "ever and again" also leaves room for the fallibility and sinfulness of the church. If encounter with revelation was envisioned as a once-for-all call into divine community, it would be hard to find space for the failures of church without calling into question the effectiveness and holiness of Christ's encounter. However, because encounter with revelation is understood as an "ever and again", there is room to acknowledge the *process* of sanctification – or the continual struggle to *become church* – and the need to be called out of false relation and back into encounter again and again. We will explore this further later in the chapter, considering the role of the divine mandates and the church existing in a state of repentance (under the divine No and Yes).⁴⁹²

⁴⁹¹ Agency chapter, pp. 62-65.

⁴⁹² Church chapter, pp. 131-236.

How is the Church Visible?

We have established that there is an important visible and human component of the church. The church's *visibility*, however, is inextricable from its invisible nature constituted through divine revelation. This dual nature is understood through Bonhoeffer's Christology and theological anthropology. Because of the kind of person Christ's encounter creates –personhood constituted in free responsibility to others in conformation to Christ – the church community is not simply divinely instituted and eternally oriented but also *must be visible*. It is a visible body because otherwise – logically – 'it is not a body at all.'⁴⁹³ The church is visible because it is made up of persons acting as Christ for one another, bringing the world into encounter with Christ through proclamation, preaching, gaining space, and preparing the way. The church is visible because of the social personhood (theological anthropology), instituted through encounter with the Who (Christology) at the centre of its reality.

For Bonhoeffer, the church is nothing apart from the person from whom it stems, which is Christ alone. The church and persons that make it up *look only to Christ*.⁴⁹⁴ The presence the church is therefore visible *for Christ*. As I will explore below, the church must be *visible* but it never ought to be *visible for itself*.

Extraordinariness in reflection

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer speaks about the extraordinariness of the disciple. Having been encountered by Christ, Christians are called to be extraordinary.⁴⁹⁵ They are to be the light on the hill and salt to preserve the world.⁴⁹⁶ Disciples work to bring the world into recognition of Christ's reality. However, simultaneously they are to 'beware of practising... piety before others in order to be seen.'⁴⁹⁷ The Christian must not let their left hand know what their right hand is doing.⁴⁹⁸ As Bonhoeffer says, Matthew chapter 5 and chapter 6 seem to collide against one another, with opposing words.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹³ DBWE 4:225; DBW 4:241.

⁴⁹⁴ Simple wisdom, as explored in the Agency chapter, pp. 52-57.

⁴⁹⁵ DBWE 4:146; *Außerordentliche*, literally 'out of the ordinary,' DBW 4:150-151.

⁴⁹⁶ Matthew 5:13-16.

⁴⁹⁷ Matthew 6:1.

⁴⁹⁸ Matthew 6:3.

⁴⁹⁹ DBWE 4:149; DBW 4:153.

Bonhoeffer therefore asks the question, ‘from whom should the visibility of discipleship be hidden?’ His answer is,

not from the other people, for they are to see the light of Jesus’ disciples shining. Rather it should be hidden to those doing the visible deed of discipleship. They should keep on following Jesus, and should keep looking forward to him who is going before them, but not at themselves and what they are doing. The righteousness of the disciples is hidden from themselves.⁵⁰⁰

The Christian acts in accordance with Christ’s revealed freedom for, living and working in the world as a vicarious representative of humanity. As we explored in the Agency chapter, the disciple truly owns their actions as flowing from themselves – but *only* as they simultaneously recognise them as stemming from Christ.⁵⁰¹ I do not look to my own goodness (which is truly not good at all), and instead view my goodness as belonging entirely to Christ.

As Bonhoeffer says,

The concept of discipleship itself provides the resolution. It is exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. Disciples always look only to their Lord and follow him. If they were to see the extraordinariness itself, then they would no longer stand in discipleship. In simple obedience [schlichten Gehorsam] disciples do the will of the Lord who bids them do something extraordinary, and they know in everything only that they can do nothing else, that they are, therefore, doing what is simply a matter of course.⁵⁰²

The visibility of the church is therefore entirely related to the Who standing at the centre of the church community. The human actions of the church are *hidden from the ones who carry them out*. Ethical actions are done in accordance with and while looking at Christ alone. This is the case at the level of individual Christians, but also for the church as a whole.

The mandated church

In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer states that the commandment of God revealed in Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection ‘embraces all of human life. Its claim on human beings and the world through the reconciling love of God is all encompassing.’⁵⁰³ However, this does not mean that this commanding word can be found everywhere and anywhere. It can only be found where God gives it to us. For Bonhoeffer, God has chosen to encounter the world in ‘four different

⁵⁰⁰ DBWE 4:149; DBW 4:154.

⁵⁰¹ See Agency chapter, pp. 39-45, 52-57.

⁵⁰² DBWE 4:150; the disciples doing the will of God in ‘schlichten Gehorsam’ in DBW 4:155 echoes Bonhoeffer’s later ethics of simple wisdom. Compare with DBW 6:67

⁵⁰³ DBWE 6:388; DBW 6:392.

forms that find their unity only in the unity of the commandment itself, namely, in the church, marriage and family, culture and government'⁵⁰⁴ These are what Bonhoeffer calls 'the divine mandates' or '*die göttlichen Mandate*.'⁵⁰⁵

I am going to discuss Bonhoeffer's description of the divine mandates more fully and raise some questions about them in the related case study for this chapter.⁵⁰⁶ What matters for our purposes here is a discussion of the mandates in two related ways. First, how the divine call into responsibility takes form in concrete patterns of relationships – ordering and shaping human life in specific ways. But second, that we cannot think of this as a blessing of existing patterns of relationship. We must view the mandates within the ongoing 'ever and again' of reworking and the transformation of human life in encounter with revelation.

By 'mandate' Bonhoeffer says,

we understand the concrete divine commission grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of scripture; it is the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution... Laying claim to, commandeering of, and formation of a certain earthly domain by the divine command. The bearer of the mandate acts as a vicarious representative, as a stand-in for the one who issued the commission.⁵⁰⁷

The church exists in relation to the command of God revealed in Christ. It is called to reveal this command on the earth. It is authorised to do this as an earthly and visible institution. The church ought not to be ashamed or hide its earthly body and visible domain. It has been commissioned to be a visible entity in the world, to the extent that it and those within it act as a vicarious representative of Christ's reality.

According to Bonhoeffer, the nature of a mandate is obscured if it is understood 'more strongly on the static element of order rather than on the divine authorizing, legitimizing, and sanctioning, which are its sole foundation.'⁵⁰⁸ What matters is not the earthly entity of the church itself – visible though it must be – but whether it is following God's command in Christ.

We cannot therefore sanction the church solely as an earthly institution because this 'leads too easily to a divine sanctioning of all existing orders per se, and thus to a romantic conservatism

⁵⁰⁴ DBWE 6:388; DBW 6:392. Or elsewhere, '*work, marriage, government, and church*,' DBWE 6:68; DBW 6:54.

⁵⁰⁵ DBWE 6:388; DBW 6:392.

⁵⁰⁶ Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 154-165.

⁵⁰⁷ DBWE 6:389; DBW 6:392-393.

⁵⁰⁸ DBWE 6:389; DBW 6:393.

that no longer has anything to do with the Christian doctrine of the four mandates.⁵⁰⁹ Rather, the mandates, including the church, must ‘depend solely on God’s *one* commandment as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. They are implanted in the world from above⁵¹⁰ as organizing structures – ‘orders’ – of the reality of Christ, that is, of the reality of God’s love for the world and for human beings that has been revealed in Jesus Christ.’⁵¹¹ The church is therefore truly an earthly institution and wields power in the world – but only to the extent that it reflects Christ’s word and command. Crucially, the church is

in no way an outgrowth of history; [mandates] are not earthly powers, but divine commissions. Church, marriage and family, culture and government, can only be explained and understood from above, from God. The bearers of the mandate are not commissioned from below, executing and representing particular expressions of the collective will of human beings.⁵¹²

Christ’s church should not look to its own earthly power or legitimise itself within history. It is not associated with or commissioned to represent a particular expression of humanity. Rather the church *is only church* to the extent that it exists in accordance with Christ’s reality.

Radner proves helpful in his discussion of the type of ‘thing’⁵¹³ the church is. Radner suggests that the only way to speak about the church in a meaningful way, aside from in small isolated and apparently unlinked geographical locations, is to stop looking at the church *itself* and instead look to how it participates in and points toward God’s ongoing creative action and purpose.

The difference between a ‘true’ and a ‘false’ church is located in the action of God. When we can say that God has done such and such with this body of people, and that such and such is according to the purposes of God so that this people might be God’s people, then we can call that “the Church,” and not simply a “church” among contested and even perhaps self-evidently wicked churches. God’s choice, action, and purpose make the difference.⁵¹⁴

The church is the church both as a people and a place to the extent that it is located within God’s purpose in the world. The church is not one stable object. Key to understanding the church is understanding it as the work of God: ‘the church *is* truly a people who can be a place and a

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ I will discuss the potential problem with the wording ‘above’ and ‘below’ in the Marriage Mandate Study, pp. 157-165.

⁵¹¹ DBWE 6:390; DBW 6:394. It is interesting that Bonhoeffer uses ‘order’ here, but rejects its use elsewhere in *Ethics*, e.g. DBWE 6:68; 6:54-55 (but then uses it in relation to marriage in his marriage sermon for Eberhard and Renate Bethge, DBWE 8:84; DBW 8:76. See discussion in Marriage Mandate Case Study, p. 160.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ephraim Radner, *Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books), p. 53.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid. p. 56.

person at the same time, because God makes it so.’⁵¹⁵ The church is a visible, physical entity existing in time and space, made up of people called by God, *because God makes it so*.⁵¹⁶ To point to the church, we must therefore simultaneously point to God’s revelation, which makes the church what it is.

The church as collective person

As we have established, Christian persons are formed and oriented to Christ through encounter. It is this encounter that releases them to their created freedom in responsibility in conformation with the vicarious representative, Christ himself. God’s commandment seeks human beings in the world, through the human other, bringing them into right relationship with him and the world. This is true at the level of individual persons in the church – but it is also true of *the church as a collective*. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, the church is not merely an institution. From as early as *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer describes the church as a ‘collective person.’⁵¹⁷

The church as collective person is encountered by Christ and realises it exists in relation to the world through Christ’s freedom-for. The church responds to divine encounter through the human claim of other mandates and persons in the world, to reorient itself where it falls away from Christ (hearing the divine No), so it can be brought back into right belief and obedience (in the divine Yes). It also acts *as* Christ’s word, existing as a barrier to bring others into Christ’s revelation. The church as mandate therefore exists, like the Christian person, *in encounter*.

Only in their being with-one-another [Miteinander], for-one-another [Füreinander], and over-against-one-another [Gegeneinander] do the divine mandates of church, marriage and family, culture, and government communicate the commandment of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. None of these mandates exists self-sufficiently, nor can one of them claim to replace all the others.⁵¹⁸

The church is there-for the other mandates in the world and persons therein, in vicarious representative action in conformation with Christ, or it *ceases to be* God’s mandate. It must be visible as Christ’s vicarious representative in the world, acting as a barrier to bring others into encounter with Christ. However, simultaneously, it must be willing *to be encountered*, to be called out as sinful and be brought back into right relation. The church exists in the same dynamic of personhood, created time and again through encounter with Christ’s No and Yes. It

⁵¹⁵ Ibid. p. 60

⁵¹⁶ The church is better ‘described by verbs than by nouns’ as people who participate in the divine life, William Henn, *Church* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004), pp. 3-4, 85.

⁵¹⁷ DBWE 1:78-80; DBW 1:49-51.

⁵¹⁸ DBWE 6:393; DBW 6:397. I will return to this language of *Miteinander*, *Füreinander*, and *Gegeneinander*, arguing these terms should replace ‘above’ and ‘below’ in the mandates. See Marriage Mandate Case Study, pp. 166-167.

is for this reason that Bonhoeffer names the church as collective person – for it is subject to the same ‘arising ever and again in time’ in order for it to remain a mandate in active discipleship to Christ.

Returning to the *Discipleship* passages we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, our exploration of the church in relation to Bonhoeffer’s Christology and theological anthropology so far, should alter our initial impressions. Bonhoeffer says,

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, and understood. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or even hearts; he needs actual, living human beings who follow him. That is why he called his disciples into following him bodily. His community with them was something everyone could see. It was found and held together by none other than Jesus Christ, the incarnate one himself. It was the word made flesh who called them, who had created the visible, bodily community. Those who had been called could no longer remain hidden; they were the light which has to shine, the city on a hill which is bound to be seen. Over their community stood visibly the cross and suffering of Jesus Christ.⁵¹⁹

The church must be a visible community because persons are called by Christ into their created freedom which is to be in relation with and responsible for others. The church must be a body of persons visibly living and encountering one another with Christ’s word. This does not diminish the human and historical context of the church. The invisible divine reality does not exist prior to the visible relations on earth. Being encountered invisibly by Christ *is* to be in community visibly. So, too, being in relation with others *is* to be in conformation with Christ. Faith and obedience remain unified, even as they are distinct.

The church is visible as a city on the hill, a light which shines, salt which preserves. However, what is visible is inseparable from its conformation with Christ. As Busch Nielson suggests, ‘there is a logical and sociological unity of the essential and empirical, invisible and visible church, a unity established by the word, and that invisible and visible church are one single church.’⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ DBWE 4:224; DBW 4:241-242.

⁵²⁰ Kirsten Busch Nielson, ‘Critique of Church and Critique of Religion in Bonhoeffer’s Late Writings’, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theologie Heute Ein Weg Zwischen Fundamentalismus Und Säkularismus*, ed. by Stephen Plant, Christiane Tietz, and John W. de Gruchy (Munich: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2009) p. 330.

The church is visible but is not visible *for itself*. The church that exists in the world instead exists and continues to exist only in the unity of belief and obedience, free for the world in its orientation and daily discernment for Christ's word.⁵²¹ Where the church loses this active discernment for Christ's word, or where it becomes self-justified, it *ceases to be church*.

Hence, Bonhoeffer's criticisms of the church written in prison are exactly this. The church's 'visibility', i.e., position in society, has become divorced from its discernment of and orientation to Christ's word. He says that Christians must find again 'what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ'. Because the

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 only in two ways, through prayer and doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing 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 organization again will only delay its conversion [Umkehr] and purification.⁵²²

The church can change its form, its organisation, and become entirely remoulded – what matters is the extent to which it exists (visibly) inextricably united to its encounter with Christ (invisibly).

Turning back to Bonhoeffer's letter to Bethge that we considered in the introduction, the 'Christian is not a *homo religiosus* but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being.'⁵²³ We have established in this thesis that a "human being", as we should be, for Bonhoeffer means to be encountered by Christ and freed into responsibility for others. Becoming a "human being" means being in the body of the church, made up of persons encountered and encountering one another with Christ's revelation. The church must throw itself entirely into the arms of God, living entirely in the world but simultaneously entirely in response to Christ's encounter. The church is visible, but *it continues being the church* only insofar as it exists in relation to God. This involves coming under Christ's word of judgement and being willing to change in response, as we will further explore later in this chapter through the notion of repentance.⁵²⁴

⁵²¹ Where it falls away from belief and obedience in Christ's encounter *it ceases to be church*: DBWE 5:35-37; DBW 5:23-25.

⁵²² Bonhoeffer here is addressing his great nephew, Dietrich Willhelm Rüdiger, in a sermon written for his baptism, DBWE 8:389-390; DBW 8:435-436.

⁵²³ DBWE 8:485-486; DBW 8:541-542.

⁵²⁴ Church chapter, pp. 131-136.

Christ the Mediator

Bonhoeffer speaks about Christ as the mediator of the world in *Discipleship*. As we began the Agency chapter,

[Christ] puts himself between me and the given circumstances of the world. I cannot go back. He is in the middle. He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities... he stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things. *He is the mediator*, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality.⁵²⁵

Because Christ is the mediator, there are no unmediated relationships in the world, between persons, between a person and God, or between a person and reality.

This is related to what we have explored above. Christian community means community in and through Christ alone. Through Christ's encounter, I am released into community, working in responsibility to others. Importantly, according to Bonhoeffer, viewing others through Christ alone, does not distance or diminish my relationships. Rather, it is only through Christ that we *truly have relationships at all*. As he says in *Life Together*,

Without Christ we would not know God; we could neither call on God nor come to God. Moreover, without Christ we would not know Christians around us; nor could we approach them. The way to them is blocked by one's own ego [das eigene Ich]. Christ opened up the way to God and to one another. Now Christians can live with each other in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only through Jesus Christ.⁵²⁶

We have community in and through Christ, as the person to whom we are conformed. Without Christ, we attempt to have immediate relations with others, which really is the desire to force 'the other into one's own sphere of power and influence.'⁵²⁷

Love for the world therefore comes from Christ and serves Christ. It means I can recognise my relationships to others through Christ. 'Jesus tells me what love for my brothers and sisters really looks like. Therefore spiritual love is bound to the word of Jesus Christ alone.'⁵²⁸ Indeed, Christian community exists *only* to the extent it sees itself and members therein through the mediator. A 'life together under the word will stay healthy only when it does not form itself into

⁵²⁵ DBWE 4:93-94; DBW 4:88.

⁵²⁶ DBWE 5:33; DBW 4:20.

⁵²⁷ DBWE 5:41; DBW 5:28.

⁵²⁸ DBWE 5:43; DBW 5:30.

a movement, an order to society... but instead understands itself as being part of the one, holy, universal Christian church'⁵²⁹ in Christ's mediatorship.

This is important for our understanding of the relationship of the church with the world. The church views the world through Christ's mediatorship – but in this relationship, can love the world for what it is, created and sustained through Christ's revelation.⁵³⁰

The World Received Back

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer speaks about Abraham's life as existing under two calls. Abraham is called to leave his father's house. Later, he is called by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In both calls, Bonhoeffer explains, Christ encounters Abraham and steps between Abraham and his relationship with the world.⁵³¹ Because it is vital to our discussion in this chapter, I quote it at length here:

Christ came between [Abraham] and his relatives. In that case the break had to become visible. Abraham became a stranger for the sake of the promised land. That was his first call. Later Abraham was called by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Christ steps between the father of faith and the son of promise. Not only natural immediate relationships are broken, but even unmediated spiritual relationships are broken here. Abraham had to learn that the promise did not depend on Isaac, but only on God. No one hears about that call from God, not even the servants who accompany Abraham to the site of the sacrifice...

He does not try to interpret it, nor does he spiritualize it. He takes God at God's word and is prepared to obey. Against every natural immediacy, against every ethical immediacy, against every religious immediacy, he obeys God's word. He brings his son to be sacrificed. *He is prepared to make the secret break visible for the sake of the mediator.* At the same time, everything that he had given up is restored to him. Abraham receives his son back. God shows him a better sacrifice, which is to take Isaac's place... Abraham received Isaac back,

⁵²⁹ DBWE 5:45; DBW 5:32.

⁵³⁰ Kirkpatrick likens Bonhoeffer's understanding of community to frogspawn: each 'individual tadpole must be separated from every other by a jelly sphere so that both the individual and its neighbours do not hurt each other. However, it is also the jelly that binds the tadpoles together into a cohesive whole. So that each individual is separated and yet finally bound together by the same Christ,' Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Bonhoeffer's Ethics*, pp. 17-18.

⁵³¹ Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by the *Akedah*, explored in Kirkpatrick, *Bonhoeffer's Ethics*, p. 21. Some commentators find Bonhoeffer's speaking of Christ in the Old Testament offensive and supersessionist. See John E. Phelan, 'The Cruelty of Supersessionism: The Case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer' in *Religions* 13:59, (2022); Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's interpretation* (London: Westminster Press, 1976).

but he has him in a different way than before. He has him through the mediator and for the sake of the mediator. As the one who was prepared to hear and obey God's command literally, he is permitted to have Isaac as though he did not have him; he is permitted to have him through Jesus Christ. No one else knows about it. Abraham comes down from the mountain with Isaac, just as he went up, but everything has changed. Christ came between the father and the son. Abraham had left everything and had followed Christ, and while he was following Christ, *he was permitted to go back to live in the same world he had lived in before. Externally everything remained the same. But the old has passed away; see everything has become new* [2 Cor. 5:17]. *Everything had to go through Christ.*⁵³²

Before Christ's encounter, Abraham views Isaac through his own attempts to control and coerce. He views the promise of his future as relying on Isaac and the ambitions he has for him. In other words, he has an unmediated relationship with Isaac, defined by his own desires and fulfilment.

After Christ's encounter, Abraham realises that 'the promise did not depend on Isaac, but only on God.' Christ steps between Abraham and Isaac as the mediator (into the middle of them, as *der Mittler*). Abraham is therefore called *out* of his previous relationship with Isaac and *into* a new one. Abraham receives Isaac back in a 'different way than before'. He has him through and for the sake of Christ the mediator. Through the mediated relationship, Isaac is separated from Abraham's own desires, and held away from Abraham by Christ. But it is this very separation which simultaneously allows Abraham to see who Isaac truly is and thus have an authentic relationship with him through Christ.

'He is prepared to make the secret break visible'

Abraham's encounter requires losing immediate relationship with Isaac. He is called out from his former relationship, but simultaneously receives Isaac back – viewing him instead through Christ and Christ's freedom-for. Abraham is able to have Isaac once again but in such a way that it is as 'though he did not have him', instead viewing him in the reality of Christ. Abraham is set towards Isaac in obedience and love, without an attempt to possess.

What is interesting about Abraham's second call is that it is *invisible*, unlike the call which led him to leave his family. A key phrase here, however, is that Abraham, 'is prepared to make the secret break visible for the sake of the mediator.' Related to our previous section, it is not the visibility of the new relationship *itself* that matters but whether Abraham is willing to act in

⁵³² DBWE 4:97-98; DBW 4:92-93. Emphasis mine.

accordance with the mediator. His belief and his action are entirely related to Christ's will. What matters is that he 'takes God at God's word and is prepared to obey. Against every natural immediacy, against every ethical immediacy, against every religious immediacy, he obeys God's word.' Like we explored above, it is not the *visibility* of the action that counts, but whether Abraham is looking beyond himself, and beyond his immediate relationship with Isaac, and is responding to Christ's encounter.

Abraham's new relationship to Isaac (and the world) is therefore one that can only be seen through the eyes of revelation, as we explored in our previous section. Outside of revelation, 'Abraham comes down the mountain with Isaac, just as he went up.' But having been encountered by Christ, *for Abraham* 'everything has changed. Christ came between the father and the son... Everything had to go through Christ.'

This is how we must understand the nature of the church. Its visibility or invisibility is not what matters but whether it is conformed to Christ's freedom-for in its faith and obedience. In Bonhoeffer's words, whether the church 'is willing to make the secret break visible.' The church *can be visible* (as Bonhoeffer emphasises in the Finkenwalde period), the church can also be entirely invisible (as Bonhoeffer discusses in his *Letters and Papers*).⁵³³ What matters is that the church is not securing its own future, pursuing its own fulfilment, or making space for its own success in the world, but instead views itself entirely in relation to Christ's ongoing encounter. Everything hangs on whether it is *willing* and *obedient* to Christ's will. The church comes into existence and lives in an ongoing process of learning how to live for others in the world. Through its prayers, practices, service, and daily seeking of Christ, the church lives under ongoing encounter with Christ. This process, as I will go into further later, also involves ongoing repentance of its failures, and seeking again for the mediator. The church must be willing and able to break down its own community for the sake of Christ, to receive it back through Christ alone – like Abraham with Isaac.

'Externally everything remains the same. But the old has passed away; see everything has become new'

Abraham is called out of his previous existence and relationship with his son. Having been encountered, he receives Isaac back through Christ, the mediator. Bonhoeffer continues,

⁵³³ Although Bonhoeffer writes to the Bethges saying Christians suffer when separated from others; DBWE 8:237-239 DBW 8:254-256. As I will discuss in the Suffering chapter, Christians suffer from isolation, pp. 202-204.

Abraham had left everything and had followed Christ, and while he was following Christ, he was permitted to go back and live in the same world he had lived in before. *Externally everything remained the same. But the old has passed away; see everything has become new. Everything had to go through Christ.*⁵³⁴

Abraham goes down the mountain to the same world as the one he left just a short time before. Externally everything is the same. He is still in the same reality, with the same relations as before. However, simultaneously 'the old has passed away' and everything has become new.

The old world for Abraham has passed away, and he is now in a new creation; a creation in which everything goes through Christ. The old world remains but he views it through the new. It is this idea of being called *out of* and *into the world* that I would like to focus on next.

⁵³⁴ DBWE 4:97-98; DBW 4:93. Emphasis mine.

Bonhoeffer's Apocalypticism?

Theologians have previously been hesitant to identify a Pauline apocalyptic logic at work in Bonhoeffer's materials, but it is fast becoming a popular area of scholarship.⁵³⁵ As McBride suggests, it was Ziegler who first drew on studies by Martyn⁵³⁶ and Beker,⁵³⁷ among others to re-examine the relationship between Paul's apocalypticism and Bonhoeffer's theology.⁵³⁸

Certain readers of Bonhoeffer's works – especially the *Ethics* – have not been led to the idea of apocalypticism, in fact quite the opposite.⁵³⁹ West in his review of Rasmussen's *Dietrich*

Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans, criticises the author, claiming that,

Bonhoeffer loved the world of his heritage, its culture, its human relations, its values expressed in family and in public life, and the intellectual integrity of its sciences, human and natural. He was at home in it, found it good, and hoped that in new ways it would be reborn after the Nazi catastrophe. He did not idealize all this. He knew it as secular, as part of sinful humanity, both sustained and judged by God in Christ. But among his colleagues in the resistance he found men and women who, without the support of religion or ideology, maintained a certain human integrity as they faced the problems of human society.⁵⁴⁰

For Bonhoeffer, West maintains, the ultimate reality of Jesus Christ takes form in this world, 'evoking a responsible penultimate human action. The final coming of Christ is expressed in, though always beyond, this penultimate witness.'⁵⁴¹ There is therefore a "new creation" instituted in Christ's encounter, but, West says, 'the ultimate is the origin as well as the end of human life. Grace is not new. It has accompanied the history of the world from the beginning.

⁵³⁵ Gunter M. Prüller-Jagenteufel, *Befreit Zur Verantwortung. Sünde Und Versöhnung in Der Ethik Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004), especially pp. 227, 280-282; Emerton *God's Church-Community*; Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer-An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?'; Philip G. Ziegler, "'Voices in the Night": Human Solidarity and Eschatological Hope'; Ziegler 'Completely within God's Doing'; Ziegler, *Militant Grace*; Ziegler, 'Parabolic Life'; Gregg, 'Bearing Sin in the Church', McBride, *The Church for the World*; Mark R. Lindsay, 'Bonhoeffer's Eschatology in a World "Come of Age"', *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.), 68.3 (2011), pp. 290–302; Mark Lindsay, 'Eschatology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), pp. 34-35.

⁵³⁶ J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (London: T&T Clark International, 1997); Martyn, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages'; Martyn, 'The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians'.

⁵³⁷ J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God*.

⁵³⁸ McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 96.

⁵³⁹ Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer-An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?', p. 579 n. 3 highlights one exception potentially being Larry Rasmussen; Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans*, Bonhoeffer Secondary Studies Series (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2016), pp. 75-88.

⁵⁴⁰ Charles C. West, 'Review of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans', *Theology Today*, 47.4 (1991), p. 471.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

Criticism and resistance are not the only expressions, therefore of a Christ-centered hope. Participation, preservation and building of structures of relative justice in a sinful world are also part of it.⁵⁴² Christians live as citizens in the world, accompanied by Christ's grace, which has been with them from the creation of the world. For West, those claiming apocalypticism as present in Bonhoeffer's thought are doing damage to this idea of worldly preservation and participation, replacing it with a radical, world-critical eschatological emphasis alien to Bonhoeffer.

"Kata Stauron"

The issue many theologians have with apocalyptic as a theological genre is a focus on the end times in opposition to the current world. This is exactly West's issue with Rasmussen above. However, I will demonstrate that this is not necessarily the way in which we must understand apocalyptic language. I will first look at Pauline scholarship, leading into a discussion of Bonhoeffer's concept of the ultimate and penultimate, and how this relates to our understanding of the church.

There is still debate over the extent to which Paul ought to be spoken of as an apocalyptic theologian.⁵⁴³ Much of this comes down to the way in which we define the word apocalyptic.⁵⁴⁴ In Martyn's extensive work on Paul, he suggests that, although many people understand apocalyptic to be a focus on the new world standing over against and in opposition to the current world, for Paul (and Bonhoeffer) it means something subtly different.

For Paul, there are two ways of understanding and behaving in the present world. What separates the two is the eschatological event of Christ's death and resurrection. There is therefore a way of knowing which is representative of the old age '*kata sarka*' and a way of knowing which is representative of the 'new age', or more specifically of *the point at which those two ages meet* - in Christ.⁵⁴⁵ Crucially, for Martyn, this does not necessitate oppositional knowledge between thinking according to the flesh (the old age) and the 'spirit' (the new

⁵⁴² Ibid. pp. 471-472.

⁵⁴³ Cf. Barry R. Matlock, *Unveiling the Apocalyptic Paul: Paul's Interpreters and the Rhetoric of Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁵⁴⁴ See Sturm, 'Defining the word 'Apocalyptic'; Boer, 'Paul, Theologian of God's Apocalypse', pp. 21-23; C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) pp. 1-3, 29-36, 70-72; Wayne A. Meeks, 'Apocalyptic Discourse and Strategies of Goodness', *The Journal of Religion*, 80.3 (2000), pp. 461-463.

⁵⁴⁵ Martyn, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages', p. 274.

age).⁵⁴⁶ Instead, *both ages* are viewed in and through '*kata stauron*' – through the cross of Christ.⁵⁴⁷

Boomershine expands on this, saying

At the heart of Paul's appropriation of the epistemological dualism of apocalyptic is a refusal to contrast 'old age' knowledge (*kata sarka*) with the 'new age' knowing of those who have been given the gift of the spirit (*kata pneuma*). Paul steadfastly confesses to the way of knowing and being known at the juncture... is to know *kata stauron* [according to the cross of Christ]. As Professor Martyn says, 'the marks of the new age are at present hidden *in* the old age. At the juncture of the ages the marks of the resurrection are hidden and revealed in the cross of the disciple's daily death and *only* there.'⁵⁴⁸

Living *kata stauron*, according to Christ's cross, is to receive the new creation of Christ here and now in the world. It means living through the knowledge of Christ's resurrection and future Parousia. But simultaneously, living under Christ's cross in the world *now* reminds us that, before Christ's future Parousia, we cannot know ourselves fully according to the spirit. We are not yet perfected or redeemed. We therefore exist in the current sinful world but *view* it through Christ's cross and promise.

The cross and resurrection of Christ therefore acts as an invasion in the present world. As Roberts Gaventa describes, Christ's cross has invaded the world, revealing its 'utter distortion and foolishness, reclaiming the world.'⁵⁴⁹ Crucially, this incursion *has effect in the world*. It is not simply a disclosure of a secret or information about the future. For those who are encountered by Christ, it brings about a new way of being and acting in the *present* world.⁵⁵⁰

Put another way, according to Ziegler, Christ's 'revelation *is* reconciliation.'⁵⁵¹ Those who hear the message of Christ *are already implicated in that of which it speaks*. Paul's apocalyptic language is never one of *possibility*, that "if I behave in such a way", "then something will

⁵⁴⁶ Paul's apocalypticism overcomes previous binaries; cf. Brigitte Kahl, 'No Longer Male: Masculinity Struggles Behind Galatians 3.28?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 23.79 (2001), pp. 37–49.

⁵⁴⁷ Martyn, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages', p. 274; 'cross' here as shorthand for the crucifixion, resurrection, and continued revelation of Christ in the world.

⁵⁴⁸ Boomershine, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages in Paul', p. 148 citing Martyn, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages', p. 286.

⁵⁴⁹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, first edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 81.

⁵⁵⁰ Boer, 'Paul, Theologian of God's Apocalypse', p. 25; cf. Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer-An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?', pp. 243–244, and Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Trinity Press International, 1994).

⁵⁵¹ Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer-An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?', p. 581.

happen.”⁵⁵² As Duff suggests, there is no ‘theological two-step’⁵⁵³ whereby God offers ‘grace to humanity (first step) and humanity offers a ‘faith response’ to God (second step).’⁵⁵⁴ For Paul, the turn of the ages *has already begun* in Christ. Christ *has* invaded, and therefore those he encounters *now live according to his new age* but also fully in the old, pointing to the future culmination of the new.

We do not now live completely in the New Age, but the New Age (or New Creation) has already been inaugurated in Jesus Christ. Hence, we live at the juncture of the ages. As a result of the clashing of the new Age with the Old a great conflict has arisen between the reality embraced by the Old Age and that which is acknowledged as real in the New Age.⁵⁵⁵ Revelation is therefore not just unveiling something already existing but unknown, to which we then respond. Instead, it is an invasion of God’s grace in the world which brings into existence something new. To be encountered is to be claimed by this something new, even as we continue to live in the old.

The Separation of the Church

Passages in *Discipleship* suggest that the church lives in radical opposition to the world. McBride refers to a previous translation of *The Cost of Discipleship*, published by Touchstone, a subsidiary of Simon and Schuster, in 1995. Sections therein read as follows:

The church *invades* the life of the world and *conquers territory* for Christ....The member of the Body of Christ has been delivered from the world and called out of it.⁵⁵⁶

[T]he Body of Christ makes a deep invasion into the sphere of secular life.⁵⁵⁷

The *Ecclesia Christi*, the disciple community, has been torn from the clutches of the world....The object of their calling in Jesus Christ, and of their election before the foundation of the world, was that they should be holy and without blemish...[God] is holy both in his perfect separation from the sinful world and in the establishment of his sanctuary in the

⁵⁵² Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 581 cf. Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, trans. by L.M. Maloney, ed. by H.W. Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

⁵⁵³ Duff, 'The Significance of Pauline Apocalyptic for Theological Ethics', p. 280.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 281 cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-5.11., Rom 4.17, 1 Cor. 1.28-29.

⁵⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 258 cited in McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 88.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 267, cited in McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 88.

midst of that world....God makes a covenant with his people and separates them from the world.⁵⁵⁸

The phrases have very different translations in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English edition and sound far less severe.⁵⁵⁹ And yet this same dynamic of opposition and separation remains. As McBride suggests, we must relate these statements in *Discipleship* to the context of the totalitarian state Bonhoeffer was engaging with. The world being referred to in opposition to the church is the world of totalitarianism and the 'seductive powers of security and concession tempting Confessing Christians and holding sway over the national church.'⁵⁶⁰ In this context, Bonhoeffer is asking his brethren to "stay salty" and remain true to their Christian discipleship and therefore not cease to be effective.⁵⁶¹

And yet it is not just the political context which informs Bonhoeffer's thought. As McBride goes on to suggest, the 'world' being opposed here by the church is not simply the *world itself*, nor is this opposition simply related to immediate contextual concerns. What is being opposed is rather the "world" that *has not received Christ's encounter*, insofar as people have not heard the call to be *for* one another. Christians are called out of *that way of being and seeing*. They are called to oppose it and to live as insurgents in the world, promoting and supporting a different and new way of life.⁵⁶² The church breaks off from the old because it has been brought into relationship with Christ alone. However, as I will demonstrate, it is precisely this *breaking off* from the world which allows it to *receive the world back* (as in the *Akedah*). The church lives

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid pp. 272-273, cited in McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 89.

⁵⁵⁹ For the translation of the first example, DBWE has 'The church-community has, therefore, a very real impact on the life of the world. It gains space for Christ, DBWE 4:236. DBW has the separable verb *hineingreifen* (to intervene) and *erobern* (past participle of *erobern*, to conquer or invade): 'So greift die Gemeinde mitten hinein in das Leben der Welt und erobert Raum für Christus...' DBW 4:252. The Touchstone 'invade' for *hineingreifen* doesn't seem like quite the right translation. The DBWE rendering of 'has... a very real impact on' also strikes not only as insipid compared to the German but also a poor paraphrase. In the second example, *hineingreifen* is used again in DBW 4:263 'So greift zwar der Leib Christi tief hinein in die weltlichen Lebensbereiche...' Touchstone has '[T]he Body of Christ makes a deep invasion into the sphere of secular life', rendered in DBWE as 'The body of Christ is thus deeply involved in all areas of life in this world,' DBWE 4:247. Again, neither translation seem to grasp the original sense of the body of Christ intervening at the centre of the world. The translation of *entrisen* in DBW 4:269 (past participle of *entreißen*, to rip or tear away), in the third example also receives very different treatment by the respective translations: 'torn from the clutches' in Touchstone vs. DBWE 4:253 'the 'Ekklesia' of Christ, the community of disciples, is no longer subject to the rule of this world.' The translation of *Herrschaft* (lordship) in the third example is also potentially problematic. A natural translation would be 'the ecclesia of Christ, the community of disciples is torn away from the *lordship* of the world' (and brought under the *lordship* of Christ). Both translations miss the opportunity for this contrast.

⁵⁶⁰ McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 92

⁵⁶¹ See Donald Fergus, 'Lebensraum – Just What Is This "Habitat" or "Living Space" That Dietrich Bonhoeffer Claimed for the Church?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 67.1 (2014), pp. 70–84, for discussion of how context informs the ecclesiology of *Discipleship*; cf. B. Hamill, 'Beyond Ecclesiocentricity: Navigating between the Abstract and the Domesticated in Contemporary Ecclesiology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 14.3 (2012), pp. 277–294.

⁵⁶² The church, too, keeps falling back into the 'old world', discovering they do not know how to inhabit the old through the new. They need to be taught it again and again through encounter.

from Christ's *new* creation *in the old*, and points towards its future perfection, in a dynamic very similar to the one we just discussed above in Pauline apocalyptic.

The ultimate is *not against the penultimate*

For Bonhoeffer, in Ziegler's words, 'what takes place in the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ... is nothing less than an eruption of "the reality of God... into the reality of this world."' ⁵⁶³ Christ encounters the world as an ultimate word. As ultimate word, nothing can go beyond it. In Ziegler's words,

The world is a *different* place as a result of the word that justifies the ungodly, and in this new world nothing is as it once was thought to be. ⁵⁶⁴

Jesus' encounter is an invitation to a new reality in which the church participates. As we confirmed above, 'revelation is reconciliation.' ⁵⁶⁵ The old world is left behind and the new world comes into effect through God's word spoken in Christ.

However, Bonhoeffer is at pains to emphasise that this does not mean the destruction of the present world. There may be no word that goes beyond God's ultimate word, *qualitatively*; Christ's word involves a 'complete break with everything penultimate, with all that has gone before.' ⁵⁶⁶ But, *temporally*, while the world still exists, its existence must be allowed to continue for the sake of the ultimate. ⁵⁶⁷ In Christ

God enters into created reality, that we may be and should be human beings before God.... Jesus Christ's being human [Menschsein] does not mean simply the confirmation of the existing world and of human existence. Jesus was human "without sin" (Heb. 4:45); that is the decisive thing. But Jesus lived among us in deepest poverty, was unmarried, and died as a criminal. Jesus' being human embodies therefore a double judgment on human beings – the absolute condemnation of sin and the relative condemnation of existing human orders. Included in this condemnation, however, is that Jesus is really human and wants us to be human beings. Jesus lets human reality exist as penultimate neither making it self-sufficient nor destroying it. ⁵⁶⁸

The world and existing human orders are judged by Christ's ultimate word. However, this does not mean the total annihilation of the world, *for the world continues to exist*. Human beings 'live under this death-sign of the cross [of Christ's ultimate word], living on toward judgment when they despise it, but living on toward salvation when they accept it.' ⁵⁶⁹ To be in the church, then,

⁵⁶³ Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 175.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 176.

⁵⁶⁵ Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer-An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?', p. 581.

⁵⁶⁶ DBWE 6:149; DBW 6:140.

⁵⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer rejects the 'compromise' (der Kompromiß) and 'radical' (der Radikalismus) approaches to the ultimate and penultimate, DBWE 6:153-157; DBW 6:144-149. Instead, ultimate and penultimate are held together in Christ. We will explore this relationship more fully in the Suffering chapter, pp. 192-196.

⁵⁶⁸ DBWE 6:157-158; DBW 6:149.

⁵⁶⁹ DBWE 6:158; DBW 6:150.

is to live in the present world but view it through Christ's judgment *and* salvation, his No and Yes.

Bonhoeffer explains this through the penultimate. The penultimate for Bonhoeffer, is everything that is *open to the coming of Christ* in his mercy and goodness. It is therefore in the penultimate – viewing the world through and directed towards the ultimate – that Christians operate. The ultimate word of Christ encounters us and brings God's ultimate judgement and No on everything in the world. However, Christ's word, simultaneously brings grace and the divine Yes 'for the penultimate that bows to the judgment of the ultimate.'⁵⁷⁰ The church lives in the world which has been judged by Christ; but only at it simultaneously recognises in Christ's word of judgement that there is also grace and redemption. The church hears and lives under this dual message, a message it then brings to the world through its *penultimate* words and actions – words and actions done in view of, in openness to, and in response to the ultimate.

As Nickson says, 'true community is only possible among those who are set free from themselves. However, because Christians live with the permanent eschatological tension of those who are redeemed and yet sinful, the receiving of divine grace and forgiveness needs to be repeatedly actualised and made concrete.'⁵⁷¹ The church lives in the present, through Christ's end. But for it to continue to be church, it must repeatedly be encountered concretely in the world, both with its sin and its forgiveness through Christ.

In such a way, Bonhoeffer's "apocalypticism" avoids the world-hating criticism from Charles West we explored above. The church is encountered by Christ's word. This word calls the church out of the world. However, simultaneously, the church is *called back into the world*, viewing it through Christ's ultimate word of No and Yes. The church is commissioned *to the world*; in its penultimate words and actions, it *views* the world, *opens* the world to, and *delivers* to the world, Christ's ultimate word. The world is not annihilated through Christ's word. It continues to exist temporally, under Christ's judgment but also under his grace for those who are willing to receive it. It is in such a way that the church encounters the world. It is taken out of the world, but, like Abraham and Isaac, *it receives the world back*.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 111.

Living in Repentance

In the introduction of *The Church for the World*, McBride asks how the church can give a non-triumphal witness to God in the world.⁵⁷² Her answer is found within Bonhoeffer's thought, and particularly his framing of public witness as a 'confession of sin unto repentance.'⁵⁷³ For Bonhoeffer, she says,

The church witnesses to Christ by taking the form of Christ in the world; therefore, witness is embodied and enacted. When it becomes necessary for church-communities to complement public engagement with speech that is particularly Christian, I suggest this language first be its own confession of sin. By 'confession of sin' I do not primarily or necessarily mean a formal statement of confession, like an apology issued by a denomination confessing its racist past. By 'confession of sin' I mean more broadly a pattern of speaking characterized by humble acknowledgment of complicity in specific sin and injustice and of the church's inherent interconnectedness in the sin of broader society.⁵⁷⁴

The church, in other words, must be deeply involved in *repentance*.⁵⁷⁵ The church's concrete activity 'in social and political life... arises from its accepting responsibility and acknowledging its complicity in sin.'⁵⁷⁶ Through 'creative and courageous repentant activity, the church participates in God's dynamic and ever-unfolding transformation.'⁵⁷⁷

We have already established earlier in this chapter that the church is commissioned as a divine mandate from God's revelation. For Bonhoeffer, the church has a special function as a mandate, because it is where God's commandment encounters the world in a specific way. The church is commissioned for *proclamation*.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷² McBride, *The Church for the World*, pp. 3-22.

⁵⁷³ Ibid, p. 17 cf. DBWE 4:44.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ McBride is correct that repentance and guilt are too often associated with Bonhoeffer's *Abwehr* involvement, removed 'from everyday discipleship,' McBride, *The Church for the world*, pp. 13-15; cf. Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). An exception McBride highlights is Christine Schliesser, but Schliesser too readily defines guilt as a rare deed rather than the daily orientation of the church; Christine Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty: Bonhoeffer's Concept of Accepting Guilt* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 92-91, 180-186; Christine C. Schliesser, 'The Concept of Accepting Guilt in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reconstruction and Critical Assessment' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2005). Instead, repentance is part of daily confession of sin and daily contrition in discipleship. McBride here sees Luther's influence on Bonhoeffer, McBride *Church for the World*, p. 60 cf. Jane E. Strohl, 'Luther's Spiritual Journey', in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. by Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 153-155.

⁵⁷⁶ McBride, *The Church for the World*, p. 17.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer is influenced here by Luther regarding the church as a body for proclamation, interesting in the context of *Ethics* where Barth's influence is evident in the Divine No and Yes. The church is a body of proclamation (Luther) living under the Divine No and Yes (Barth). How Bonhoeffer is influenced by Luther and Barth is not

Proclamation is the specific mandate given to the church. God wants a place at which, until the end of the world, God's word is again and again spoken, pronounced, delivered, expounded and spread. The word that in Jesus Christ came from heaven wants to come again in the form of human speech. The mandate of the church is the divine word. In this word God wills to be personally present. In the church God is determined to speak in person.⁵⁷⁹

The church lives under Christ's word and proclaims his word to the world. As we have already established, Christ's ultimate word comes to the world as a divine No of radical judgement on the world's sins. It is only in this No that one can then also hear the divine Yes; that in spite of our sin, we are brought into grace in Christ's encounter.

The church that has been encountered by Christ knows itself to be entirely judged, and simultaneously entirely redeemed by Christ's ultimate word(s) of No and Yes. The church's function in proclamation is therefore to live under and spread this message of judgement and grace to the world. But only the church which views *itself* entirely under judgement, taking on the judgement of the world in the divine No, can also proclaim the message of Christ's divine Yes. The church therefore *must live in a state of repentance*. It is only by living in repentance under Christ's No which simultaneously allows it to live under Christ's Yes, as entirely forgiven and redeemed.⁵⁸⁰

Understood in such terms, the repentant church lives not by constant self-flagellation,⁵⁸¹ but can in fact engage in the world, according to McBride, in

in a positive, open, and constructive manner... faithful to Christ, who belonged wholly to this world. It also recognizes that Christians are historical, contextual beings - that this is part of the gift of being human - and that like everyone else, Christians are necessarily formed by cultural forces and societal trends, both positive and negative. This means that instead of

something I have space to focus on. See, DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation*; Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Gaylon H. Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Jennifer M. McBride, 'Reformation through Repentance', pp. 177-190; McBride, *The Church for the World*; Heinrich Bedford-Strohm 'Freeing the Church for Authentic Public Witness' in *Luther, Bonhoeffer, and Public Ethics: Re-Forming The Church of the Future* ed. by Michael P. DeJonge and Clifford J. Green, (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), pp. 107-123; Michael Mawson, 'The Weakness of the Word and the Reality of God: Luther and Bonhoeffer on the Cross of Discipleship' in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31:4 (2018), pp. 452-462; Wolf Krötke, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther' in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. by Peter Frick (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), pp. 53-82; Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*; Tom Greggs, *Barth and Bonhoeffer as Contributors to a Post Liberal Ecclesiology: Essays of Hope for a Fallen and Complex World* (London: T&T Clark, 2022); Wolf Krötke, *Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologians for a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

⁵⁷⁹ DBWE 6:396; DBW 6:399-400. 'Das der Kirche gegebene Mandat ist das der Verkündigung [proclamation or preaching]' DBW 6:399.

⁵⁸⁰ This is important for church remaining an ethically responsible body.

⁵⁸¹ Often repentance is seen as in tension with living a fulfilled life, instead of being its *prerequisite*; Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, 'Freeing the Church for Authentic Public Witness', p. 110.

arrogantly and blindly understanding itself in stark opposition to the surrounding culture, the repentant church in solidarity with humanity may cultivate an awareness about the ways the church has been affected by negative cultural trends... And may be receptive enough to alter dominant assumptions it previously held. Refusing to take a defensive stance against the world does not mean that the church sheds its distinctive identity as the body of Christ in the world. It means that its identity is not defined in opposition to the rest of humanity. Like Christ, the repentant church demonstrates in action and speech that it is for, not against, the world.⁵⁸²

The church, so envisioned, works in the world driven by hope for restoration. It does this by viewing itself as entirely under the same judgement as the rest of the world, but simultaneously commissioned to bring to the world Christ's love and reconciliation (in its penultimate words and actions). It is, as McBride says, by belonging to the world, by 'accepting guilt and taking responsibility of sin that Christ has reconciled humanity to God and has transformed the world's ontology.'⁵⁸³ Therefore the world's identity is no longer entirely understandable by its fallenness. Rather, 'in its sin and in the unfolding of redemption, the world is definitively reconciled to Christ.'⁵⁸⁴ It is the church who is called to give witness to this already accomplished reconciliation, by bringing this message and Christ's revelation.⁵⁸⁵

The place where the sin of the world is acknowledged is the church. In fact, Bonhoeffer says, this is almost 'tautological to say... [because] if it were otherwise, the church would no longer be church.'⁵⁸⁶ It is for this reason that the church is where 'the whole guilt of the world falls.'⁵⁸⁷ The church proclaims '*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.'⁵⁸⁸ There is no 'search for the actual guilty person, no demand for the just expiation as punishment for the evil.'⁵⁸⁹ Instead, the church does not measure the sins of others. Rather, it confesses its sins 'without a sidelong glance at the others who are also guilty.'⁵⁹⁰ The church takes on the guilt of the whole world, not because it is the most guilty in terms of volume of sins. Rather, it takes on the guilt of the world, because it is here that sin 'is confessed and not denied' and forgiveness is therefore made possible.⁵⁹¹ The church views itself under the divine No, bringing God's judgement upon itself for the world, in order to also bring the word of forgiveness upon the world. The guilt and

⁵⁸² McBride, 'Concrete Implications of an Ecclesial Witness Based on Repentance', p. 139.

⁵⁸³ Ibid. p. 142.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ The church is the place where human existence is understood. Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 15, cf. DBWE 2:109.

⁵⁸⁶ DBWE 6:135; DBW 6:126.

⁵⁸⁷ DBWE 6:136; DBW 6:127.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ DBWE 6:136; DBW 6:126.

⁵⁹¹ DBWE 6:136 DBW 6:127.

judgement of the whole world falls on the church because here sin is proclaimed (in the divine No) and only then is there also the possibility of the Yes of forgiveness.

A change in emphasis

Returning to Bonhoeffer's prison letter to Eberhard Bethge, he says that thought he could learn to have faith by trying to live 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... I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life.⁵⁹²

In *Discipleship*, there are many passages describing the community of Christ as having been brought out of the world as a sacred community, sealed in, and saved by Christ's encounter vs. Bonhoeffer's later insistence that the church should exist entirely in the 'this-worldliness' of life. It would seem initially that these materials are therefore opposed in terms of the position and relationship of the church to the world, with the early material suggesting a separation of the church from the sinfulness of the world, existing under Christ's grace vs. later materials where the church is deeply immersed in, working in, and accountable for sinful humanity. However, I argue that an orientation to Christ's revealed No and Yes, and therefore the church existing under *judgement and grace* is present in both materials, although differently stated and emphasised.

Bonhoeffer focuses his attention in *Discipleship* on the removal of the church from the world under the divine Yes, but the No of judgement remains implicitly stated throughout his discussion. For example, Bonhoeffer, describing the call to discipleship, suggests that disciples must 'die' to their sin to enter community with Christ.⁵⁹³ They must respond to Christ's call in their whole being, forgetting themselves and not attempting to intellectualise the call through their human capacities.⁵⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer says,

In the community of the crucified and transfigured body of Jesus Christ, we take part in Christ's suffering and glory. Christ's cross is laid upon the body of the church-community. All sufferings under this cross are Christ's sufferings. This suffering first takes the form of dying

⁵⁹² DBWE 8:485-486; DBW 8:541-2.

⁵⁹³ We will explore this further in the Suffering chapter, pp. 189-191

⁵⁹⁴ Hence the simultaneity of obedience and belief we explored, pp. 106-111.

the death upon the cross in baptism; it then is Christians' "daily dying" (1 Cor. 15:31) by virtue of their baptism. It is, in addition, a suffering that bears an indescribable promise.⁵⁹⁵ Christians live and take part in Christ's suffering, dying to themselves and their sin daily. They are simultaneously made a part of Christ's glory and promise. This implies the same pattern of dynamic living under the judgement of sin as found in the later materials, concurrent to living under Christ's grace and redemption. The inclusion of suffering is something we will explore further later in this thesis.

We find the same pattern of life under the No and the Yes in other earlier materials. In *Sanctorum Communio*, for example, Bonhoeffer says that 'the *peccatorum communio*... continues to coexist within the sanctorum communio.'⁵⁹⁶ Indeed, it is the 'community of saints as the community of penitent sinners [that] is held together by the unity of the body of Christ.'⁵⁹⁷ The church community exists under the judging No and redeeming Yes of Christ; it remains the community of saints *only through* its continued encounter with and orientation to Christ in the world, which includes being called out of sin.

So, too, in *Life Together*, contemporaneous with *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer has a section on confession. He says,

God has come to you to make the sinner blessed...God wants to see you as you are, wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and to other Christians as if you were without sin. You are allowed to be a sinner. Thank God for that; God loves the sinner but hates the sin.⁵⁹⁸

In another's presence, I am permitted to *be a sinner*, Bonhoeffer says. And in recognising this, I can once again receive God's grace. In going to another Christian, 'I am going to God.' It is for this reason, 'the call within Christian community to mutual confession and forgiveness goes out as a call to the great grace of God in the congregation.'⁵⁹⁹ Here we have the same implied relationship of the divine No and divine Yes. In recognising myself as being under Christ's judgement, viewing myself in sin and guilt, I can also hear Christ's grace and forgiveness. The church lives and proclaims this judgement and forgiveness its own members, and the world.

⁵⁹⁵ DBWE 4:221; DBW 4:235. An implicit No and Yes is present three times just in this brief passage. The body of Christ is the community of the crucified (No) and transfigured (Yes) body of Christ; we take part in suffering (No) and glory (Yes) of Christ; suffering (No) also bears an indescribable promise (Yes).

⁵⁹⁶ DBWE 1:213; DBW 1:144.

⁵⁹⁷ DBWE 1:214; DBW 1:144.

⁵⁹⁸ DBWE 5:108; DBW 5:93.

⁵⁹⁹ DBWE 5:109; DBW 5:94.

Bonhoeffer, in *Letters and Papers*, expresses to Bethge that he sees the danger in *Discipleship* and its implications of living a saintly life, and it is certainly in his later works, where worldliness associated with life under the divine Yes and No comes to the fore. But I believe the seeds are still found in his earlier materials.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the (in)visibility of the church community and its relationship with the world, especially comparing Bonhoeffer's earlier materials to some of his later statements about the worldly nature of the church. I have sought to demonstrate that Bonhoeffer's consistent understanding of the church lies in its relationship to his Christology and theological anthropology, and of Christian life lived in response to Christ's encounter.

The church exists as Christ's body on earth. It is made up of members who have been encountered by Christ and exist in relation to others. The visibility of the church as a historical entity cannot therefore be separated from its invisible grounding in Christ; for to be encountered by Christ *is* to be in relation to others physically and spiritually in the world. Neither is prior to the other. As we established, belief requires obedience; and obedience requires belief.

Indeed, the historical church – made up of members – itself functions as a collective person, living in response to Christ's encounter through others. The church can therefore be visible, wielding power in the world, but only to the extent that it lives in conformation with Christ, returning to Christ's encounter in belief and obedience. It can be extraordinary, but it is not extraordinary *for itself*. The church remains the church only to the extent that it lives in response to Christ's word, seeking his No and Yes 'ever and again' in its daily interactions. What matters is not the visibility of the church *itself* but that it exists in response to Christ's word.

Being in relation with Christ changes the relationship the church has with the world. This is true at the level of even the most intimate relations, including familial (hence Bonhoeffer's use of the Akedah in *Discipleship*). In the same way that Abraham was encountered by God's call and receives his relationship with Isaac anew, the church lives for the world viewing it through its relationship with Christ. What matters is not the *visible change in relation* – i.e., visible behaviour associated with expected so-called Christian values – but that Abraham is *willing* to make his change in relationship visible, for the sake of the one who encounters him. We should understand the visibility of the church and its relationship to the world in the same way. Actions and visibility themselves are not what matters, but that they are done in view of and in response to Christ as mediator.

Abraham's call and receiving relationship with Isaac anew is described by Bonhoeffer in the following way:

Externally everything remained the same. But the old has passed away; see everything has become new. Everything had to go through Christ.⁶⁰⁰

Receiving the world through Christ as mediator means entering into Christ's new creation, instituted through his incarnation, cross, and resurrection. The church views the world through Christ's reality. However, as we explored through Bonhoeffer's ultimate and penultimate, the old world remains in existence. Therefore, the church exists in the old world but views it from the new. The old and the new creation are not in competition with one another. The church exists to bring Christ's judgement to the old world, but only as it also brings Christ's redeeming word of grace simultaneously. It is such an understanding that helps reconcile Bonhoeffer's description of the church's relationship with the world. The church is indeed called out of the world – called by Christ's encounter – but only as it is simultaneously *called back into the world*, viewing it through Christ alone.

Living in accordance with Christ's new creation means recognising the world in light of Christ's encounter. Christ encounters the world through his dual words of No and Yes. To be in the church is therefore to recognise and live under the divine judgement of God, but also under his accompanying word of grace. It is in such a way that the church *lives in repentance*. It is the place where the guilt of the world is taken on, judged, but also redeemed.

The church is therefore understood – in its visibility and its relationship with the world – through its relationship with Christ and the personhood Christ's encounter creates. The church is visible, because being encountered by Christ simultaneously includes becoming free-for others in obedience. The church is called out of the world in Christ's encounter, but only as it is also called into the world to be free-for others. The church views itself under divine judgement and grace, and it exists to bring Christ's No and Yes to the world. It is visible, but only visible through its relationship with Christ. It is in the world, but only as it views the world through its relationship with Christ.

⁶⁰⁰ DBWE 4:98; DBW 4:32.

Marriage Mandate Case Study

Bonhoeffer's Treatment of Women

Introduction

In previous chapters, we have considered areas of Bonhoeffer's thought where his seemingly contradictory theological presentation can be understood when placed within his Christology, ecclesiology and theological anthropology, as Christian life lived in response to Christ's encounter. Here the horizon is slightly different. Instead of assessing theological themes which are in apparent tension or paradoxical when viewed alongside other material, in this case study I will be exploring an area in which Bonhoeffer explicitly promotes a theological message at odds with his broader Christological vision.

As Muers suggests, 'it is widely acknowledged that Bonhoeffer's account of gender relations is problematic at many points.'⁶⁰¹ Criticism of this aspect of Bonhoeffer's material has often focused on his wedding sermon to Eberhard and Renate Bethge and how it represents a wider pattern of promoting divinely instituted male privilege. This case study considers Bonhoeffer's wedding sermon, his marriage mandate material and how both are representative of broader underlying androcentrism and promotion of patriarchal structures.⁶⁰²

What I will argue, in line with approaches suggested by other theologians,⁶⁰³ is that this area of Bonhoeffer's thought represents an embarrassing anomaly from his theological approach, contradicting his notion of Christian life lived in response to Christ's freedom-for in the world.

⁶⁰¹ Rachel Muers, 'Anthropology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 207; cf. René van Eyden, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Understanding of Male and Female', in *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, ed. by Guy Carter and others (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), p. 200.

⁶⁰² Bonhoeffer's 'love letters' will also be touched upon, but a more detailed analysis of them in relation to Bonhoeffer's understanding of marriage is not possible here due to space; Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria Von Wedemeyer, *Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria Von Wedemeyer, 1943-1945*, trans. by J. Maxwell Brownjohn, ed. by Ruth-Alice Von Bismarch and Ulrich Kabitz (Abingdon: Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁶⁰³ Muers, 'Anthropology'; Rachel Muers, 'Bonhoeffer, King, and Feminism: Problems and Possibilities', in *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought*, ed. by Willis Jenkins and Jennifer M. McBride, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. 33-42; Jennifer M. McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 365-382; Lisa E. Dahill, 'Jesus for You: A Feminist Reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology', *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 34.4 (2007), pp. 250-259; Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009); Lisa E. Dahill "There's Some Contradiction Here": Gender and the Relation of Above and Below in Bonhoeffer', in *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive Theory*, ed. by Peter Frick (Germany: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2013), pp. 53-85; Karen V. Guth, 'To See from Below: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Mandates and Feminist Ethics', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 33.2 (2013), pp. 131-150; Karen V. Guth, 'Claims on Bonhoeffer'.

In this case study, my aim is not to rescue Bonhoeffer from critique. His material is explicit in its promotion of divinely instituted patriarchal society and the domestication of women. It is something we need to take seriously when assessing Bonhoeffer's thought.⁶⁰⁴ Indeed, his name is listed by Mary Daly among theologians who use God 'oppressively against women... in an overt manner' and 'proclaim women's subordination to be God's will.'⁶⁰⁵ Rather, in this case study, I am attempting to demonstrate that in promoting patriarchal, androcentric, gendered essentialism, Bonhoeffer falls foul of the temptation to absolutise and decontextualise theology, at odds with his notion of Christian life made up of active discernment and response.

Approaching the Problem

Approaching Bonhoeffer's discussion of marriage and the role of women can be difficult precisely *because* it feels so at odds with his broader Christocentric approach, where he promotes careful discernment and response to Christ's word, living for others and viewing the world through Christ's encounter.

Criticising Bonhoeffer's treatment of women can also be difficult for a few other reasons. Theologians, for example, have pointed to Bonhoeffer's near saintlike reputation.⁶⁰⁶ As Haynes suggests, when someone 'is mentioned in the same sentence with Jesus and Gandhi, exploring their flaws seems somehow blasphemous.'⁶⁰⁷

Reproach can also be challenging due to a sense that Bonhoeffer's theology does not match with experience of him as a person. There are those who knew him, such as Renate Bethge, who find asymmetry between the Bonhoeffer they knew vs. the writer of certain passages.

In daily life, Dietrich never had or gave the feeling to a woman that he, as a man, was superior to her. None of the men in the family did that, nor did the women feel this way... as a matter of fact, the women were cunning and strong, never showing fear towards the Nazis,

⁶⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer is criticised more generally for conservatism and elitism. De Lange attempts to make Bonhoeffer's voice relevant again by assessing how Bonhoeffer speaks of God; Frederik de Lange, *Waiting for the Word: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Speaking about God* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2000); cf. Richard H. Bliese, 'Review of Waiting for the Word: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Speaking about God by Frits de Lange', *Pro Ecclesia*, 12.1 (2003), pp. 110–112.

⁶⁰⁵ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: Women's Press, 1986), p. 19.

⁶⁰⁶ Dahill, 'There's Some Contradiction Here', p. 54; Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*; Stephen R. Haynes, 'King and Bonhoeffer as Protestant Saints: The Use and Misuse of Contested Legacies' in *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought*, ed. by Willis Jenkins and Jennifer M. McBride, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Guth, 'Claims on Bonhoeffer', p. 26; Muers, 'Bonhoeffer, King, and Feminism', p. 33; McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies'.

⁶⁰⁷ Haynes, 'King and Bonhoeffer as Protestant Saints', p. 23.

hardly even to each other, in order to keep up the spirit. They, as women were, even more outspoken and straightforward to the Nazis than the men.⁶⁰⁸

This disjoint was not only felt by Renate. Van Eyden, for example, describes a group of women who held a “Bonhoeffer week” in Berlin in 1986. Two women, who had known Bonhoeffer personally, spoke warmly of what Bonhoeffer meant to them. However,

this is how the report of this meeting ends: ‘it is impossible just to adopt or apply theological *topoi* from Bonhoeffer’s very masculine theology to women. Our feeling of relationship is with the praying and acting Bonhoeffer, rather than with the theologian.’⁶⁰⁹

As van Eyden suggests, there are those, these women included, who think ‘in this respect the man Bonhoeffer is better than the theologian Bonhoeffer.’⁶¹⁰

The praying and acting Bonhoeffer

In a sense, this is exactly where my analysis of Bonhoeffer also begins: that the ‘praying and acting Bonhoeffer’, dedicated to a vision of Christian living in Christ’s freedom-for, is at odds with the Bonhoeffer who promotes patriarchal hierarchy as divinely instituted. It is my belief that it is precisely this praying, Christ oriented ‘Bonhoeffer’ which can *correct* where ‘Bonhoeffer’ *himself* errs. My approach will, as strange as it may seem, therefore pit ‘Bonhoeffer’ against ‘Bonhoeffer’. I will demonstrate how a dedication to *Bonhoeffer’s broader contextual Christology* and associated ecclesiology and theological anthropology can be used *against* and to *resolve* areas where he fails to rigorously apply his own theological approach.

In pitting ‘Bonhoeffer’ against ‘Bonhoeffer’, I am not stepping out of line from a theological approach Bonhoeffer *himself* calls for. Indeed, as Guth states,

public invocations of Bonhoeffer [whether positive or negative] tend to ignore his emphasis on particular contexts and on the need for constant discernment... to assume that action in one time context – even in Bonhoeffer’s own action – can be replicated in others or used as a straightforward guide violates his central theological and ethical point of departure: “Who is Christ actually for us today?”⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁸ Renate Bethge, ‘Bonhoeffer’s Picture of Women’, in *Bonhoeffer’s Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers*, ed. by Guy Carter and others (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), p. 198.

⁶⁰⁹ van Eyden, ‘Bonhoeffer’s Understanding of Male and Female’, p. 205 cf. Erika Fechner, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer – ein feministische Auseinandersetzung’ in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1986 Texte zum 80. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1988 (Evangelisches Bildungswerk: Berlin, 1988), pp. 109-119.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid. p. 205. However, Bonhoeffer’s social conservatism and treatment of women appears in his personal correspondence, too, as we will see in the next section.

⁶¹¹ Guth, ‘Claims on Bonhoeffer’, p. 26.

We can therefore ask, “Who is Christ for us today?” and find a different answer to the one Bonhoeffer found for himself in his context of conservative, middle-upper class Germany in the mid 20th century.

We are also legitimised in this approach when we remember that Bonhoeffer did not see himself as a ‘lone male figure in the pulpit.’⁶¹² We must recall that the unity of spirit in Christ’s community is not just *for*-one another but also *with* and sometimes necessarily *against* the other: in this case, with, for and against Bonhoeffer himself.⁶¹³ As Tanner states, we can avoid divisiveness by encouraging the Christian community

to become a *genuine community of argument*, one marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift, in keeping with the shared hope of good discipleship, proper faithfulness and purity of witness. This is the sort of unity of mutual admonition and concern that one finds in the letters of Paul. It is something like what Augustine talked about as the new Christian virtue of sociability: a solidarity of love and common hope, which eschews compulsion by allowing all decision to be free, a community ruled by humility and not by way of the advantage of superior power.⁶¹⁴

In criticising Bonhoeffer in this case study, I am therefore taking the *position of his community* discussing, critiquing, and uplifting his thinking. In the spirit of Bonhoeffer’s own notion of freedom-for in the church, the divine word being placed in the human word of daily encounter, this case study is an attempt to bring the divine word *to Bonhoeffer*. This will involve bringing the divine No of judgement, but simultaneously, under the divine Yes, considering his theology afresh for the needs of church members today. In so doing, we can consider where he has erred, and take seriously the concrete reality in which we must discern Christ’s will here and now. This is possible by inhabiting Bonhoeffer’s notion of Christian community (even across the span of many decades since Bonhoeffer wrote). We remain under Christ’s living word just as Bonhoeffer lived under Christ’s word.⁶¹⁵ It is in such a spirit of mutuality that I approach this case study, highlighting where Bonhoeffer’s thought needs correcting, in order to do justice to the lived experience and witness of Christians in current churches around the world. This case study therefore acts as an embodied application of Bonhoeffer’s theological approach, founded in Bonhoeffer’s understanding of personhood and church discussed the previous chapter.

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ The *Miteinander, Füreinander* and *Gegeneinander* constituting the church community, DBWE 1:178; DBW 1:117 and the relationship between mandates, DBWE 6:395; DBW 6:399.

⁶¹⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 123-124.

⁶¹⁵ Church community living under Christ’s word spanning time will be discussed in the Prayer chapter, pp. 226-230.

Androcentrism, Patriarchy and Gender Essentialism

Dahill points out that Bonhoeffer's mothers and sisters 'were strong women, creative and devoted to the flourishing of culture and human well-being; and in Maria he chose a woman of formidable intellect who, after the war, became a professor of computer science at MIT.'⁶¹⁶ And yet, in spite of this, Bonhoeffer had a lifelong, 'nearly unquestioning support of patriarchal social and familial structures.'⁶¹⁷ Before looking at Bonhoeffer's mandates and presentation of marriage specifically, I would like to demonstrate how androcentrism and patriarchalism are consistently found throughout Bonhoeffer's materials and how this tendency informs his description of the marriage mandate in his *Ethics*.

Androcentrism

Bonhoeffer's writings are androcentric, with a presumption of male normativity throughout. In *Discipleship*, when speaking of adultery, the section is titled 'Woman'⁶¹⁸, revealing an assumption that the Christians he is addressing are heterosexual males. *Life Together* is framed around the relationships of the entirely male Brüder community.⁶¹⁹ Dahill also notices, at

various points in his writings, Bonhoeffer uses the terms *der Mensch* ("the human being" or, more broadly, "humanity"); *der Einzelne* ("individual"); *die Person* ("person"); *das Ich* ("ego", or "I"); and *das Selbst* ("self"). *Mensch*, of course, is the standard German term for a human being, used ubiquitously throughout Bonhoeffer's writings. Although its grammatical gender is masculine, the term does not in and of itself refer only to a male human being. For instance, the sentence, "*der Mensch neben mir—den soll ich lieben*" ("the human being next to me is the one I should love") can as easily be understood grammatically to refer to a woman as to a man.⁶²⁰

Nevertheless, Dahill continues, Bonhoeffer's use of the term does reveal an androcentric bias. Bonhoeffer consistently speaks of the '*Mensch*' he is addressing as having a wife, being a father or businessman, 'or becoming a brother to the neighbor. Thus he really does at times mean "man" and not simply "person."⁶²¹

⁶¹⁶ Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, p. 126

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ DBWE 4:125-127; BDW 4:126-129.

⁶¹⁹ This may feel less problematic, given Bonhoeffer was addressing his male Finkenwalde community, but the fact he did not adapt the writing for its publication, belies an assumption of male normativity beyond the original audience.

⁶²⁰ Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, p. 38; also, Dahill, 'There's Some Contradiction Here', p. 68.

⁶²¹ Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, p. 38. Often obscured in the DBWE translations!

In *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, for example, Bonhoeffer discusses being a Christian in the world,

But the question still troubles us: What could the call to follow Jesus mean today for the worker, the businessman, the farmer, or the soldier?⁶²²

The mandate of the church embraces all people as they live within all the other mandates.

Since a person is at the same time worker, spouse, and citizen.⁶²³

These are not only all stereotypically male vocations in his era, but Bonhoeffer also uses masculine nouns throughout, addressing an explicitly male audience. Bonhoeffer's discussion of sin, laid out most fully in *Creation and Fall*,⁶²⁴ but consistent across his materials, also assumes an androcentric position. In notes for pastoral advice, Bonhoeffer suggests that the 'root of all our sin is *arrogance*. The confession of sin is the humiliation that we experience before the brother.'⁶²⁵ Sin is rooted in pride, and reconciliation with Christ therefore requires the prideful self being overcome and conformed instead to the image of Christ, which is an existence 'for' others.

We can partly understand Bonhoeffer's account of sin by the fact he wrote from *his own perspective*. Green, suggests that Bonhoeffer was 'troubled by his ambitiousness'⁶²⁶ and showed 'signs of an attitude of superiority, and of aggressiveness, competitiveness, and ambition.'⁶²⁷ Green, indeed suggests that this is why Bonhoeffer's personal crisis of 1932⁶²⁸ was centered around his vocation and professional life, and the reason why 'critique of boundless intellect, self-glorification in thought and philosophy... features so prominently in the passages on the anthropological problematic. For the same reason, *Discipleship* is replete with polemics against false Christianity as following self-chosen ideas, principles, and beliefs,'⁶²⁹ instead of following the word of Christ. Bonhoeffer acknowledges his ego and even aggression. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge in 1941, Bonhoeffer says that Bethge has 'patiently withstood the severe tests of such a friendship, particularly due to my violent temper (which I too abhor in myself and of

⁶²² DBWE 4:39; 'Aber noch bedrängt uns die Frage: was der Ruf in die Nachfolge Jesus heute für den Arbeiter (masculine accusative noun), für den Geschäftsmann (masculine accusative noun), für den Landwirt (masculine accusative noun), für den Soldaten (masculine accusative noun) bedeuten könne...' DBW 4:23.

⁶²³ DBWE 6:73; 'Wie der Mensch zugleich Arbeiter (masculine noun), Ehegatte (masculine noun), Untertan (masculine noun) ist' DBW 6:59-60. DBWE has 'spouse' but the German *Ehegatte* is explicitly masculine and therefore denotes *husband*. We can therefore assume this is an occasion where 'der Mensch' really means *man*.

⁶²⁴ DBWE 3:62-66, 84, 98, 113, 123-128; DBW 3:58-62, 79, 92, 105, 115-120.

⁶²⁵ DBWE 15:316; DBWE 15:307 n.1 for German publication details. That this is a stereotypically androcentric view of sin will be explored below.

⁶²⁶ Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, p. 147.

⁶²⁷ Ibid. p. 147 n.93

⁶²⁸ We will discuss this in the Prayer chapter, pp. 214-215.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

which you have fortunately repeatedly and openly reminded me).'⁶³⁰ In another letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer shares his opinion that he 'would very much like for my wife to be in agreement with me as fully as possible', and that he doesn't like it 'at all when wives and husbands are of different opinions.'⁶³¹ He asks whether Bethge agrees with him or if this is an aspect of Bonhoeffer's "'tyrannical" nature that [he] know[s] so intimately.'⁶³²

Bonhoeffer's projection and universalisation of sin as stemming from arrogance is harmful when viewed in a culture of patriarchy and subjugation of women or minority groups. Relating sin to arrogance – for which surrendering and diminishing the self is the antidote – projects toxic divine justification for the continued subordination of already oppressed groups.⁶³³

And yet surrendering the self is exactly the antidote that Bonhoeffer suggests. In *Sanctorum Communio*, in passages we have considered elsewhere, Bonhoeffer says that as 'long as my intellect is dominant, exclusively claiming universal validity... I am not in the social sphere. But this means that I enter this sphere *only when my intellect is confronted by some fundamental barrier [Schranke]*.'⁶³⁴ I must experience a barrier – an ethical encounter with another,

⁶³⁰ DBWE 16:136; DBW 16:125.

⁶³¹ DBWE 8:203; DBW 8:214. Arrogance and sections hinting at patriarchalism and condescension are seen in his correspondence with Maria in *Love Letters from Cell 92*. For example, asking Maria to 'always remain as you are. Remain so for my sake, because that's what I need, what I've found in you, and what I love... You're so young, and you'll always remain so – for me,' pp. 184-185. This is not the only occasion Maria's age is commented on, or her being a certain way for Bonhoeffer; Bonhoeffer and Wedemeyer, *Love Letters from Cell 92*.

⁶³² DBWE 8:203; DBW 8:214.

⁶³³ Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, The Cross, and the Feminist Critique* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) offers an compelling discussion of patriarchal distortion of Christology and theological anthropology, including the misuse of the theology of the cross, and possibilities for recovering it as a theological approach. See also Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, *God-His and Hers* (London: SCM, 1991); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, 'The Imago Dei and a Reformed Logic for Feminist/Womanist Critique', in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. by Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 95–106; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th anniversary edition (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Rebecca Parker and Joanne Carlson Brown, 'For God so Loved the World?', in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp. 1–30; Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Carolyn Osiek, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986); Brita L. Gill-Austern, 'Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What Does It Do to Women?', in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. by Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 304–321; Marie M. Fortune, 'The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective', in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. by Marie M. Fortune and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 85–91; Catherine Clark Kroeger, 'Let's Look Again At The Biblical Concept of Submission', pp. 135–140; Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); Wendy Farley, 'Evil, Violence, and the Practice of Theodicy', in *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, ed. by John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998), pp. 11–20; Julie Hopkins, *Toward a Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁶³⁴ DBWE 1:45-46; DBW 1:26.

empowered by Christ – to overcome my interiorised ‘self-knowing and self-active spirit.’⁶³⁵ Only through this encounter do I enter a state of *responsibility* in time. Bonhoeffer continues:

It is a Christian insight that the person as conscious being 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... *For Christian philosophy, the human person originates only in relation to the divine; the divine person transcends the human person*, who both resists and is overwhelmed by the divine.⁶³⁶

To regain my created personhood, my arrogant self must be confronted by an ethical encounter, originating in Christ. In the moment of being moved and overcome, I regain my centre which derives from my relation to the divine. I cannot regain this centre which is my boundary without ‘ethical struggle’, my arrogant self being overcome and submitting to the divine. It is only when the ‘concrete ethical barrier of the other person is acknowledged or, alternatively, when the person is compelled to acknowledge it, we have made a fundamental step that allows us to grasp the *social ontic-ethical basic-relations of persons*.’⁶³⁷

As Dahill points out, various authors have commented on the ‘other-orientation’ in Bonhoeffer in very positive terms (as we have in this thesis),

finding it a salutary alternative to the self-indulgent pieties of American consumerism and privilege, and locating him within a developing tradition of philosophical alterity manifest in such thinkers as Adorno and Levinas, as well as in subsequent liberation theology.⁶³⁸

The other is the locus of transcendence for Bonhoeffer, as Dahill says, because the other draws one’s attention away from one’s own arrogant self in surrender to the absolute demand of the other in encounter.

The issue is not the other-orientation of Christian person per se,⁶³⁹ but rather the notion that this includes a need to suppress one’s ego or give up oneself in order to be free for others.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁵ DBWE 1:46; DBW 1:26.

⁶³⁶ DBWE 1:49; DBW 1:29.

⁶³⁷ DBWE 1:50; DBW 1:30.

⁶³⁸ Dahill, ‘Jesus for You’, p. 251; David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 241-265.

⁶³⁹ The issue is not the other-orientation, but the implied notion of diminishing the self. I believe Bonhoeffer avoids this to an extent through his non-competitive notion of Christian agency, Agency chapter pp. 39-45. Similar themes will also be covered in the Suffering chapter, especially the *communal context* of Christian living, pp. 169-207.

⁶⁴⁰ Since the 1960s, feminist theologians have critiqued male oriented Christian understandings of sin and self, steeped in concepts of pride; Valerie Saiving Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View’, *The Journal of Religion*, 40.2 (1960), pp. 100–112; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1980); Eleanor Humes Haney, ‘What Is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion’, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 8.1 (1980), pp. 115–124. For contemporary reflections on these early feminist accounts, see Mark Douglas and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, ‘Revisiting Valerie Saiving’s Challenge to Reinhold Niebuhr Honoring Fifty Years of Reflection on “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”: Introduction and Overview’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 28.1 (2012), p. 76; Jodie Lyon-

Dahill reflects on a woman called Shirley who did a summer course on Bonhoeffer. In the course, she read about the necessity

of giving up one's self in favor of the claims of the other, and loving the other instead of the self, and culminated in a reflection on the central Christian stance of loving the enemy, letting the enemy 'grasp' a person in a radical claim on one's time and priorities and even one's life.⁶⁴¹

Shirley reflected that if she had heard that same message 30 years ago when in an abusive relationship, she would be dead. What feels liberating for Bonhoeffer can be excruciatingly damaging and even deadly for others.

Chung Hyun Kyung also offers a reflection that Bonhoeffer's other-oriented ethic doesn't speak to female experience. She says,

'women for others' doesn't give me any new theological imperative or inspiration... because that is what we women have been for the last five thousand years of patriarchal history. Remember our mothers', grandmothers', and great-grandmothers' lives? They sacrificed their lives for others [...] let's add some adjectives to this term 'Women for others.' Think about 'Asian women for others.' What image comes up in your head? The images that come up in my hear are Korean comfort women under Japanese militarism; Vietnamese, Filipino, and Thai prostitutes; migrant women workers.... Asian picture brides in the catalogues widely circulated in Europe, North America, and Australia.... 'Black women for others.' What images come up [...] I remember black slave women who were forced to give birth and then to put their babies up for sale. Black women cleaners, maids and nannies who work for others.⁶⁴²

Dahill reminds us, 'that women exist in situations... Bonhoeffer never imagined in his writings... and gender theorists engaged in queer and other sexual-orientation analyses burst the questions Bonhoeffer was addressing (or more often, failing to address) so far beyond his sketches of explicitly heterosexual and patriarchal marriage as to make an attempt at mutual conversation seem nearly inconceivable.'⁶⁴³

Baldwin, 'Women, Work, and Reinhold Niebuhr: A Feminist Understanding of Sin' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010); Mary Elise Lowe, 'Woman Oriented Harmatologies: A Survey of the Shift from Powerlessness to Right Relationship', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 39.2 (2009); Mary Potter Engel, 'No Self and the Calling Given to Anyone, Roundtable Discussion: Mysticism and Feminist Spirituality', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 24.2, (2008), pp.143-159.

⁶⁴¹ Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, p. 10.

⁶⁴² Chung Hyun Kyung, 'Dear Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Letter', in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, by John W de Gruchy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 14; referenced in Dahill, *There's Some Contradiction Here*, pp. 53-54 and McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies', p. 374.

⁶⁴³ Dahill, *There's Some Contradiction Here*, p. 54.

Feminist theologians have criticised male oriented perspectives on sin, including Bonhoeffer's, arguing that the male perspective of sin rooted in pride and arrogance is out of touch with female experience – where sin is far more likely to look like the hiding of oneself, shyness, giving too much of the oneself to family etc.⁶⁴⁴ However, here too, we must approach with caution, as ascribing descriptions of “female” characteristics is just as damaging. This is something, for example, Saiving Goldstein is criticised for in her 1960s work, that she essentialises certain female ‘characteristics’ and forgets the experience of, for example, black women.⁶⁴⁵

Bonhoeffer's concept of Christian personhood as constituted in being free for others through the necessary overcoming of the prideful self is androcentric – or at least specific to Bonhoeffer's experience as a middle class, white male. As I will explore in my Suffering chapter, however, Bonhoeffer's concept of turning away from the self into relation needs to be placed *in an ecclesiological* context⁶⁴⁶ and within a non-competitive notion of human agency,⁶⁴⁷ which creates a more nuanced account than the one given here, whilst remaining aware of the potential issues Bonhoeffer's account suggests. What remains evident and useful for our discussion in this case study is that Bonhoeffer's thought (including his presentation of sin) is not without male bias, a bias then projected onto his theology and understanding of the world, as we will see in his marriage mandate.

Patriarchy

As will be demonstrated, Bonhoeffer saw systems of patriarchy as unproblematic. For him patriarchal society reflected, as Dahill says, ‘the way God intends human beings to live for their own flourishing and blessing... women's subordination in general, do not represent shocking

⁶⁴⁴ Keun-Joo Christine Pae, ‘Rethinking Masculinized Sin: Critical Dialogue Between Saiving and Niebuhr from an Asian Anti-Military Feminist Perspective’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 28.1 (2012), pp. 115–121; Rebekah Miles, ‘Valerie Saiving Reconsidered’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 28.1 (2012), pp. 79–86; Mark Douglas, ‘Experience and Relevance: Continuing to Learn from Niebuhr and Saiving’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 28.1 (2012), pp. 102–108.

⁶⁴⁵ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, ‘The Imago Dei and a Reformed Logic for Feminist/Womanist Critique’, pp. 95–106; Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, no. 64 (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1989); Miles ‘Valerie Saiving Reconsidered’. This issue is extant also in, for example, Keller's concept of the soluble self in Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*, reprint edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) pp. 7–16; Keller's approach is corrected of its over-simplification of male and female selfhood in Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, p. 15.

⁶⁴⁶ Other orientation must be placed in an ecclesial context. The person who is free for others is *simultaneously the person for whom another is free*. A great analogy is the concept of ‘receiving a guest’ – the one is receptive is at the same time active. Actor and receiver are both active recipients, giving and taking, and responsible; Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, ‘Agape in Feminist Ethics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 9.1, 1981, p. 77.

⁶⁴⁷ For example, Bonhoeffer says selflessness is corrupted in two related ways, including making the welfare of another absolute over my own self, DBWE 6:257–259; DBW 5:256–259. Similarly, one does not hear the divine No of judgement (against our ‘prideful’ selves) *without also hearing the divine Yes* which reminds us of our created nature. Christian agency is not about diminishment without associated release into freedom.

violations of women's full created personhood but a beneficial division of labor along gender lines.'⁶⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer speaks of patriarchy as belonging to creation. It is therefore not an order of preservation nor a punishment. Instead, it is divinely ordained for the flourishing of the world. Bonhoeffer speaks of patriarchal order in positive terms throughout his materials, right from *Sanctorum Communio*. As Dahill says,

[Bonhoeffer] distinguishes "patriarchalism understood as punishment" (after the fall) from the good and necessary patriarchalism of the primal creation; thus the effect of the fall is not to impose patriarchy but only to make it seem like punishment. For him, the necessary "subordination" of women and children in the patriarchal family model is quite compatible with the "equality" of persons he elsewhere asserts: Marriage and family are the most primitive social forms and doubtless willed by God. These forms are of course depraved in the state of sin, by concupiscence and also by patriarchalism understood as punishment; they are restored to sanctity again in Christ. Originally, neither reproduction nor the idea of "subordination" is associated with sin as constitutive forces of the family. Both are good and necessary... Rather, what was created unequal must be accepted as such, and this, in turn, sanctions and introduces the idea of patriarchalism (the same Paul wrote Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 14:23).⁶⁴⁹

Bonhoeffer defends and supports patriarchal ordering as willed by God. It is 'good and necessary' and only seen as 'punishment' from the view of the fall and those who do not know or understand God's will. The effect of the fall is therefore not to *impose* patriarchy, but only to make this divinely instituted arrangement *feel oppressive*.⁶⁵⁰ The restoration of marriage and family is found in Christ's encounter, and here subordinates (i.e. wives and children) will no longer see their state as *unjust* but instead seek to preserve the patriarchal structure by 'being obedient'⁶⁵¹ to Christ.

In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer directly critiques the notion of equality, using this criticism as a means of *legitimising* divinely instituted patriarchy. As McBride says, Bonhoeffer argues that 'human beings are equal 'before God' – by which he presumably means that they are loved the same since he argues that this is seen 'most clearly' in the fact that the judgment and grace of Christ's cross extend to all.'⁶⁵² But because of created human difference, this equality before

⁶⁴⁸ Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, p. 127.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 36 cf. DBWE 1:204-208; DBW 1:137-140.

⁶⁵⁰ McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies', p. 366; Dahill, *Reading from the Underside*, pp 35-36.

⁶⁵¹ DBWE 1:263; DBW 1:182.

⁶⁵² McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies', p. 367, cf. DBWE 1:205; DBW 1:138.

God is *invisible* in the world, and should not therefore take the form of egalitarianism. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, egalitarianism is 'too principled and therefore not rooted in concrete existence.'⁶⁵³ Concrete existence in response to Christ necessarily includes an acknowledgement of *difference* between persons as created by God, to which Bonhoeffer then includes societal hierarchies.

McBride continues that Christian community for Bonhoeffer, as

'Christ existing as church community' - is necessary *precisely because* 'of the vast differences of ability and social status among human beings' (DBWE 1:206-208); for 'there are some who are strong and others who are weak, some who are honorable and others who are dishonorable, some who are, from an ethical and religious perspective, exemplary and others who are inferior' - an argument that will grow stronger in Bonhoeffer's writings with the rise of Nazi socialism and its attack on those deemed inferior or weak. Referring to human dissimilarity, Bonhoeffer says, 'if this is kept in mind, then... patriarchalism becomes immediately apparent; the Christian idea of equality does not allow for an egalitarianism but indeed only for the acknowledgement of the particular circumstances (DBWE 1:206-207).'⁶⁵⁴

Ironically, then, Bonhoeffer defends his view of patriarchal hierarchy precisely through a sense of *protecting* the apparent dissimilarities in human beings in concrete circumstances. Our equality before God cannot be perceived in the world. Instead, what is created 'unequal' (although truly equal in the eyes of God) must be accepted as it is, and our particular differences in specific circumstances ought to be celebrated. And yet, by appealing to patriarchal structures and promoting the need for cherishing the particularities of human existence against forced egalitarianism, Bonhoeffer *ends up essentialising gender and allowing for no difference, particularly in the role of women.*

Indeed, as Dahill and McBride highlight independently, despite his proclamation in *Sanctorum Communio* that patriarchy conserves the difference between and uniqueness of created human beings, Bonhoeffer's pro-patriarchal material in fact leads to gender essentialism in the case of women. Women again and again appear in his materials as an 'undifferentiated category or class with a common vocation: being a wife and mother,'⁶⁵⁵ and as having no individuated relationships with God themselves, but rather standing in relation to God only *through their husbands.*

⁶⁵³ Ibid. p. 367, cf. DBWE 1:205-208; DBW 1:138-140.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 367 cf. DBWE 1:206-207; DBW 1:139.

⁶⁵⁵ Dahill, 'There's Some Contradiction Here', p. 70.

For example, in his fictional writing Bonhoeffer suggests that women ought not to have any ambitions beyond the domestic sphere. He presents his fictional character Klara, for example, directly in opposition to ‘those emancipated half-men’⁶⁵⁶ who go against God’s intention for women. Instead she is praised by Bonhoeffer for wanting to stay at home, marry, have a family, and for finding happiness not for herself but in the simplicity of her vocation as a woman.⁶⁵⁷ Again and again, Bonhoeffer reveals, as McBride states, a view that ‘women are not, like men, separate persons with a variety of vocations⁶⁵⁸ that they discover in their unfolding relationships with God and other human beings, but are indistinguishable members of a homogenous group with a standardized vocation of subordination,’⁶⁵⁹ in the domestic sphere.

This does not only appear in the prison era writings. In an exercise on the pastoral epistles in 1938, Bonhoeffer reflects on 1 Timothy 2:8-9:

The husband is the head of the wife and the family. He is the priest. He speaks with God on behalf of his own... Human and pious ideals are the enemy of the divine ordinances and commandments. Thus, a new teaching of the law easily leads to disorder in the relation between man and woman. Often it is the case that overzealous [schwärmerisch]⁶⁶⁰ teachers will try to win women over by promising them special rights. For Paul the order is clear: Women have full part in salvation and truth. But they have a different vocation from that of the man. Woman’s finery is not to be sought in public... This is not merely conservatism but biblical order: 1. The man was created first and, from him, the woman. 2. The woman was seduced by the devil; she is more susceptible to the temptations of Satan. It follows from this not that the woman has *lesser value* but that she has a different *calling*... God gave the woman her calling in submission to the man so that she is not exposed to temptation but is under her husband’s protection.⁶⁶¹

Women are explicitly named here as subordinate to the husband. Although they have full part in salvation (i.e., they are ultimately equal before God), they have a different vocation to man, and are therefore unequal in the world (confirming Bonhoeffer’s statements from *Sanctorum Communio*).

⁶⁵⁶ DBWE 7:137; DBW 7:142.

⁶⁵⁷ DBWE 7:137-138; DBW 7:142-143.

⁶⁵⁸ As we saw earlier in this case study, pp. 143-144.

⁶⁵⁹ McBride, ‘Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies’, p. 369.

⁶⁶⁰ *schwärmerisch* was a term used by Luther to refer to anabaptists. Given how Bonhoeffer was in some measure influenced by the Moravian movement, it is interesting to note how he uses this here as a pejorative term. A better translation than the DBWE might be ‘enthusiastic’.

⁶⁶¹ DBWE 15:330-331; DBW 15:313-314; cf. Dahill, ‘There is Some Contradiction Here’, pp. 70-71.

Unlike the man here, however, the woman is explicitly given *one* defined vocation by Bonhoeffer – her value is not to be found in the public sphere. Therefore, by logical extension, she is to be in the home in a domestic role. Any form of ‘special rights’ are to be rejected, because women are created with a ‘different’ – and subordinate – vocation to men. The woman is created ‘from man’ and therefore her vocation is to be in relationship with man. In her marriage, she is to be in submission, so ‘she is not exposed to temptation but is under her husband’s protection.’⁶⁶²

This is consistent with *Creation and Fall*, where, although Bonhoeffer does not view women as *deficient* (in contrast to the passage above where he suggests the woman is more susceptible to temptation), Eve is very much identified as the ‘other’, created in partnership and as boundary to Adam, while, Adam remains, as Dahill says, ‘the norm, the paradigmatic human subject.’⁶⁶³ *Creation and Fall* is above all else ‘Adam’s journey of human experience before God.’⁶⁶⁴

Bonhoeffer may suggest *some* equality in the framing of relationship between Adam and Eve; ‘[Adam] now belongs to her, because she belongs to him’, ‘they are one and yet two.’⁶⁶⁵

However, Eve is described solely through her purpose to be a support and companion to Adam. She is defined as ‘the helper who is a partner of the man [Mann].’⁶⁶⁶ Adam is nowhere described as a helper in return; only *she is defined through her creation as a help and support for her male partner*. Again, Eve – here standing as the prototype for all women – is described solely through her vocation to be subordinate to her male partner, a vocation therefore by which all women as a homogenised group are defined.

Returning to the Timothy reflection, not only is the woman defined by her earthly vocation by Bonhoeffer, but she is also depicted as having no individual relationship with God, but only through the man she is married to, who is ‘the priest. He speaks with God on behalf of his own.’⁶⁶⁷ Such material reveals, again Dahill suggests, Bonhoeffer’s ‘curious incapacity’ to apply to women the ‘distinctive features’⁶⁶⁸ that are central to his very own understanding of Christian discipleship. In *Discipleship*, for example, Bonhoeffer says that,

Christ the mediator stands between son and father, between husband and wife, between individual and nation, whether they can recognize him or not [...] Anytime a community

⁶⁶² DBWE 15:331; DBW 15:314.

⁶⁶³ Dahill, ‘There’s Some contradiction here’ p. 68.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ DBWE 3:97; DBW 3:91.

⁶⁶⁶ DBWE 3:98; DBW 3:91.

⁶⁶⁷ DBWE 15:330; DBW 15:313.

⁶⁶⁸ Dahill, ‘There’s Some Contradiction Here’, p. 68.

hinders us from coming before Christ as a single individual, anytime a community lays claim to immediacy, it must be hated for Christ's sake.⁶⁶⁹

We have already explored the notion of Christ as mediator in the previous chapter on the church.⁶⁷⁰ Christ stands between *every relationship*, because through Christ one receives the world back afresh through his encounter with us. Viewing the world through Christ means viewing it through his freedom-for. There ought to be no hindrance between the person and Christ, Bonhoeffer says, because the whole world stands in relation to Christ's freedom-for. And yet, Bonhoeffer seems *to actively endorse precisely* such a hindrance in the case of a wife (woman). The wife, so described in this reflection on 1 Timothy 2:8-9, relates to Christ *through her husband as priest*.

These passages openly promoting an essential, one dimensional, and divinely instituted understanding of female nature, *directly* contradict Bonhoeffer's own broader theological promotion of Christian personhood and formation in encounter with Christ, of discipleship in the world of concrete reality, and his aversion to decontextualised, abstract principles. As Dahill states, there is a clear sense of distinction between Bonhoeffer's 'theology of Christian personhood, formation and discipleship in the world and his inherited and mostly unexamined views on patriarchal order and women's full personhood.'⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁹ DBWE 4:95; DBW 4:90.

⁶⁷⁰ Church chapter, pp. 119-123.

⁶⁷¹ Dahill, 'There's Some Contradiction Here', p. 73.

The Mandates

In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer states that ‘in Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely in the reality of the world.’⁶⁷² There is no room to speak about any separate ‘realm’, religious or secular, because the whole world is claimed by God’s reconciling and all-encompassing love. Christian life is therefore made up of living in accordance with the reality that Christ has revealed and continues to reveal in his freedom-for. ‘What matters is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*’⁶⁷³ which is *one* reality, and *one* world. We have already explored this in the agency and church chapters.⁶⁷⁴

In *Ethics*, however, Bonhoeffer goes on to say that God’s commanding word in Christ encounters human beings in the world *where God has chosen to give it* – namely in four different forms united only by God’s commandment itself. These forms, ‘scripture names [as] four... mandates: *work, marriage, government, and church*.’⁶⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer explains that marriage and work have been mandates since the creation of the world, with Adam and Eve expected to live in the garden and keep it (Gen 2.15), and Eve being created as a helper to Adam.⁶⁷⁶ Government thus presupposes the mandates of work and marriage. It protects what is created by establishing justice.⁶⁷⁷

In contrast to marriage, government, and work, the church is commissioned to allow the reality of Jesus Christ to become real through proclamation.⁶⁷⁸ As we have discussed in the church chapter, the church’s

concern is the eternal salvation of the whole world. The mandate of the church embraces all people as they live within all the other mandates. Since a person [der Mensch] is at the same time worker, spouse and citizen,⁶⁷⁹ since one mandate overlaps with the others, and since all the mandates need to be fulfilled at the same time, the church mandate reaches into all the

⁶⁷² DBWE 6:55; DBW 6:40.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ Agency chapter, pp. 52-57; Church chapter, pp. 113-118.

⁶⁷⁵ DBWE 6:68; ‘Die Schrift nennt vier solche Mandate: *die Arbeit, die Ehe, die Obrigkeit, die Kirche*’ DBW 6:54. ‘*Obrigkeit*’ literally has to do with those who are *over us*, a connotation lost in the English translation of ‘government’. This is another example of Bonhoeffer’s social and political conservatism (perhaps influenced by Luther’s usage of the term – e.g. Luther’s December 1522 pamphlet, “Von Weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr gehorsam schuldig sei” (About secular powers and to what extent one should be obedient). It is worth noting that elsewhere in DBWE 6:388/DBW 6:392, Bonhoeffer names ‘culture’ (die Kultur) as a mandate instead of work and also broadens ‘marriage’ to ‘family’.

⁶⁷⁶ DBWE 3:98; DBW 3:91.

⁶⁷⁷ DBWE 6:72; DBW 6:58.

⁶⁷⁸ Church chapter, pp. 131-136.

⁶⁷⁹ All masculine nouns in the original German, as discussed on pp. 143-144.

other mandates. Similarly, the Christian is at the same time worker, spouse and citizen. Every division into separate realms [Räume] is forbidden here. Human beings as whole persons stand before the whole earthly and eternal reality that God in Jesus Christ has prepared for them... This is the witness the church has to give to the world, that all the other mandates are not there to divide people and tear them apart but to deal with them as whole people before God the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer – that reality in all its manifold aspects is ultimately one in God who became human, Jesus Christ.⁶⁸⁰

Bonhoeffer is clear that mandates encompass the entirety of the world, as God's will is directed to the whole of reality in Christ's reconciliation. Mandates are not a separate spiritual realm into which an individual can retreat. People are called to live in the world and in the mandates at the same time.

The mandates are divinely instituted to preserve and reaffirm God's will. They are crucial, Bonhoeffer says, because God's commandment cannot be found everywhere and anywhere. It is never a general law. Rather, God's commandment can only be found where it is *given to us*, when it encounters us, and where it is spoken only with God's authorisation. A 'mandate', therefore, is a

concrete divine commission grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of scripture; it is the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution.... Laying claim to, commandeering of, and formation of a certain earthly domain by the divine command. The bearer of the mandate acts as a vicarious representative, as a stand-in for the one who issued the commission.⁶⁸¹

Divine mandates exist as solely dependent on God's command. They are 'in no way an outgrowth of history; they are not earthly powers, but divine commissions. Church, marriage and family... [work] and government, can only be explained and understood from above, from God. The bearers of the mandate are not commissioned from below, executing and representing particular expressions of the collective will of human beings.'⁶⁸² Rather, bearers are *vicarious representatives* – encountered by God, and made responsible for others in the world, by encountering others with the divine word. These earthly institutions have the authority of God, as we have already discussed in the church chapter, the one who issued the commission, *only* so far as they are grounded in the revelation of Christ, and only so far as they remain a bearer of

⁶⁸⁰ DBWE 6:73; DBW 6:59-60.

⁶⁸¹ DBWE 6:389; DBW 6:392-393.

⁶⁸² DBWE 6:390; DBW 6:394.

that revelation.⁶⁸³ They remain vicarious representatives so far as they continue to live in active discernment and response to Christ's word in the world.

The divine mandates, of work, marriage, government and church⁶⁸⁴ are therefore not *divine in themselves*, but solely through their 'work for the sake of Jesus Christ, for the sake of a divine task and goal... only because God, for Christ's sake has commanded human beings to work and has placed a promise on it, is work divine.'⁶⁸⁵ Hence, in his initial description of the mandates, Bonhoeffer says that we 'speak of divine mandates rather than divine orders, because thereby their character as divinely imposed tasks [Auftrag], as opposed to determinate forms of being, becomes clearer.'⁶⁸⁶

Having established that divine mandates are not fixed *orders*, Bonhoeffer also emphatically states that the relationship of mandates in the world is not about *things*, or structures or systems - *but persons*. Namely, the person of Christ.

None of these mandates exists self-sufficiently, nor can one of them claim to replace all the others. The mandates are *with-one-another* [*miteinander*] or they are not divine mandates. However, in being with-one-another, they are not isolated and separated from one another but oriented toward one another. They are *for-one-another* [*füreinander*] or they are not God's mandates. But in this being-with-one-another and being-for-one-another, each of them is also limited [begrenzt] by the other, and, in the context of being-for-one-another, this limitation is necessarily experienced as a being-over-against-one-another. *Where being-over-against-one-another* [*Gegeneinander*]⁶⁸⁷ is no longer present, God's mandate no longer exists.⁶⁸⁸

The mandates – like the relationship between individual persons and community – are oriented towards one another, viewing one another in and through Christ. The mandates exist *in relationship to one another* and to other persons in the world. The mandates therefore exist in a relationship of encounter; bringing the word of God to one another, and being encountered in return. Included in this relationship of encounter is also being *gegeneinander*, 'against-one-another', bringing the divine No of judgement where a mandate errs, and being prepared to also receive this No in return. As Bonhoeffer says, if one mandate were to distort the image of Christ and refuse to receive Christ's divine No and Yes, it would cease to be a divine mandate. The

⁶⁸³ Church chapter, pp. 113-118.

⁶⁸⁴ DBWE 6:68; DBW 6:55.

⁶⁸⁵ DBWE 6:69; DBW 6:56.

⁶⁸⁶ DBWE 6:68-69; DBW 6:54-55.

⁶⁸⁷ 'Over against' is a usual translation of *gegenüber*, which implies spatial opposition. Bonhoeffer says the mandates are *gegeneinander*, not *gegenüber*. They are not over against one another, but *against*. I will therefore use against.

⁶⁸⁸ DBWE 6:393-394; DBW 6:397. The mandates existing *miteinander*, *füreinander* and *gegeneinander* will become important for my retrieval of Bonhoeffer's marriage mandate, pp. 166-167.

other divine mandates, existing with, for and against the others, would succeed in unveiling this distortion. This is how the mandates are protected from self-sufficiency or self-interest by being in relationship with the other mandates, and, in turn, Christ.

However, there are issues in Bonhoeffer's presentation of the mandates, especially with regard to his understanding of marriage. I will next explore the marriage mandate and related concept of 'above' and 'below', in relation to themes we have already discussed regarding Bonhoeffer's patriarchalism. Too often in his discussion of marriage, there is a tone of *preserving* the ordering of society, keeping those who are 'lower' (including women) in a timeless structure of relation to those who are 'higher' (including men). Bonhoeffer's discussion of marriage as a mandate seems to be more about conserving static social status rather than responding to Christ's living encounter in the world, especially when considered in relation to his androcentric, patriarchal and gender essentialism discussed in the previous section.

Above and Below in Marriage

Bonhoeffer states that God's commandment seeks to encounter human beings within an earthly relationship of authority, and this relationship has an order which is 'clearly determined by above and below.'⁶⁸⁹ The bearers of a divine mandate become vicarious representatives, with authorisation by God. Because of this, Bonhoeffer says, an 'irrevocable above and below'⁶⁹⁰ is constituted. The bearers of the office have authority over the world, bestowed upon them through God's commandment. They receive this authority from above (God), but it directs their earthly relations below (in the world).

There are by necessity, Bonhoeffer says, those who are in positions of higher authority, and those who are in lower positions. Such relationships in a mandate are sustained and preserved in and through Christ alone. As Guth states, Bonhoeffer's central ethic of *Stellvertretung* or vicarious representative action assumes 'asymmetries of power in ethical action and orders of authority for the mandates to become concrete.'⁶⁹¹ But because Bonhoeffer does not explicitly discuss 'how these structures of power and authority might change, his ethics tend toward the conservation of existing social systems.'⁶⁹² This becomes particularly apparent in his discussion of marriage.

Although Bonhoeffer emphasises that the order of relations in a divine mandate are not identical with earthly power because they are constituted through God's commandment in Christ alone, his notion of divinely decreed hierarchy in the world cannot easily be digested without further examination. Indeed, although saying that mandates do not rely on historical contingency, Bonhoeffer does say that God's command '*always seeks to encounter human beings within an earthly relationship of authority, within an order that is clearly determined by above and below.*'⁶⁹³ What is unclear is whether that authority, namely the ordering of above and below, always remains the same. If so, Bonhoeffer is straying into the preservation of hierarchical structures of power.

⁶⁸⁹ DBWE 6:391; DBW 6:394-395. The German here is '*unaufhebbar*' meaning irrevocable. It can also mean the opposed pair can't be raised up to a higher synthesis (sublimated), which Bonhoeffer may also intend.

⁶⁹⁰ DBWE 6:391; DBW 6:394.

⁶⁹¹ Guth, 'To See from Below', p. 133.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ DBWE 6:391; DBW 6: 394-395.

Bonhoeffer attempts to protect mandates from any abuse of power by saying that the above and below in a divine mandate *belong together*. The one in power does not simply control the one below. Instead,

Master and servant owe one another the respect that springs from their respective participation in God's mandate. Abuse of being below is equal to and just as frequent as the abuse of being above that inflicts injury on the person below. Apart from personal misconduct, the abuse of being above and being below is inevitable when the grounding of both in God's mandate is no longer recognized.⁶⁹⁴

According to Bonhoeffer, master and servant, dominant and subordinate, have the same obligation. Both of their roles are constituted in their being oriented toward one another through Christ, receiving and encountering one another through Christ. Abuse of *either* role nullifies participation in the divine mandate.

Bonhoeffer insists that 'being above... [is] limited in a threefold way, each of which works differently. It is limited by God who issues the commission, by the other mandates, and by the relation to those below... these limits at the same time also safeguard being above. This safeguard serves to encourage the exercise of the divine mandate, just as the limit is not to transgress it. Safeguard and limit are two sides of the same coin.'⁶⁹⁵ Here, Bonhoeffer's words remind us of those used in *Creation and Fall*, of humans representing the freedom-for but also the boundary of the other.⁶⁹⁶ I would argue, however, that it is one thing for persons to represent a freedom and boundary to one another in participation with Christ's reality, but it becomes potentially treacherous when applied to a role or mandate, especially in the relationship of superior and subordinate.

When we place Bonhoeffer's concept of above and below within his broader promotion of divinely instituted patriarchal structures, the danger becomes clear. In *Sanctorum Communio*, as we saw above, Bonhoeffer suggests that human difference is created by God. Although all are equal in the eyes of God, especially with regard to salvation, one cannot seek to promote egalitarianism in community, because God has created human beings to be different.⁶⁹⁷ Patriarchal relations in marriage, the man being above and the woman being below is therefore, for Bonhoeffer, in accordance with and in protection of God's created reality.

⁶⁹⁴ DBWE 6:391-392; DBW 6:395.

⁶⁹⁵ DBWE 6:394; DBW 6:398.

⁶⁹⁶ DBWE 3:98-99; DBW 3:92-93.

⁶⁹⁷ See discussion earlier in this case study, pp. 148-153.

A woman ought to embrace her created subordination in accordance with her created nature. More than this, as Bonhoeffer says in his concept of above and below, for a woman to *reject her status as subordinate* would be to reject God's divinely instituted mandate: because 'abuse of being below is equal to and just as frequent as the abuse of being above.'⁶⁹⁸

Bonhoeffer is clear in his discussion of the mandates that the relationship of above and below is expressed in family relations. Van Eyden points out, for example, that parents are representatives for – above – the child they have brought into the world. Bonhoeffer, however, speaks only in *Ethics* of 'father and child', 'father and son', 'father and family' and 'fatherhood' in this relationship.⁶⁹⁹ The mother is not mentioned. Although Bonhoeffer does not explicitly state that the mother is also subordinate to the father in the family unit, we can infer from our consideration of the broader treatment of women in Bonhoeffer materials that this is exactly what he intends. We see this in his discussion of patriarchy explored in *Sanctorum Communio*, his discussion of the husband as priest in his reflection on 1 Timothy 2:8-9, and in his fictional character of Klara. His most explicit comments regarding the subordination of women in marriage, however, are found in his marriage sermon written for Eberhard and Renate Bethge in 1943, especially relevant to our discussion because of his description of their marriage as 'an order.'⁷⁰⁰

In the sermon, Bonhoeffer explains,

*God establishes an order [Ordnung], within which you are able to live together in marriage.*⁷⁰¹

"Wives be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives" (Col. 3). With your marriage, you establish a home. This requires an order [Ordnung], and this order [Ordnung] is so important that it is established by God himself, since without it everything would be in disarray. In everything you are free to establish your home, but in one thing you are bound: the wife is to be subject to her husband, and the husband is to love his wife. Thus God gives to husband and wife the honor that belongs to each of them, it is the wife's honor to serve the husband, to be his helpmate, as the creation story puts it. Likewise,

⁶⁹⁸ DBWE 6:391-392; DBW 6:395.

⁶⁹⁹ DBWE 6:257-258, 269, 375; DBW 6:257, 268-269, 378. Interesting also is the equation here of responsibility in fatherhood and being a statesman, both in the masculine in DBWE 6:269/DBW 6:268-269; cf. van Eyden, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Understanding of Male and Female', p. 202.

⁷⁰⁰ DBWE 8:84; DBW 8:76.

⁷⁰¹ It is interesting here Bonhoeffer says '*Gott gründet eine Ordnung, in der ihr in der Ehe miteinander leben könnt*' DBW 8:76. Marriage is described as an *order*. And yet in his description of the mandates in DBW 6:54-55 Bonhoeffer says he *avoids speaking of mandates as orders* because of their character as divinely imposed tasks as opposed to determinate forms of being: 'Wir sprechen von göttlichen Mandaten statt von göttlichen Ordnungen, weil damit der Charakter des göttlichen Auftrages gegenüber dem einer Seinsbestimmung deutlicher heraustritt,' DBW 6:54-55. Hence, even in the *language* used, Bonhoeffer describes marriage in a way that contradicts his *own approach to mandates* and theology of life in response vs. determinate forms of being.

it is the husband's honor to sincerely love his wife... Times and conditions are unhealthy when the wife's ambition is to be like the husband, and when the husband considers the wife merely a toy of his freedom and desire for power.⁷⁰²

Bonhoeffer here demonstrates his understanding of the patriarchal ordering in the marriage mandate. Marriage is an 'order', established by and directed to God. In everything, the woman is free except she is 'bound' to, is a 'helpmate' and is to 'serve' her husband. She is, to use Bonhoeffer's terms, *below* her husband, divinely instituted in the marriage mandate. The husband is to love his wife, as his serving helper. He is to respect her, so as not to abuse his position of being above, but the fact remains that God places him above her in a patriarchal relationship, and this hierarchy is to be established, maintained, and not changed. Indeed, times and conditions become 'unhealthy' if an attempt is made by either spouse to change their above or below status. Marriage for Bonhoeffer, therefore, includes an ordering of above and below between spouses. This is not an affront to the honour of the wife, Bonhoeffer says. Indeed, her being subject to her husband *is exactly the honour* that belongs to her, explicitly showing, Dahill says, that Bonhoeffer's 'model for marriage is not a peer relationship. The norm is instead female subordination, in which the woman's 'honor' is found.'⁷⁰³

Bonhoeffer goes on to say that it is the beginning 'of the disintegration of and decay of all the orders of human life when the wife's service is considered a demotion, indeed, an affront to her honor, and when the undivided love of a husband for his wife is considered weakness or even stupidity.'⁷⁰⁴ It would seem that Bonhoeffer does not want the wife's service to be considered a demotion or as dishonourable – and yet at the same time, there seems to be no potential or possibility to *change* the role of the wife, regardless of hers – or anyone else's – feelings on that role. She is to accept her status as fixed within the order of marriage, for to deny the honour of it would not only be a rejection of God's order and therefore a sin against God's creation, but also, Bonhoeffer says somewhat dramatically, 'the disintegration' and 'decay of all the orders of human life.'⁷⁰⁵

Bonhoeffer continues:

The place to which God has assigned the wife is the home of the husband. While most people today have forgotten what a home can mean, for others of us it has become especially clear in our own time. In the midst of the world, the home is a realm of its own, a fortress amid the

⁷⁰² DBWE 8:84-85; DBW 8:76, discussed in Dahill, 'There's Some Contradiction Here', pp. 63-64; Guth, 'To See from Below', p. 134; McBride, 'Bonhoeffer and Feminist Theologies', pp. 367-368; Muers 'Anthropology', p. 207.

⁷⁰³ Dahill, 'There's Some Contradiction Here', p. 64.

⁷⁰⁴ DBWE 8:85; DBW 8:76.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

storms of time, a refuge, indeed, a sanctuary, it is not built on the shaky ground of the changing courses of public and private life, but it rests in God, which means that God has given it its own meaning and value, its own nature and right, its own purpose and dignity. It is established by God in the world – despite what may happen there – as a place of peace, quietness, joy, love, purity, discipline, reverence, obedience, tradition, and, in all of these, happiness. It is the wife's vocation and happiness to build this world within the world for the husband and to be active there. Blessed is she if she recognizes the greatness and richness of this her vocation and task. The realm of the wife is not what is new but what endures, not what changes but what remains constant, not what is loud but what is silent, not words but action, not giving orders but persuading, not desiring but possessing – and all this infused with and sustained by the love of her husband.⁷⁰⁶

The woman's place is her husband's home, which should not be seen as a devaluation for the woman, but as part of God's gift, a place with its own destiny and dignity. There she receives her task and destiny.

What interests me particularly in the above passage, however, is the seemingly *timeless* and permanent nature of this order. Bonhoeffer describes the home (which is identified almost entirely synonymously with the woman's role) as being 'a realm of its own' outside of the 'storms of time.'⁷⁰⁷ It exists not 'on the shaky ground of the changing courses of public and private life, but it rests in God.'⁷⁰⁸ Not only does Bonhoeffer say marriage is timeless, but he then identifies the realm a woman creates as possessing abstract qualities – that it is constant, silent, not giving orders but persuading, not desiring but possessing etc. Bonhoeffer appears here to have taken a *contingent* structure of his society, marriage as understood in patriarchal culture, and has applied to it a permanent nature, as divinely instituted by God.

In the section above, we explored Bonhoeffer's gender essentialism, of women seemingly having no individuated nature, no variety of vocation, and no unmediated relationship with God. This essentialism is seen again in Bonhoeffer's discussion here. All wives have the *same role*; they are to be the subordinate helpmate of their husband, to build a home for him, and that home is to be enduring, constant, and silent. One wonders, however, whether it is just the *realm of the wife* or the wife *herself* who is to have these qualities. How, for example, does a "realm" 'not give orders' and 'be silent' if it is not in fact the wife who is to possess these qualities? Bonhoeffer is therefore not only giving the *mandate* of marriage timeless, abstract qualities – but is also essentialising the nature of *wifehood* itself. (It is of note, for example, that the husband does not

⁷⁰⁶ DBWE 8:85; DBW 8:76-77.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

receive the same treatment. He is to love and protect the wife and be in the realm she creates, but no other qualities are given to him personally. Instead, his status as a Christian with varied vocations in the world⁷⁰⁹, responding to Christ in reality is respected – unlike the woman.)

And yet, Bonhoeffer says in his *Ethics* that mandates are constituted from *above* and should not therefore be historically contingent. Mandates ought not exist for their own fulfilment but are to discern and respond to God's word as command *in time*.⁷¹⁰ In eternalising the vocation of the woman in the role of the wife, Bonhoeffer therefore contradicts his own broader understanding of the divine mandates.

Indeed, in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer stresses that central to a Christian ethic is '*participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*'.⁷¹¹ How can a marriage, as an order of Christ, be able to respond to the concrete encounter of Christ today, if it is made static by fixed, abstract notions of its apparent nature? I would argue that Bonhoeffer's approach to marriage and the patriarchal ordering of society is blinded by his own views on the historical contingency of marriage. We must ask why we ought to accept women 'possessing' a position and kingdom timelessly, if elsewhere Bonhoeffer claims that Christian mandates should never be universally sanctioned positions, and Christian personhood is something that should never be possessed entirely, but is formed and reformed in response to Christ?

Re-placing Bonhoeffer in encounter

A solution to Bonhoeffer's misstep is found precisely by re-placing his thought within his broader approach to Christian life in active discernment of Christ's encounter and how the mandates *should* function as he describes elsewhere. As Guth states, Bonhoeffer's theological and ethical approach, with 'its accompanying emphasis on discernment invites such revision [of his anti-feminist narrative]'.⁷¹² Focusing on Christian accountability and response to the world in time is, indeed, something, somewhat ironically, that Bonhoeffer *shares* with many feminist scholars.⁷¹³ Tanner explicitly states, for example, that an ethic of justice includes 'skills of

⁷⁰⁹ The man is 'at the same time worker, spouse and citizen' DBWE 6:73; DBW 6:59 vs. the wife whose vocation is to *be a spouse*.

⁷¹⁰ Church chapter pp. 113-118.

⁷¹¹ DBWE 6:55; DBW 6:40. Emphasis mine.

⁷¹² Guth, Karen V., 'To See from Below', pp. 134-135.

⁷¹³ Emilie M. Townes and D. Hopkins, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007), pp. 2-3; Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, p. 1; Beverly Wildung Harrison, 'The New Consciousness of Women: A Socio-Political Resource', *CrossCurrents*, 24.4 (1975), pp. 447-448; Beverly Wildung Harrison, Wildung Harrison, Beverly, *Making the*

judgment (that establish the manner of application of principles, without themselves being directed according to principles.)'⁷¹⁴ These are the very skills Bonhoeffer mentions as imperative for discerning the will of God – of understanding, observing, and emotionally discerning by engaging with the particular.

Knowledge of and life in response to Christ, Bonhoeffer writes, is a living reality. What matters, as we said above, 'is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*.'⁷¹⁵ The focus on what Christ says *today* leads Bonhoeffer in his broader corpus to reject timeless static ethics in favour of a life of active discernment. If we are to take seriously the task of ethics as obeying the commandment of God within the divine mandates, we must therefore assert that the mandate of marriage *can, should* and likely *does* look different today than it did in Bonhoeffer's own time.

Robin Lovin expands upon this.

The reality which guides our actions encompasses both situation and heritage in the not yet visible reality of Christ, in whom alone the multiplicity of our obligations can be unified. In this Christocentric view of reality, no ordering of the mandates can claim the status of the original 'natural' model to which all subsequent arrangements must return.⁷¹⁶

What is important for Christian actions is whether they are unified in the not-yet visible reality of Christ. Christians seek Christ daily, listening to, and discerning Christ's will. No mandate can ever claim any universal or 'natural' status. The task of the divine mandates is re-formation (re-forming themselves to Christ's personhood through daily encounter) and not restoration.⁷¹⁷

Therefore, Lovin says, when a mandate 'is disrupted by historical change or deliberate evil, there can be no question of putting things back the way they were. A modern industrial society precludes the relationships between master and apprentice that served the mandates of labor and culture in the medieval guild.'⁷¹⁸ To participate in a mandate one must recognise oneself in Christ's reality, in active discernment of his word, *now* and the future to which he points. It requires living in the current world in and through Christ's new creation, as we discussed in the previous chapter.⁷¹⁹

Connections (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); Kathryn Tanner, 'The Care That Does Justice: Recent Writings in Feminist Ethics and Theology', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 24.1 (1996), p. 177.

⁷¹⁴ Guth, 'To See from Below', pp. 137; cf. Tanner, 'The Care that Does Justice', p. 177.

⁷¹⁵ DBWE 6:55; DBW 6:40.

⁷¹⁶ Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices, The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 144.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Church chapter, pp. 124-130.

Therefore, one cannot look *backwards* for clues to how a mandate should look. One can only look forward, and to how, Lovin says, Christ can 'begin to take form again in the structures of human life... This happens precisely when concrete acts of obedience are possible, when persons can meet the demands they encounter every day in work, family and citizenship, and worship without becoming hopelessly divided within themselves and without being set at odds with their neighbours. Just how this is possible cannot be determined by specific patterns from the past, any more than it can be settled by reference to general rules.'⁷²⁰ Instead, re-formation occurs where mandates, and individuals therein, are free to do their work in *present conditions*.

So understood, mandates are taken up into the ever-unfolding revelation of Christ in the world. Mandates do not exist for themselves, for their own self-preservation, or for the preservation of a pattern of order. They exist to continually discern the reality of Christ, and to conform themselves to that reality. This re-formation does not just take place through radical societal change – for example, a reaction against a totalitarian state – but also in quieter ways, including the emancipation of women from subordination in marriage over time.

Looking at Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church in *Life Together*, (the church being a mandate), one wonders how Bonhoeffer can justify what he writes about marriage alongside statements there that God does not allow idealistic notions in the building up of a church community:

Christian community is not an ideal but a divine reality... by sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks...for God is not a God of emotionalism but the God of truth.⁷²¹

If, according to Bonhoeffer, God will not allow a Christian community to be fuelled by 'emotionalism', God logically will likewise not condone such notions to operate in the marriage mandate, either. In the same way that 'the bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting,'⁷²² we should expect the mandate of marriage to exist only in response to God's divine encounter – rather than through dreamlike projections of domestic bliss. As Bonhoeffer says elsewhere, we do not know what constitutes divine reality other than encounter. We cannot know an appropriate action or ethic in advance, other than through God's specific commandment. Bonhoeffer would do well to listen to his own

⁷²⁰ Ibid. p. 145.

⁷²¹ DBWE 5:35; DBW 5:23.

⁷²² DBWE 5:37; DBW 5:25.

theology against what seem to be blind spots of sentimentalism, and instead take seriously his *own ethical demands*.

A Question of Vocabulary

When Bonhoeffer uses the phrases above and below,⁷²³ he sets them in relation to *divine* reality.⁷²⁴ God's commandment is revealed in Jesus Christ which embraces all of human reality. As we have explored in the Agency chapter, Christ chooses to be free for others, bringing persons into conformation with his freedom. As Christ is free-for creation, Christians are conformed to his freedom-for others in encounter.⁷²⁵ Above and below should therefore be understood in this way.⁷²⁶ Being above or below is not a position that a person attains for themselves. Rather, both positions exist only in their continued participation in Christ's reality. A master has as much obligation to stay in her place and act ethically in accordance with Christ's command as a servant does, because both belong in relationship through Christ's reality. Within the mandates, Christians are created to be with, among and for one another in conformation with Christ. The master is God's representative to the servant; but, so too, the servant is a representative to the master. Both belong in a relationship of freedom and boundary in accordance with Christ.

There is, therefore, true reciprocity between those in relation in the divine mandates, whether they are above or below, for their "above-ness" or "below-ness" depends not on that person, but their responsibility to and for others in conformation with Christ. This, however, is not immediately obvious from the hierarchical vocabulary used. Although one can perhaps accept mandated relationships exist through conformation to Christ's reality and freedom-for, and that it is not the *human position* that matters but *re-formation* to Christ's reality, the hierarchical vocabulary remaining in Bonhoeffer's ethic remains awkward.

It is my belief that above and below should be replaced by 'with', 'for' and 'against' embedded in Bonhoeffer's own language of *Miteinander*, *Füreinander* and *Gegeneinander*.⁷²⁷ As Bonhoeffer says in his earliest formal theological work, the community of the church is made up of social acts, which disclose the structure and nature of the church. The structure and nature of the church, he says, can be summarised by two interrelated things:

- (1) Church-community and church members being structurally 'with-each-other' [*Miteinander*] as appointed by God and (2) the members' active 'being-for-each-other' [*Füreinander*] and the

⁷²³ DBWE 6:391; DBW 6:394.

⁷²⁴ DBWE 6:391-392; DBW 6:394-395.

⁷²⁵ Agency chapter, pp. 39-45.

⁷²⁶ Bonhoeffer's use of *Obrigkeits* is also relevant to my critique here of *oben/unten*.

⁷²⁷ For example, DBWE 1:178; DBW 1:117; DBWE 6:393-394, 395; DBW 6:397, 399.

principle of vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]... In reality, however, one is possible only through the other.⁷²⁸

It is only by being *with* another, in relation with another person, community or mandate, and bringing Christ's word in encounter – which will involve encouraging, debating, agreeing, and disagreeing – that we can then also be *for* others as vicarious representatives of Christ. We can only be free-*for* another, as we are simultaneously *with* them, receiving them through Christ as mediator, being encountered by them, and encountering them with Christ's word. A community of freedom-*for* only continues to exist as it is received through Christ. As Bonhoeffer says, 'one is possible only through the other.' It is in this relation of being *with* and *for* others that we can also, when necessary, be against them [*gegeneinander*], holding them and their continued conformation to Christ accountable.

We can therefore understand relationships of persons, communities and between mandates as substantiated in this same *with*, *for* and *against*. When we come to see others through Christ, as those we are made free-*for*, we simultaneously make them our boundary and limit, our brother and sister, as others who live *with* us and encounter *against* us as Christ's word. Our freedom-*for* requires our continued living with and being encountered by Christ through the human word.

⁷²⁸ DBWE 1:178; DBW 1:117

Conclusion

It is in the spirit of the *Füreinander*, *Miteinander*, and *Gegeneinander* of the previous section that I view this case study in its entirety. Bonhoeffer's notion of Christian life and personhood are ecclesially located, as life lived in response to Christ's encounter through the human other to whom I am directed. It is in community that the divine words of judgement and grace are given and received.

Bonhoeffer's theology is written in living response to his own encounter and discernment of Christ, seeing himself and his materials located within Christ's unfolding reality and relationship with the world. It therefore feels appropriate to bring my human No in judgement of Bonhoeffer's theological misstep, in acknowledgement of my own witness and freedom-for the current needs of the world, including women or others living in oppressive structures. I do this as I simultaneously bring my Yes of what I believe Christ's freedom-for requires of us today. In so doing, I place myself *in community with* Bonhoeffer, bringing my human encounter *with, for,* and *against* his theology, placing myself in relation with his theology, in the hope that through this encounter, Christ's own No and Yes can be heard.

Chapter 3: Suffering

Introduction:

The first two chapters of this thesis (and their associated case studies) have focused on two sides of one theological coin: the person and the church community, respectively, and their relationship to one another through Christ. I have explored how Bonhoeffer's total theological approach requires consideration of his Christology, his ecclesiology, and his theological anthropology, and their foundational interrelatedness in Christ. One becomes a Christian person through being encountered by Christ's call, which precisely means becoming conformed to Christ's freedom-for others in community. This does not happen once, but throughout life in active discernment for Christ's word through interactions with others. In encounter, we hear Christ's divine No of judgement where we err, and the divine Yes calling us into re-conformation to his personhood. Life is lived under the divine No and Yes, in conformation to Christ's freedom-for others.

This chapter and the next represent a slight gear shift, in that they do not focus on the person and the church and their Christic interrelatedness *explicitly*, but instead focus on two important related themes and how these are also understood through Bonhoeffer's Christology, ecclesiology and theological anthropology, of Christian life constituted under the divine No and Yes.

Suffering is an example of a topic in Bonhoeffer's work that presents us with initial problems, with apparent inconsistencies in the corpus, and worrisome potential conclusions. Suffering, as I will show, is a theme that is clarified when understood in the Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology framework that we have explored. This chapter also represents an opportunity to further explore, apply, and deepen our understanding of that framework.

Suffering is a key aspect of Christian discipleship and experience for Bonhoeffer. To become a disciple of Christ, one must die to one's previous sinful self in order to begin a new life in Christ's community. This 'death' involves suffering because it involves the killing of the old self, a struggle against sin, and taking the difficult step toward something new and uncomfortable:

The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ.⁷²⁹

⁷²⁹ DBWE 4: 87; DBW 4:80-81.

Former things are left behind, when the disciple is called to 'step out' of their previous existence. This involves the throwing away of previous securities, relationships, and knowledge, and stepping into 'complete insecurity (which in truth is absolute security and protection with Jesus).'⁷³⁰ The death of the old self is necessary for birth into a new life in Christ.

Suffering, however, is not only imagined as the once-and-for-all death of the sinful self. Christian discipleship is certainly *initiated* through the suffering and death which come with baptism,⁷³¹ but discipleship also involves a daily continued struggle 'against sin... each day, with its temptations by the flesh and the world,'⁷³² involving suffering. As Kelly and Burton Nelson state, Bonhoeffer's concept of discipleship consists in 'the daily struggle'⁷³³ of Christian forbearance and mutual forgiveness, bearing the community of other Christians, and taking on the sins of the world. The disciple dies once and for all to their sin in Christ's encounter but, because the individual remains in the world, they must continue to struggle with sin, suffer the ridicule of the world, and bear others as they travel on the 'narrow'⁷³⁴ path of discipleship.

Suffering has a significant role to play in the life of a disciple. What is less clear is the *status* of suffering for Bonhoeffer. Does suffering have value? Is suffering somehow instrumental in becoming a disciple or necessary for leading a good Christian life? Is suffering merely *endured* in discipleship or ought it also be *welcomed* and viewed as somehow beneficial? In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer speaks about costly grace. He says,

Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field, for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again... the door at which one has to knock... It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner. Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's Son... and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God... Grace is costly, because it forces

⁷³⁰ DBWE 4:58; DBW 4:46.

⁷³¹ Bonhoeffer uses call and baptism interchangeably DBWE 4:57-76; DBW 4:45-68 vs. DBWE 4:205-212; DBW 4:219-226.

⁷³² DBWE 4:88; DBW 4:81.

⁷³³ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 136.

⁷³⁴ Matt 7:13-23 in DBWE 4:175; DBW 4:183.

people under the yoke of following Jesus Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, 'My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'⁷³⁵

Costly grace is the grace of receiving encounter from Christ, responding, and beginning a new life in conformation to his person. This experience is the most precious thing in the world, for which one would go sell everything they have. Costly grace – as the name suggests – is also costly. The price involves suffering and death. It costs people their lives and separates them from their previous existence, wants, and desires. It is therefore not something entered into lightly. To receive costly grace is to expect associated suffering.

What is not clear, however, is whether the 'cost' itself, i.e., the suffering, has inherent value. There are a few alternative interpretations available for the material above:

The first interpretation is that we take joy only in God's grace and in God's grace alone. Grace may come out of the costly suffering but there is no value or joy associated in experiencing the cost itself. The cost becomes eventually worth it but *only because* the grace of God absolutely eclipses any previous suffering.

The second related interpretation available is close in nuance. Here we can face the cost of suffering and *see some associated value or joy within it* but only through the expectation of the grace we will eventually receive. The cost is real and painful, but we willingly go through and experience some goodness within it – because we know that the good we will eventually obtain outweighs the current suffering. The grace is costly, '*because it calls to discipleship*'; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.' The grace makes the suffering worth it and endurable. One can tear their eye out because of the knowledge the grace is worth the cost; the cost therefore gains some associated value through what it points to.

However, we need to raise the possibility of a third interpretation; that Christians should take *joy in the suffering itself*. This could become the case if we understand that through paying a cost, we are somehow united to the God who paid it first, or that suffering is in some way instrumental in receiving grace.

What we need to explore is exactly what Bonhoeffer thinks of 'the cost of discipleship,'⁷³⁶ and whether suffering has inherent value. In other words, we need to understand which of the three

⁷³⁵ DBWE 4:44-45; DBW 4:30-31.

⁷³⁶ The previous English translation of *Discipleship*.

understandings above are implied in his material, especially whether the third interpretation is present. Suffering and joy are brought very closely together in the passage quoted above, which could make the third interpretation – of suffering as value laden – a plausible one.

For example, suffering in Bonhoeffer's vision above is not simply passed through once and then done away with, replaced by grace which entirely surpasses it. Instead, the disciple must *continue to knock on the door* for grace again and again throughout their life. A logical implication of this would suggest that the disciple passes through suffering again and again, too. To what extent, though, does this mean that the Christian ought to seek *suffering again and again*? If we are continually seeking grace, and this grace is costly, are we not then to a certain extent *also seeking suffering*? And does this not ultimately give suffering some instrumental or value laden role in discipleship?

Bonhoeffer finishes the section of material above with the phrase '*Grace is costly, because it forces people under the yoke of following Jesus Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*'⁷³⁷ Both suffering and grace are part of the yoke of Jesus Christ. The disciple is placed under the yoke of Christ in enduring suffering; but this very yoke *is also* the gentle yoke of Christ's grace. This could conflate suffering and grace. As grace is Christ's yoke, so too becomes the associated suffering. There is not one without the other. If the two are conflated into one, there is a danger of giving them the same theological status, where suffering becomes positive, as grace is positive.

Bonhoeffer suggests that the suffering involved in discipleship occurs within Christ's 'easy yoke'. Suffering is therefore lessened because everything is endured in close proximity to Christ; the disciple shares Christ's sufferings, humiliations, and bearing the world's sin in closeness to and in conformation with him. If suffering is borne *with* and in conformation *to* Christ, however, suffering is in danger of becoming a signifier of faithful following. Suffering goes from being something endured on the way to grace, to becoming a sign of grace in and of itself, as it is endured in *proximity to Christ*. If suffering becomes a sign of closeness to Christ, this belittles the experience of suffering for those who cannot find Christ within it. It also risks generalising suffering, or ascribing meaning to suffering where there is none, as I will explain in more detail within the chapter.

⁷³⁷ DBWE 4:44-45; DBW 4:30-31. Emphasis mine.

The further danger here is that suffering not only becomes a sign of closeness to Christ, as something endured in proximity to him – but becomes interpreted as a tool to *bring us into proximity* with Christ. Such an interpretation would not only instrumentalise suffering but also sacralise it as a method of receiving Christ's justifying grace.

This chapter will explore the status of suffering in the context of Christian life for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially assessing to what extent he falls into what we have defined above as the 'third interpretation' of suffering being an inherently valuable experience for Christians, rather than something borne only for the sake of grace. To begin this assessment, I will be asking to what extent Bonhoeffer appears to theodice suffering, instrumentalise suffering, and generalise suffering.

In the second half of this chapter, I will argue that, while Bonhoeffer's material may seem to promote suffering as a positive Christian experience, it is avoided when his presentation of suffering is placed within his broader Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, and life in response to Christ's divine word(s). I will show this in three interrelated ways.

First, I will attend to Bonhoeffer's concept of the 'death' of the Christian experienced in the call to discipleship. I will demonstrate that it is the death of one's old life that proves instrumental in becoming a Christian, not the associated suffering.

Second, I will explore Bonhoeffer's understanding of the penultimate and the ultimate. According to Bonhoeffer, when we are encountered by Christ, our previous existence becomes relative to Christ's ultimate word. Encountering Christ, we realise that everything in the world is created in and through God, only existing in relation to Christ's justifying work. However, as we continue to live, the world *continues to exist* and the experience of suffering therefore must not be swept away. We live in the present, continually waiting for Christ's ultimate word to come to us again and again until the end of time. This argument will feel familiar from our discussion of life under Christ's No and Yes in previous chapters; of living in the world in Christ's unfolding reality (apocalypticism), and discerning Christ's word again and again in daily life.⁷³⁸

An understanding of daily discernment for Christ's ultimate word is important for our understanding of suffering. Suffering is a fact of existence in the world. Christians live in the present in the faithful hope that experiences, such as suffering, *will once again become relative or*

⁷³⁸ For example, the Agency chapter, pp. 46-51; Church chapter, 124-130.

open – penultimate – to Christ’s ultimate word of grace. We can therefore witness suffering and attend to it in all its horror, whilst simultaneously hoping that it will become relative to Christ’s word – but never until Christ’s word comes to us again. However, we do not know *how* or *when* this will take place until Christ’s word encounters us. Until that time, suffering remains what it is; painful, isolating, and diminishing. For Bonhoeffer, there are conditions which make it harder to receive Christ’s ultimate word of grace. Suffering closes us off from Christ’s encounter. Christians are therefore to alleviate the suffering in the world, in the hope that this work can be penultimate (open to) to transformation by Christ’s ultimate word.

Finally, I will place suffering in the context of the church community and consider the consequences of this for understanding suffering. For Bonhoeffer, the image of God in humanity is to be free for others, to bear one another and live for and with one another. Christ is the ultimate vicarious representative of humanity, and we are called into responsible action in conformation with him, bearing and suffering for and with the world. This means Christians are called precisely *into the world* on behalf of Christ – attending to, bearing with, and helping others. Far from ignoring the pains of suffering or placing them within a grander positive narrative of Christ’s gracious yoke, Bonhoeffer stresses that disciples are to attend to suffering in the world and to work within it. We must understand, however, that according to Bonhoeffer’s Christology and related ecclesiology and theological anthropology, the person does not become a Christian in isolation. We become Christians *only in community*. Therefore, suffering needs to be understood in the context of the Christian person in their community. We suffer, but this takes place in the social context of the church. In such an understanding, suffering becomes something taken in and borne within the *whole community*. I can feel and experience my suffering, while others in my community bear it for me, and vice versa. We can look at suffering’s place alongside the grace of the church, whilst also attending to its horrors on an individual level.

The chapter will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of suffering requires for it to be placed within his interrelated Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, and notion of Christian life in discernment for Christ’s ultimate divine word (the No and the Yes). Exploring this framework with regard to suffering will also be an opportunity for us to deepen our understanding of Bonhoeffer’s total theological approach so far, in relation to important aspects of Christian life. Before exploring Bonhoeffer’s approach to suffering in the context of his broader Christology and related ecclesiology and theological anthropology, I will first signpost the dangers of theodicing, instrumentalising or generalising suffering. I will demonstrate how some of Bonhoeffer’s passages look at risk of falling into such traps. Then, by bringing suffering into conversation with Bonhoeffer’s broader theology, I will show how I believe he avoids these risks.

Is Bonhoeffer a Theodist?

Christians throughout the world grapple with suffering, pain, isolation, hopelessness, dereliction, and evil daily.⁷³⁹ These experiences by necessity raise questions such as how one can continue to believe in an all-loving God, who has justified the world through the actions of Christ on the cross. The attempt to answer such a question is known as a 'theodicy'.

One of the most well-known articulations of theodicy is made by Hume in the mouth of Philo.⁷⁴⁰

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?⁷⁴¹

As Tilley⁷⁴², Swinton⁷⁴³, MacIntyre,⁷⁴⁴ and others state,⁷⁴⁵ theodicy is a thoroughly modern undertaking.⁷⁴⁶ It sits well within the enlightenment culture of seeking explanations to problems. In such a culture, theodicy appears as a necessity, where questions of God, evil and suffering need to be dealt with in the same way as other dimensions of modern life. The problem of evil is, as Swinton says, 'we assume like every other problem we encounter: *solvable*.'⁷⁴⁷

The theodicy 'project' was initiated in the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century, receiving its first definitive outing in 1702,⁷⁴⁸ then being coined as a term by Leibniz as the title of his 1710 work.⁷⁴⁹ The work attempts to explain how the present world, with all its evil, is the best

⁷³⁹ Suffering is not just something we experience but is also something 'human imaginative activity is bound up with', Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁴⁰ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. by Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), part 10, p. 74; cf. discussion in Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020), p. 68.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

⁷⁴² Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000).

⁷⁴³ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007).

⁷⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?', in *Rationality*, ed. by Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 62-77.

⁷⁴⁵ Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*; Karen Kilby, 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology', in *Game Over?: Reconsidering Eschatology*, ed. by Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler, Mariel Mazzocco, Ghislain Waterlot, (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017), pp. 279-292; Karen Kilby, 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering', *Modern Theology*, 36.1, pp. 92-104.

⁷⁴⁶ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*; Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Pamela Cooper-White, 'Suffering', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2011), pp. 21-31; Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*; Sandra G. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁷⁴⁷ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, p. 2

⁷⁴⁸ With the publication of *De origine Mali* by Anglican Archbishop, William King. Pierre Bayle and G. W. F. Leibniz then responded to the work, as referenced in Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, p. 2.

⁷⁴⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952); cf. Nicholas Hadsell, 'Leibniz's Horrendous and Unthinkable World: A

of all possible worlds. Rahner looks at other attempts at theodicy, such as the claims that evil is the natural side effect of the evolving world,⁷⁵⁰ that suffering is the effect of our sinful freedom,⁷⁵¹ or that suffering has a purpose of trial and education.⁷⁵² The last of these sounds very much like Hick's Irenaean theodicy, where evil and pain are necessary in order to guide humans toward becoming ultimately worthy of God.⁷⁵³ Human beings are created at a distance from God and develop through experiences of evil. Indeed:

God has set us in a world containing unpredictable contingencies and dangers, in which unexpected and undeserved calamities may occur to anyone; because only in such a world can mutual caring and love be elicited.⁷⁵⁴

The logical implication being that, if we did not have evil, we could not learn to love God.

Theodicy therefore attempts to provide an *explanation* to evil and meaningless suffering, in order that people can hold onto, or indeed justify, the possibility of a loving God in the midst of pain, often using complex philosophical and theological arguments as justification.⁷⁵⁵

The problem is that theodicy, as seen above in Hick's case, can make evil seem to not *really be evil at all*. A harmonious picture is presented of God and God's consistent love but is done so through painting an unreal depiction of the horrors the world faces. This not only does damage to one's relationship with a supposedly all-loving God, but also to the experience of suffering itself. To coin a term, it is essentially a form of theological gaslighting.

As Tilley says, theodicies, far from solving evil, actually *create it*.⁷⁵⁶ They are suspect theologically and pastorally. They are incorrect theologically, as evil becomes discussed as an abstract general concept, allowing us to avert our gaze from the particular evils of the world.⁷⁵⁷ Many theodicies can also be logically explained 'without reference to any particular narratives, without any discussion of incarnation, Christology, Trinity... theistic belief in general whose coherence they are exploring or defending.'⁷⁵⁸ The Christian God is ousted from the equation

Critique of Leibniz's "Best Possible World" Theodicy', *Heythrop Journal*, 63.1 (2022), pp. 57–63; Larry M. Jorgensen, Samuel Newlands, and Robert Merrihew Adams, *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, *Faith and Ministry* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984) pp. 198-199.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid. pp. 201-202.

⁷⁵² Ibid. p. 203.

⁷⁵³ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, p. 15.

⁷⁵⁴ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, second edition (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 50.

⁷⁵⁵ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, p. 2.

⁷⁵⁶ Because theodicies distract our attention from suffering, encouraging us to distance ourselves from the world and its evils rather than engage with them, Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, pp. 219-231.

⁷⁵⁷ Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, p. 71.

⁷⁵⁸ Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, p. 70. Of course, for Bonhoeffer, theology or ethics become abstract when not related to Christ.

and removed from traditional patterns of Christian thinking.⁷⁵⁹ Arguments from free will fail to understand human autonomy and God's agency as not in competition, or that suffering exists unattributable to human sinfulness.⁷⁶⁰ Arguments based on the idea of development or trial fail to comprehend those sufferings, for example an infant's death,⁷⁶¹ where no chance for education or development is possible. And arguments from soul-making do not correspond with Christian witness about the loving Christian God. Theodicies also fail *pastorally* because they generalise human suffering and thereby diminish individual experiences of it, which I will go into in further detail in the next section.

Bonhoeffer certainly does not provide a theodicy in the same way as the figures described above. He never presents a theodicy which justifies suffering through any abstract logical scheme, as part of a discussion of free will, the development of virtue, and certainly not soul-making. However, Bonhoeffer explicitly links suffering again and again to the nature of Christian discipleship, seemingly justifying it as necessary for conformation to Christ in the present, directed *eschatologically* to future perfect reconciliation.

Placing eschatology as the justification for present suffering, however, can be equally problematic. Eschatological glory may be presented as compensation for present suffering, therefore downplaying the horror of suffering, or presenting it as a prize for which present pain is a price worth paying. Eschatologically prescribed theodicies can do much damage to present understandings of suffering – not only diminishing the experience, but also instrumentalising it – viewing suffering as a necessity or tool to work towards glory. Eschatological justification for suffering can easily, Rahner says, imply that 'suffering is the absolutely necessary means for attaining eternal life, [and] that death under any circumstances is the sole gateway to eternal life.'⁷⁶²

For example, in the beginning of *Creation and Fall*, a relatively early text from Bonhoeffer, he says that the church 'lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims

⁷⁵⁹ Although there may be pre-enlightenment thinkers, such as Aquinas, who in sections of his *Summa Theologia* speak of God in abstraction, they were engaged in very different projects than theodicy; Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, p. 70; cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics', in *Rationality, Religious Belief & Moral Commitment*, ed. by R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁷⁶⁰ Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, pp. 73-75. More on non-competitive divine/human agency, Agency chapter, pp. 36-45.

⁷⁶¹ Rahner *Faith and Ministry*, pp. 198-203; cf. 'Rebellion', Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 236-246. Unless, compounding the horror, we are to think of the suffering of those who love and lose the infant.

⁷⁶² Rahner, *Faith and Ministry*, pp. 204-205.

its message from the end.⁷⁶³ The church understands the present state of the world through revealed knowledge of Christ's 'end' – the revelation of Christ's justifying act on the cross and the future perfection of this work eschatologically. Christ reveals the 'end' to Christians, in relation to which everything in the 'middle'⁷⁶⁴ (the present and everything that makes up our reality) is oriented. Christians therefore frame their actions, knowledge, and proclamations from this revelation. The church is given an understanding of the here and now and the various evils and sufferings within our world, through their orientation to Christ's 'end'. The Christian can view suffering in light of its eschatological end in Christ, and therefore learn to accept it, make sense or even potentially *value it* in light of this end.

Indeed, Bonhoeffer continues in *Ethics* that 'the past and future of the whole of life flow together in God's presence. The whole of the past is embraced by the word 'forgiveness'... past sin has been sunk in the depths of God's love in Jesus Christ and overcome.'⁷⁶⁵ Christian life knows itself, its sin, its sufferings to be swept up in and comprehended through Christ's reconciliation. Justification in Christ is something ultimate because it is God's word. Everything in the world therefore gains its meaning only through God's ultimate justifying word. Suffering, as a constituent part of the 'middle' is also given meaning through its relationship to this word.⁷⁶⁶

The danger is that in gaining *meaning* through the end, suffering could also gain *value* through its end in Christ. Suffering, instead of something valueless passed through, is then given inherent value as a *means* towards its eschatological end, or as a necessary condition for it. The logic could be as follows, for example: Christ passed through suffering in order to redeem the world (his end justifying the middle). If the end comes from and indeed justifies our work in the middle, Bonhoeffer's material could suggest that suffering not only fits appropriately within a narrative of crucifixion to resurrection, but is also a *necessary component*. As we will see in the second half of this chapter, however, this conclusion is avoided when suffering is set within his broader theology.

First, we must consider the second question – does Bonhoeffer generalise suffering?

⁷⁶³ DBWE 3:21; DBW 3:31.

⁷⁶⁴ For discussion of the 'middle', DBWE 3:28-35; DBW 3:27-33.

⁷⁶⁵ DBWE 6:22; DBW 6:22.

⁷⁶⁶ There is also the possibility that some suffering is *just evil*. Bonhoeffer in places construes evil as the privation of good and therefore evil will cease to have any being, as the world is reconciled to Christ. See apocalypticism in Church chapter, pp. 124-130.

Does Bonhoeffer Generalise suffering?

Kilby in 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering'⁷⁶⁷ highlights further dangers with theologising suffering. Theodicies and pastoral theologies can generalise human suffering and therefore belittle individual experience. This occurs when suffering is 'sorted' into easily digestible and understandable categories,⁷⁶⁸ by coming up with a catch-all technique for processing suffering,⁷⁶⁹ or by diminishing suffering through evasion or relativising it in reference to a confident eschatological vision.⁷⁷⁰

The issue is discussed by Kilby through consideration of the difference between first person, second person, and third person accounts of suffering. Kilby reflects upon her conversations with a community of nuns,⁷⁷¹ in which the themes of suffering and death came up frequently. There were stories of illness, emotional anguish, and the accompanying of others who were dying. Included in these stories *were* what could be called 'beautiful deaths', where in 'the midst of terrible suffering and loss there was growth and depth and reconciliation and peace; but there were also stories told... of deaths where there was not much other than depression, of meaningless loss and the deepening of family division.'⁷⁷²

Meaning in suffering may be found in the first person.⁷⁷³ As soon as we go beyond this even to the second person, the person who may witness the suffering of another, it immediately becomes problematic.⁷⁷⁴ It becomes something like:

⁷⁶⁷ Kilby, 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering', pp. 92-104.

⁷⁶⁸ Weinandy lays out forms of suffering and 'correct' corresponding Christian responses, in the final chapter of Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). Although steeped in biblical references, I agree with Kilby that the language is too 'positive, confident... nowhere counterbalanced by any suggestion that there might be some kinds of suffering for which no account or a purpose can be found, which go beyond our capacity to explain or find meaning,' Kilby, 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering', p. 94.

⁷⁶⁹ Cooper-White offers an analysis of pain and concludes that it is shared comprehension of suffering with others which makes transformation to become possible, Cooper-White, 'Suffering', pp. 21-31; cf. Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), for her exposition of Aquinas and argument of suffering being morally justified 'as antidote to permanent willed loneliness or else as therapeutic for deepened union among persons', p. 22.

⁷⁷⁰ As we criticised Bonhoeffer of potentially doing in the previous section.

⁷⁷¹ The Sisters of La Retraite

⁷⁷² Karen Kilby, 'The Seductions of Kenosis', in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. by Bernard McGinn and Karen Kilby (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), p. 168.

⁷⁷³ When one speaks about one's own pain vs. another person's pain, 'one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events,' Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: OUP, 1985), p. 4.

⁷⁷⁴ 'Whether or not the experience of suffering indeed becomes [an experience of growth and learning] depends largely on the kind of response that the victim receives from family, friends, the Church, and other institutions she/he may encounter. A supportive response will maximize the possibility for healing and new life; a nonsupportive response will to a large degree eliminate such a possibility', Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983), p. 198; cf. Fortune, 'The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective', pp. 85-91.

'I know you suffered terribly.... But now it's time for you to find meaning in it'... for me to speak to you of your suffering and presume it has meaning is in some fundamental way for me to overstep a boundary. In some instances, of course, one person can help create a space in which another may find some meaning in his or her suffering: one person can help another probe, reflect, examine, and perhaps as a result the sufferer will find value... [But] that is the limit of what I can do: I cannot find the meaning for you.⁷⁷⁵

This does not only include tactfully knowing when to speak and when to stay silent.⁷⁷⁶ It also involves not ascribing meaning even wordlessly to another's suffering. I may want to, Kilby says, because I may want to be 'relieved of some of the discomfort your suffering causes me', but this is beyond the bounds of the person accompanying the sufferer, and therefore 'I am transgressing my proper relationship to you if I succumb to this temptation.'⁷⁷⁷

If this is true at the level of the second person, at the third person, it is not for me to speculate at all on another's suffering: 'we can pray for those who suffer, we can sorrow for those who suffer, but there is no justification in finding meaning in that which damages and destroys the lives of others.'⁷⁷⁸ As Hauerwas reminds us, the question of evil and suffering posed in theodicy is a question that makes sense from anyone's place – but no one is an 'anyone.'⁷⁷⁹ We are particular people with particular contexts. It is only *in context* that the question of suffering becomes serious. We are not terribly interested in the theoretical issue of suffering; but 'we are torn apart by what is happening to real people, to those we know and love.'⁷⁸⁰ The difference in our reaction alone should tell us enough that suffering ought never to be generalisable.

Is Bonhoeffer guilty of generalising and thus diminishing the Christian experience of suffering? Again, this is a possible inference to be made particularly in his earlier works. For example, in *Discipleship* we have the following passage:

Jesus called all who are laden with various sufferings and burdens to throw off their yokes and to take his yoke upon themselves. His yoke is easy and his burden is light... Bearing the cross does not bring misery or despair. Rather, it provides refreshment and peace for our souls; it is our greatest joy. Here we are no longer laden with self-made laws and burdens, but with the yoke of him who knows us and who himself goes with us under the same yoke.

⁷⁷⁵ Kilby, 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology', p. 288.

⁷⁷⁶ Jeffry Zurheide, *When Faith Is Tested* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1997), recommends approaching the pastoral care of one in pain 'with a generous helping of silence,' p. 9.

⁷⁷⁷ Kilby, 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology,' p. 289.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁹ Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, p. 2.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

Under his yoke we are assured of his nearness and communion. It is he himself whom disciples find when they take up their cross.⁷⁸¹

In this first sentence, Bonhoeffer says Christians 'throw off their yokes' and take Christ's 'yoke upon themselves' instead. There is an exchanging of yokes, where we remove our various sufferings and receive the easier yoke of Christ. Bonhoeffer then describes the yoke of Christ as involving 'bearing the cross' which does not 'bring misery or despair', and indeed provides refreshment for our souls. This passage could imply two alternative readings:

The first interpretation is that we enter *different* sufferings when we become Christians – we exchange one type of human suffering for another. In becoming disciples, we begin to experience Christ-related suffering, involving dying to oneself, persecution for faith, and enduring a sinful world while waiting for the end. The suffering that we take on in the call is a lighter suffering because we endure it with Christ.

An alternative interpretation of this passage is that, although our sufferings remain much the same, as we remain in the world, the way we *experience suffering* changes. We are 'no longer laden with self-made laws and burdens,' even though the laws of the world still exist. Because we are with Christ, we are able to endure worldly sufferings (although the world remains the same) differently and with less pain because of our affiliation with Christ.

With either interpretation, the same worrying conclusion is implied. Encounter with Christ affects the way in which we estimate the nature of suffering. With Christ, our sufferings are taken into Christ's yoke, and Christian suffering is therefore experienced differently to someone who has not been encountered by Christ's word.

In this passage, Bonhoeffer is in danger of doing two things. First, he seems to diminish suffering, assuming that all Christian suffering can be undergone cheerfully and without our being reduced by it. Secondly, this passage seems to generalise the sufferings that a Christian experiences. In the picture this passage paints, there is no room for an alternative understanding of suffering. All Christian suffering is experienced *like this*.

Bonhoeffer continues,

The community of disciples does not shake off suffering, as if they had nothing to do with it. Instead, they bear it. In doing so, they give witness to their connection with the people

⁷⁸¹ DBWE 4:90-91; DBW 4:84.

around them... Finally, disciples will not be weakened by suffering, worn down and embittered... Instead, they bear suffering by the power of him who supports them. The disciples bear the suffering laid on them only by the power of him who bears all suffering on the cross.⁷⁸²

The obvious question to ask here is, ‘what if a Christian *is* weakened and worn down?’, or ‘what if they *do* feel they must shake off their suffering?’ Bonhoeffer’s account of Christian suffering here seems to fail on two accounts. It fails Kilby’s test of accounting for other people’s experiences of suffering, ascribing meaning (closeness to Christ), where meaning may not be found by the individual. It also seems to fall victim of Hauerwas’ criticism of non-contextualising suffering. Here, Bonhoeffer describes *all* Christian suffering as an easy yoke, with no awareness that what suffering feels like to *me* might feel different to *you*, or how my suffering feels *today* might be different to how it feels *tomorrow*. Bonhoeffer therefore seems to diminish the experience and meaning of suffering for Christians. Bonhoeffer also seems to generalise Christian experience, that having entered community with Christ, we experience suffering in a different – and lesser way – due to being in proximity with Christ.

However, these passages alone do not represent Bonhoeffer’s total theology regarding suffering, or its relation to his Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology.

⁷⁸² DBWE 4:104; DBW 4:103.

Is Suffering Instrumental for Bonhoeffer?

The last question requiring consideration is whether Bonhoeffer is instrumental in his understanding of suffering. Does suffering bring one closer to Christ, and are we therefore left with an equation of ‘more suffering’ = ‘more Christ-like’?

Bernard McGinn suggests that the theology of suffering in the Christian tradition rests on two New Testament pillars. The first is the witness in the gospels that Christ himself had to suffer many things in order to redeem humanity. The second is the insistence in Paul’s letters and 1 Peter that the believer is called upon to suffer with Christ.⁷⁸³ As we read in Romans 8:17:

Now if we are children [of God], then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.⁷⁸⁴

We share in Christ’s sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ‘in order’ to attain his future glory. This could suggest an instrumentality to suffering embedded at the core of Christian scripture.

More worrisome is that it may also introduce a commoditisation of suffering, where I seek to pursue suffering *in order to* receive more grace. To illustrate this point, let me give two alternative scenarios.

In Scenario 1, as a sinner, I have become habituated in desires which are against God. I realise that my journey to become Christlike must involve my being weaned off my old desires in order to follow Christ. This will by necessity involve pain, but I grit my teeth and continue, because I am focused on my destination, which is being close to Christ. This journey involves a *willingness to suffer* which may *look* like a desire to suffer; but there is a nuanced difference. In this scenario, I am not looking to or desiring to suffer in order to become more Christlike. My goal is to become Christlike, and I understand that I must pass through deeply personal suffering in order to get there. I am willing to undergo suffering, but I do not desire it.

If we as theologians, however, instead place suffering at the heart of becoming Christlike, a slightly different scenario is at risk of playing out. In scenario 2, having been told that suffering is at the heart of becoming Christlike, I may then *desire to suffer* in order to resemble or share in Christ’s suffering. Here suffering becomes a value-laden instrument in my becoming like Christ,

⁷⁸³ Bernard McGinn, ‘Suffering, Dereliction and Affliction in Christian Mysticism’, in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. by Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), pp. 55–70.

⁷⁸⁴ Romans 8.17 (NIV)

rather than a valueless by-product of discipleship. Here I am not only willing to pass through suffering, but I also desire the suffering itself.

However, there may not be such an instrumentality of suffering at the heart of Paul's materials. There are theologians, such as Dorothea Bertschmann, who believe that Paul's understanding of suffering is more nuanced. From the first to the last of Paul's letters,⁷⁸⁵ Paul speaks about suffering. For example, in Phil 3.10-11, he speaks about the privilege of being able to suffer for Christ, and in 2 Corinthians 11.22-33, he says his afflictions are something to be proud of rather than cause embarrassment. The question, though, is whether Paul ends up where 1 Peter 4.1 does,⁷⁸⁶ of divine intervention and mortification of the flesh, and whether there is a relationship between mortification and the perceived growth of ethical Christian values. Key to understanding this is exploring whether the participatory language Paul uses of 'dying with' and 'suffering with' have synonymous usage.⁷⁸⁷ For Bertschmann, suffering with and dying with, while *related*, are *not synonymous*: 'while Paul might treat all suffering as dying, he does not treat all dying as suffering, at least not in Romans 6 and 8.'⁷⁸⁸

Bertschmann believes that in Romans, although 'suffering-with' and 'dying-with' are very closely used,

there is no such simultaneous but mutually exclusive relatedness of suffering and glory: believers are not said to suffer in regard to sin and *at the same time* to be glorified in regard to God. Unlike 'death to sin', suffering does not become a 'good suffering', but remains negative. However, suffering is already the paradoxical token of *future glory*, because it is borne in union with Christ and with each other.⁷⁸⁹

We die in order to receive grace in Christ. Unlike this death, however, *suffering* is not a means to receive grace. Our suffering is a by-product of discipleship, to be borne, to be experienced, knowing that eventually it will become nothing in the joyful grace of Christ – but it will never *lead* to this grace, nor have any value in itself.

⁷⁸⁵ I am happy to accept, that 1 Thessalonians is Paul's first letter and the last may be Philippians, possibly written in Ephesus or Rome, Dorothea H. Bertschmann, 'Suffering, Sin and Death in Paul', in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. by Rachel Davies and Karen Kilby (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), p. 4.

⁷⁸⁶ 1 Peter 4.1 'Whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin' (NIV).

⁷⁸⁷ Bertschmann, 'Suffering, Sin and Death in Paul', pp. 5-6. For Albert Schweitzer and Tannehill, suffering is synonymous with dying with; A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (London: Black, 1931); R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967); cf John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017); Logan Williams, 'Giving the Self through Death: A Crucified Christ as Gift in Galatians', in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. by Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020), pp. 23-32.

⁷⁸⁸ Bertschmann, 'Suffering, Sin and Death in Paul', p. 6.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 17

Bonhoeffer of course uses the same language as Paul to express dying with Christ in the call, and daily dying to one's sinful self to return to the knife-edge of discipleship in Christ. What is being disputed here is whether Bonhoeffer has a similar non-instrumental understanding of suffering. I will argue that this is indeed the case.

Facing Suffering in Encounter with Christ

The first question we set out to answer in the sections above was whether Bonhoeffer is to be considered a theodist. To do so, it will be useful to reflect on the question of human knowledge for Bonhoeffer. Is Bonhoeffer confident in the human ability to deduce the nature of God, the world, or even our own selves? And can we then apply this to the question of evil and suffering at large in the world? As we shall see, the answer to this is an emphatic no. Bonhoeffer believes that fallen humanity lives in a 'circle' – constantly seeking the answers to questions, which only lead to more questions. It is only through Christ that we gain any understanding of ourselves, the world, and our relationship to God. This 'knowledge' does not come from our abilities, but from Christ's encounter with us and our living discipleship in response.

In the beginning of *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer considers the opening of Genesis 1, and the seemingly innocuous statement: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'⁷⁹⁰ As Bonhoeffer states, from the very first verse where the bible begins 'our most impassioned waves of thinking break, are thrown back upon themselves, and lose their strength in spray and foam.'⁷⁹¹ We receive the information that God creates the world. This simple fact represents something that, up until that point, we believe we understand. We think we understand what a 'beginning' is. And yet as soon as we receive this information of God creating the world, as *true beginning*, we quickly realise we do not understand what 'beginning' means at all. We have until this point thought of the 'beginning' as something within our sinful creaturely frame of reference – within the reality of cause and effect. We can understand something as having a beginning, but its beginning was caused by something else, and so on.

In Genesis, Bonhoeffer says, we are presented with a 'beginning' that cannot fit within our frame of reference.⁷⁹²

Because [the beginning is the infinite, and because we can conceive of the infinite only as what is endless] and so as what has no beginning. Because the beginning is freedom [Weil der Anfang die Freiheit ist], and we can never conceive of freedom except in terms of necessity, and thus as one thing among others but never as the one thing that utterly precedes all other things [das Eine schlechthin vor allem anderen].⁷⁹³

⁷⁹⁰ Genesis 1:1

⁷⁹¹ DBWE 3:25; DBW 3:25.

⁷⁹² Because God is not in the created order; Agency chapter, pp. 36-38.

⁷⁹³ DBWE 3:25-26; DBW 3:25.

We cannot comprehend the beginning. This is because human reasoning, Bonhoeffer says, is fallen. Because we have turned away from God, we have lost our 'beginning' in God and any understanding of creation as a free gift, outside of the world of cause and effect.⁷⁹⁴ Because we view the world from fallen capacities, every attempt at finding an objective truth leads to further questions, ever disappearing behind the new object of knowledge being posited. This makes it impossible for thinking to make a final pronouncement on the beginning. 'Thinking pounds itself to pieces on the beginning. Because thinking wants to reach behind the beginning... all thinking... shatters against itself... in view of the beginning.'⁷⁹⁵ It is in such a way that humans exist in a circle. From this perspective 'the beginning' can be anywhere, and therefore simultaneously nowhere at all.⁷⁹⁶

What is the alternative? The answer to our beginning – and our middle and end – can only be made known through Him who was at the beginning. To have knowledge of the world and the meaning of creation – including suffering – is therefore possible only through encounter with Christ. Bonhoeffer states,

Only the church, which knows of the end, knows also of the beginning. It alone knows that between the beginning and now there lies the same breach as between now and the end, that the beginning and now are related in the same way as life is to death, as the new is to the old.⁷⁹⁷

Humans gain an understanding of the world and meaning in our lives through the 'end', namely Christ and Christ's word for the world.

Knowledge through Christ therefore represents a very different *kind of knowledge*. Christians do not gain a sudden ability to imagine an absolute beginning conceptually. Rather, they learn that the whole world, including themselves, are wholly dependent on Christ. This is the 'end' in which the whole world is included. To understand oneself, one's reality, one's current situation, and one's beginning is to realise our total dependence on Christ. It is because the church knows of Christ's 'end' to which reality points that Christians 'cannot please the old world because the church speaks of the end of the world as though this has already happened, as though the world has already been judged.'⁷⁹⁸ Christians exist in the current world living from and pointing to the world's ultimate 'end' in Christ.

⁷⁹⁴ Agency chapter, pp. 36-38.

⁷⁹⁵ DBWE 3:27; DBW 3:26.

⁷⁹⁶ DBWE 3:26; DBW 3:26.

⁷⁹⁷ DBWE 3:22; DBW 3:21.

⁷⁹⁸ DBWE 3:21; DBW 3:21. cf. Church chapter, pp. 124-130.

What does this mean for Bonhoeffer's account of suffering? Does Bonhoeffer suggest that an account of suffering is justified eschatologically? Is this not therefore a type of theodicy? I argue not, the reason being found throughout Bonhoeffer's materials from as early as *Creation and Fall*,⁷⁹⁹ to his *Ethics*.⁸⁰⁰ For Bonhoeffer, there can be no extrapolated questions concerning ethics, suffering, reality etc., *without Christ*. Any understanding of the middle is not the case of applied objective knowledge, but understanding the 'who' of reality: Christ the word.

Christ encounters us and shows us what reality is – God's freedom-for the world. God chooses to be free for the world, in love, and vicarious representation. There is no such thing as a pre-set Christian ethic or applied knowledge.⁸⁰¹ There is only Christ and Christ's relationship to us. If there is any meaning in suffering, it gains meaning *only in and through Christ*. Instead of asking 'what is suffering', or 'how can I relate to suffering', as if suffering is a general abstract concept, the question instead becomes 'what does Christian following of Christ look like in *this context* here and now?' or 'how do I look at *this suffering* in relation to how Christ encounters me here and now?' As Bonhoeffer says in his *Ethics*, the 'past and the future [of the world] flow together in God's presence. The whole of the past is embraced by the word 'forgiveness'... past sin has been sunk in the depths of God's love in Jesus Christ and overcome.'⁸⁰² Any understanding of the here and now comes from being encountered with Christ.

As this thesis argues throughout, we must therefore look at Bonhoeffer's Christology and Christologically-informed ecclesiology and theological anthropology to understand his concept of suffering in the middle-times (the world here and now).

⁷⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer's discussion of 'the beginning', DBWE 3:21-27; DBW:21-26.

⁸⁰⁰ Cf. DBWE 6:47-56; DBW 6:31-41.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² DBWE 6:147; DBW 6:137.

Dying into Life

Bonhoeffer writes about suffering and death at the inception of becoming a disciple – our first encounter with Christ’s ultimate word forces us to die to our previous sinful self:

The first Christ-suffering [Christusleiden] that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ.⁸⁰³

Becoming a disciple means dying to one’s previous life of sin and isolation and beginning life in Christ, becoming free for others in conformation to Christ who is the vicarious representative of all (as we will explore more fully below).⁸⁰⁴

For Bonhoeffer, death of the sinful self is essential to becoming a disciple. Christ encounters me with his ultimate word and kills my previous self. My apparent governance and control of the world is shown to be nothing at all. I suffer from Christ’s encounter and the associated death of my previous categories of experience. But only this death, with associated suffering, will allow me to enter new life with Christ. This is otherwise described as the Christian being encountered by Christ’s divine No (of judgement and death) and Yes (new life in Christ).

What exact roles ‘suffering’ and ‘death’ play respectively can be confusing to understand, especially because Bonhoeffer often uses them together.

Suffering the Call

Bonhoeffer speaks of suffering as related to the call of the Christian, where the individual dies to their previous sin and enters community with Christ. For Bonhoeffer, this ‘implies a *break*. Christ invades the realm of Satan and lays hold of those who belong to him, thereby creating his church-community.’⁸⁰⁵ I am deprived of my previous relations and Christ becomes the mediator between me and the world. Christ is recognised as the centre of my relationships and the means of understanding myself and others. Because of this, as we have explored in the Church chapter, the Christian no longer belongs to the world, no longer serves the world, and is no longer subject to it. They belong instead ‘to Christ alone and related to the world only through Christ.’⁸⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer explicitly states that Christ’s call ‘requires and causes our death. In

⁸⁰³ DBWE 4:87; *Christusleiden* emphasises the specific nature of suffering in Christ’s call, DBW 4:80-81.

⁸⁰⁴ See section ‘Suffering in Freedom’ below, pp. 197-204.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ DBWE 4:208; DBW 4:221. cf. Church chapter, pp. 112-118.

baptism we die together with our old world.' And this death must be 'understood in the strictest sense as an event that is suffered.'⁸⁰⁷

What is the role of suffering here? Suffering is involved because we are judged by the Creator, who presents us with our sin. We are comfortable in our sinful, self-governing lives. We do not want to kill this self. Therefore the 'death' of becoming a disciple involves suffering. It is only out of judgement (divine No) Bonhoeffer says, that the new self arises (divine Yes).

This death is thus not the final, angry rejection of the creature by the creator but rather the gracious acceptance of the creature by the Creator. This death... is the gracious death which is ours through the death of Christ.... Those who become Christ's own must come under his cross. They suffer and die with him.⁸⁰⁸

It is not the 'suffering', however, which proves instrumental for Bonhoeffer. The person who *suffers more* from the call does not somehow become 'more' of a Christian. It is death alone which is important – the once-and-for-all death of entering encounter and the 'daily' death of returning to Christ's word as one continues to live in the sinful world.

I, the fallen person, suddenly become aware that my reality is relative to Christ's 'end' as his ultimate word.⁸⁰⁹ What I had assumed to be the entire meaning of my life is revealed as relative to Christ's revelation. I am forced to change the focus and centre of my life, from myself as the centre and source of all meaning, to life lived entirely in response to God's word. Everything becomes qualified by Christ as mediator. This is indeed a type of suffering and loss (in the judgement of Christ's divine No), but through which one gains much more – right relationship to God, the world, and the meaning of one's own life (under the divine Yes).

Crucially, however, suffering the loss of my sinful reality does not *lead in any way to receiving God's ultimate word*. Encounter with the ultimate, Bonhoeffer says, is a complete 'break'⁸¹⁰ with my previous life. It is not a development or 'crowning' achievement. As Bonhoeffer writes in his *Ethics*,

They had to travel a road, to walk the full length of the way through penultimate things... And yet the ultimate word was not a crowning [Krönung] but a complete break with the penultimate. Before the ultimate word Luther and Paul stood no differently than the thief on

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid. What the synoptics call Christ's call, Paul calls baptism, DBWE 4:207; DBW 4:221.

⁸⁰⁸ DBWE 4:208; DBW 4:222.

⁸⁰⁹ We consider the 'penultimate' in the next section, pp. 192-196.

⁸¹⁰ DBWE 4:207; DBW 4:221.

the cross. We must travel a road, even though there is no road to this goal, and we must travel this road to the end, that is, to the place where God puts an end to it.⁸¹¹

The penultimate does not in any way lead to the ultimate. The depth of my suffering, the extent of the pain I feel in my reality being shattered in encounter with Christ, has no intrinsic value. What matters is Christ's ultimate word alone. Hence, we must travel on a path, but there is no path *which leads there*. What matters is that I die to my old self, not the kind of self I am dying from.

This is a very similar conclusion to Bertschmann on Paul's language of suffering and dying with. To repeat a passage we considered in the section above, her suggestion from reading Romans is that,

there is no such simultaneous but mutually exclusive relatedness of suffering and glory: believers are not said to suffer in regard to sin and *at the same time* to be glorified in regard to God. Unlike 'death to sin', suffering does not become a 'good suffering', but remains negative. However, suffering is already the paradoxical token of *future glory*, because it is borne in union with Christ and with each other.⁸¹²

I believe the same can be said of Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer speaks about suffering which is related to the death of the Christian's sinful self. We suffer when confronted with our old ways. Encountered by Christ, we find it difficult to let go of our previous sinful governance of the world. It is only *the death itself*, however, which leads to new life in Christ. Suffering is in no way instrumental, or an achievement then crowned by justification. To use Bertschmann's words, there is a "good death" in becoming a Christian but no associated 'good suffering.'⁸¹³

⁸¹¹ DBWE 6:151; völlständige Abbruch is used in the sense of breaking off or ceasing something completely. It also denotes that there is no picking up where one has left off, which the English leaves less clear, DBW 6:142.

⁸¹² Bertschmann, 'Suffering, Sin and Death in Paul', p. 17

⁸¹³ Ibid.

The View from the End

As we established above, to understand the present, or the ‘middle’, we must view it from the ‘end.’ Namely, through what Christ reveals God accomplished in creation, what Christ has done on the cross, and will complete eschatologically. The present is made sense of through the end – otherwise termed in Bonhoeffer as ‘the ultimate.’⁸¹⁴

The justification of the world in Christ is something ultimate, it is God’s final word towards the world. There is nothing which goes beyond God’s word in Christ. This is because it is a break with everything that has gone before. When we are encountered with Christ, everything preceding that encounter becomes relative to it. Our understanding of the world becomes relative to Christ’s ultimate revelation. Christ’s word is therefore *qualitatively ultimate* because everything gains value or status only in relationship to it.

However, experiences in the world – suffering included – should not be done away with or swept under the rug in view of the ultimate. This is because the justifying word of God, in addition to being *qualitatively* ultimate, is also *temporally ultimate*.⁸¹⁵

Something... always precedes it, some action, some suffering, movement, intention, defeat, recovery, pleading, hoping – in short, quite literally a span of time at whose end it stands.

The only thing that can be justified is something that has already come under indictment in time.⁸¹⁶

Experiences in the world gain value only through the ultimate. Crucially, however, Christian life ‘neither destroys nor sanctions the [world]... In Christ the reality of God encounters the reality of the world and allows us to take part in this real encounter. It is an encounter beyond all radicalism and all compromise. Christian life is participation in Christ’s encounter with the world.’⁸¹⁷

The ultimate – Christ’s word – encounters the Christian again and again in their lives. The ultimate stands at the end as Christ’s qualifying word, but while the world still exists, it is not done away with.

It is all that precedes the ultimate – the justification of the sinner by grace alone – and that is addressed as penultimate after finding the ultimate. At the same time, it is everything that follows the ultimate, *in order again to precede it...* the penultimate becomes what it is only

⁸¹⁴ See apocalypticism in Church chapter, pp. 124-130.

⁸¹⁵ DBWE 6:150-151; DBW 6:141.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ DBWE 6:159; DBW 6:151.

through the ultimate, that is, in the moment when it has already lost its own self-sufficiency. The penultimate does not determine the ultimate; the ultimate determines the penultimate. Then penultimate is not a condition in itself; it is a judgment by the ultimate on what has gone before. *It is therefore never something present, but always something already past.*⁸¹⁸

This is illuminating when applied to suffering. The penultimate is only recognised as penultimate in the *past*, as something that has been taken up into the ultimate, and has not impeded us from hearing and welcoming Christ's encounter. This is not done once and for all, but over and over again as our finite lives continue.

In *the midst of* an experience in the world, (suffering being our example here), we do not have an understanding of how to relate or relativise it to the ultimate. Ultimate knowledge is never something we possess 'ahead of time', readily available. Rather, we must travel *through an experience*, waiting for Christ to encounter us again, to discover how this experience can *become* penultimate, or be given some meaning in relation to His ultimate word. We do not know how to speak about the ultimate from within suffering or isolation.

So understood, experiences may have some meaning within the ultimate justifying word of God, but this meaning is not found in the moment in which it is experienced. In this way, the penultimate is never something 'present, but always something already past.'⁸¹⁹ Its meaning or value cannot be discovered until it has been *made penultimate* by Christ's qualitatively and temporally ultimate word.

One's Own Cross

Christ, as God's ultimate word, encounters us once and for all as we enter into discipleship, but he continues to encounter us as we live in the world. The Christian is called once and for all into conformation with Christ but must also seek this encounter again and again.

It is only encounter with Christ as the ultimate word which gives meaning to our worldly experiences. To return to Kilby's concern of giving external meaning to others' experiences of suffering, this is exactly what Bonhoeffer guards against. It is only *my personal encounter* with the ultimate that gives *my experience meaning*. As Bonhoeffer says,

⁸¹⁸ DBWE 6:159; DBW 6:151.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

In order to hear the ultimate word, Luther had to go through the monastery; Paul had to go through his piety toward the law; even the thief 'had to' go through conviction and the cross. They had to travel a road, to walk the full length of the way through penultimate things; they had to sink to their knees under the burden of these things... Before the ultimate word Luther and Paul stood no differently than the thief on the cross. We must travel a road, even though there is no road to this goal, and we must travel this road to the end, that is, to the place where God puts an end to it. The penultimate remains in existence, even though it is completely superseded by the ultimate and is no longer in force.⁸²⁰

We each experience different sufferings and have different crosses to bear. Bonhoeffer says in *Discipleship*, for each person a cross lies ready: 'so that no one presumes to seek out some cross or arbitrarily search for some suffering, Jesus says, they each have *their* own cross ready, assigned by God and measured to fit. They must all bear the suffering and rejection measured out to reach of them. Everyone gets a different amount... some with great suffering, and... martyrdom... but in every case, it is the one cross.'⁸²¹ No experience is therefore 'better' or 'worse' than another, or has more or less value. No 'cross' is somehow more or less Christlike or deserving of ultimate transformation. The only thing which gives meaning to any experience is the ultimate word of God. Where this ultimate word meets us is God's choosing. We do not ignore our worldly experiences, but we also we cannot transform them for ourselves or for others.

Preparing the Way

It is not enough, however, to just accept the ways of the world and hope that meaning will eventually be found in relation to the ultimate. This is another criticism raised against theologies of suffering; that theologians are tempted either to justify suffering (often through theodicy), or to ignore the problem all together.

For Bonhoeffer, however, not only ought the world remain in existence and be preserved for the sake of the ultimate, but Christians are to *act* to help others more easily hear the justifying word of Christ, alleviating their suffering in order to make it easier for their experiences to become penultimate (open) to Christ's ultimate word. *Alleviating suffering is therefore a penultimate deed* done by the Christian in relation to and for the sake of Christ's ultimate word (which they have received); it is a Christian action done in order to help others more easily hear this word.

⁸²⁰ DBWE 6:151; DBW 6:142.

⁸²¹ DBWE 4:87; DBW 4:80.

Bonhoeffer is clear that Christ encounters the person, and that this encounter cannot be hindered by any human power. *However*, '[t]here are conditions of the heart, of life, and in the world that especially hinder the receiving of grace, that is, which make it infinitely difficult to believe.'⁸²² Bonhoeffer highlights that those in 'extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness' find it hard to believe in 'God's justice and goodness.'⁸²³ There is a commission to Christians 'of immeasurable responsibility... The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community... We break bread with the hungry and share our home with them, for the sake of Christ's love.'⁸²⁴ Christians do not neutrally accept suffering as a necessary path to endure on the way to the ultimate. Instead, they are *directed to* the sufferings of others, to serve and help the world. Such actions constitute preparing the way for the coming of grace and Christ's ultimate word. Penultimate actions are done for the sake of the ultimate word. Christian persons cannot bring the ultimate word themselves, but they can improve the conditions of the world, and therefore the likelihood of others hearing it.

In this section, looking primarily at Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and concepts of the ultimate and penultimate, I have asked whether Bonhoeffer is a theodist and answered with a resounding no. For Bonhoeffer, Christians live in the world, with all the horrors of suffering that are present, having received and waiting to receive again Christ's justifying word. While in the world, suffering must be attended to. We should never presume to be in a position to confidently make sense of where suffering fits in the divine economy. Only the God who justifies us can give us meaning to our experiences, and while in this world, this meaning will never be found once and for all.

Some suffering, in the light of the ultimate, may prove to be educative or formative, and may even ultimately be seen as a gift from God. Other suffering may prove to have been an unavoidable cost of discipleship and have the form a cross taken up in conformation with and eventual transformation by Christ. And some suffering may instead prove to be meaningless – an experience of total hopelessness from which Christ eventually rescues us, but without transforming the experience itself. There are yet more hundreds of other possibilities. As Christians, viewing the world through the ultimate, we may have a provisional sense of what *might* be revealed from the experience of the suffering, but it is not for us to give this to ourselves, and far less for others.

⁸²² DBWE 6:162; DBW 6:154.

⁸²³ DBWE 6:162-163; DBW 6:154.

⁸²⁴ DBWE 6:163; DBW 6:155.

Christians do not simply neutrally accept the world but are set to work within it, commissioned especially to those living with suffering, in poverty or despair. We cannot make sense of suffering for others. As Christians, however, we can make the way easier for them to hear Christ's word and therefore receive whatever meaning their suffering may have through Christ and Christ alone. This is to do penultimate work for the sake of the ultimate.

Suffering in Freedom

In the sections above, we have explored suffering as non-instrumental and non-value laden. Suffering is involved in the death of the self in becoming a disciple but has no inherent value. Suffering, however, is not done away with when one begins a new life in Christ. As we have established, suffering continues as one lives from Christ's ultimate word and yet remains in the sinful world.

To receive Christ's call for Bonhoeffer, however, is also to simultaneously enter Christ's community with others who have been encountered. Suffering must therefore be explored *within the context of community* to be properly understood.

To begin our final section, I want to return to some of the material considered at the beginning of this chapter. Bonhoeffer says,

Jesus called all who are laden with various sufferings and burdens to throw off their yokes and to take his yoke upon themselves. His yoke is easy and his burden is light... Bearing the cross does not bring misery or despair. Rather, it provides refreshment and peace for our souls; it is our greatest joy. Here we are no longer laden with self-made laws and burdens, but with the yoke of him who knows us and who himself goes with us under the same yoke. Under his yoke we are assured of his nearness and communion. It is he himself whom disciples find when they take up their cross.⁸²⁵

Bonhoeffer speaks about suffering (bearing Jesus' yoke) as a hallmark experience of Christian life. He says that Christian suffering is different from the sufferings of the rest of the world. Because Christ encounters the person, he takes away the laws and burdens suffered, and lays on his 'easy yoke' instead. This could imply a damaging account of suffering, as it seems to simultaneously generalise the Christian experience of suffering (all Christians suffer in this way) and diminish it (Christians receive an easier yoke due to their proximity to Christ).

Using Bonhoeffer's broader Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, I will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer has a more nuanced understanding of suffering than the one suggested above. Above all, I will argue that specifically Christian suffering is understood as being borne within a community of faith, never by the individual alone.⁸²⁶

⁸²⁵ DBWE 4:90-91; DBW 4:84.

⁸²⁶ I am seeking to place suffering and bearing within an 'alternative, non-pathological, and convincing way of positively and actively integrating suffering into our spiritual lives, in a manner which flows from the heart of the tradition', namely the church, quotation from Paul D. Murray, 'Living Sacrifice: Is There a Non-Pathological Way of

We are created in the image of God. For Bonhoeffer this means that we are created free, in the image of God's freedom. God, however, is not free *from* creation but *for creation*.⁸²⁷ God chooses to be free for creation, seen above all in Christ's incarnation.

Because God in Christ is free for humankind, because God does not keep God's freedom to God's self, we can think of freedom only as a 'being free for...' for us in the middle who exist through Christ and who know what it means to be human through Christ's resurrection, the fact that God is free means nothing else than that we are free for God.⁸²⁸

Humans experience their God-given creaturely freedom only in relation to God and others.

Through Christ's encounter, we regain our ability to be free for others. Then we can see them not through our fallen judgement, but through the eyes of Christ, recognising others also as free in the image of God.⁸²⁹ The other becomes again the source of my freedom and simultaneously the focus of my responsibility. Viewing the other through Christ's encounter, I can love, respect, and serve the other in conformation with Christ. This occurs not once but in a lifetime of discernment and response.

Given the sinfulness of the world, however, being freed-for others in the 'middle' includes taking on the sin and suffering of others in the world, serving others, and directing them to Christ's ultimate justifying word. My suggestion is that suffering ought to be understood within this vision of Christian conformation, which may help contextualise some of the more disturbing passages on suffering found in Bonhoeffer's material.

Bearing and Service:

In *The Prayerbook of the Bible*, Bonhoeffer says:

Thus, the law of Christ is a law of forbearance... Christians must bear the burden of one another. They must suffer and endure one another. Only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled. The burden of human beings was even for God so heavy that God had to go to the cross suffering under it.... But in so doing, God bore them as a mother carries her child.... in suffering and enduring human beings, God maintained community with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the cross.

Living Suffering as Sacrifice?', in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. by Rachel Davies and Karen Kilby (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020), p. 190.

⁸²⁷ As explored in the Agency chapter, pp. 39-45.

⁸²⁸ DBWE 3:64; DBW 3:59.

⁸²⁹ Viewing them through Christ the mediator, as explored in the Church chapter, pp. 119-123.

Christians share in this law. They are obliged to bear with and suffer one another; but what is more important, now by virtue of the law of Christ having been fulfilled, they are also able to bear one another.⁸³⁰

Having entered community with Christ who bears the world, the church community are called into conformation with his bearing. Bearing includes recognising the other person as having their own created freedom. It means serving the other, accepting their sin, and shouldering their burdens. Bearing also involves suffering: suffering the burdens of another and suffering with and for the other person. Suffering, however, *itself* is not the goal of Christian conformation. Instead, suffering becomes part of the burden of existing *for others*, as Christ exists for us. My calling to be a Christian is to regain my freedom for others, involving bearing when necessary. However, my bearing is never something done *alone* but only within a community that is also free-for me and therefore also bears and suffers with me.

I would like to present some important passages from Bonhoeffer's corpus, in order to explore this further. First, in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer says that,

A community is a concrete unity, its members must not be viewed as separate individuals, for the center of activity lies not in each member, but in all of them together... It is not as if many persons, gathered together, now add up to a collective person. Rather, the person comes into being only when embedded in sociality, and the collective person comes into being together with the individual person. It is neither prior to, nor a consequence of, the individual. That is, the collective person exists only where there are individual persons.⁸³¹

God created man and woman directed to one another. 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. The collective unit and the individual unit have the same structure in God's eyes. On these basic-relations rest the concepts of the religious community and the church.⁸³²

The Christian church community exists as a concrete unity. Although it is made up of members, the centre of activity does not lie within each member but in all members together. This centre of activity describes freedom-for in conformation with Christ, as an activity which exists in the

⁸³⁰ DBWE 5:100-101; DBW 5:85.

⁸³¹ DBWE 1:78; DBW 1:49; cf. the simultaneity of Christian personhood and community, as discussed in the Church chapter, pp. 106-111.

⁸³² DBWE 1:80; DBW 1:51.

relationship and participation *between members*. The Christian person, being free-for others, therefore *exists only within the community Christ constituted and continues to constitute through his encounter*. God does not desire a history of human beings but a history of a community of persons serving, bearing, and taking responsibility for one another. We cannot think of bearing or suffering in isolation. The Christian as an individual person, with her own centre of activity outside of the community, *simply does not exist*. All statements regarding bearing, service, and suffering must therefore be considered within such a context.

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer says,

Christians need other Christians who speak God's word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves... the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation...the Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians. Their own hearts are uncertain; those of their brothers and sisters are sure.⁸³³

The individual Christian *needs* other Christians. As we have explored in this thesis, Christians bring the word of God to one another. Christian church community is based on *reciprocity*. We encounter one another, bear one another, and suffer with one another. No individual does this by themselves. Therefore, as one bears, they are simultaneously borne by others, and ultimately by Christ. Our sufferings are borne by others in community. When I am uncertain, my community provides strength. When they lack strength and suffering, I bear them in return. I bear others, suffer with and for others *when I have the strength to do so*. When I do not, I am borne by those in community with me.

Bonhoeffer writes, 'as Christ bears our burdens, so we are to bear the burden of our sisters and brothers... Not only his external fate, manner and temperament... his or her sin.'⁸³⁴ And again, 'bearing constitutes being a Christian. Just as Christ maintains his communion with his Father by bearing according to the Father's will, so the disciples' bearing constitutes their community with Christ.'⁸³⁵ Indeed, in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer writes Christians unconditionally take on the guilt of the world. Christ makes them 'fall on their knees... with the confession: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*'. With this confession, 'the whole guilt of the world falls on the church, on Christians' and only here is forgiveness enabled.'⁸³⁶ However, these passages are not to be read

⁸³³ DBWE 5:32; DBW 5:20.

⁸³⁴ DBWE 4:88; DBW 4:82.

⁸³⁵ DBWE 4:91; DBW 4:84.

⁸³⁶ DBW 6:136; DBW 6:127.

as the call for the individual alone – but only within the church context. Indeed, there is such a thing as an individual bearing too much, as I will explore next.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer speaks about how responsible action and bearing others can be corrupted in two related ways. The first is to forget that the selfless person ought also to be responsible; the second, is that the welfare of the one I am serving becomes absolute whilst ignoring myself and other responsibilities. Either lead to arbitrariness of action and a mockery of Christian ethical action before Christ.

The origin, essence, and goal of responsible life is denied in both cases, and responsibility has become a self-made, abstract idol.⁸³⁷

Seeking suffering as an objective goal with no thought to the self leads to the corruption of Christian ethical action and Christian community. Taking on so much suffering that the person is prevented from being responsible (including to *themselves*), prevents true reciprocal bearing and love.

This picture prevents any ‘heroism’ in suffering. I am not called as Christian to bear the burdens of those around me and suffer for them, so that the more I bear and suffer, the more I am conformed to Christ. No, because the church community is *conformed together* in Christ. Here the importance of placing suffering within Bonhoeffer’s Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology becomes especially clear. We bear one another’s burdens *together*. As a person within Christian community, I can at one moment be the one bearing, and at another, need to be borne in return. This is not a sign of failure, because I am never conformed to Christ on my own. I am conformed to Christ *within my community of bearing*.

Suffering therefore becomes an activity of the whole church community. I suffer for and with other Christians, and those Christians suffer with and for me. If I have lost my strength, living in my own resources, I am borne by others. My struggles are taken up into the community who serve and bear me. Their bearing will make it easier for me to once again be open to hearing Christ’s ultimate word.⁸³⁸ This is exactly what Swinton speaks of in *Raging Compassion*. We do not have an objective answer to the question of suffering, because this question is wrong. Instead, we as Christians are called to develop faithful forms of community within which suffering can be ‘absorbed, resisted, and transformed’ as we wait ‘for God’s return.’⁸³⁹ There is

⁸³⁷ DBWE 6:259; DBW 6:259.

⁸³⁸ This could be described as a ‘preparing the way’ within the community of bearing. See previous section for discussion of preparing the way in the context of suffering, pp. 194-196.

⁸³⁹ Swinton, *Raging Compassion*, p. 35.

no 'solution' to suffering. Instead, if we understand Christian existence to mean conformation to Christ's freedom-for, the church community becomes, in Swinton's words, a 'community of care that... absorb[s] the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations.'⁸⁴⁰ Suffering is not done away with, and for the person experiencing it, suffering is real and terrible, and their pain must be respected. What the person does have,⁸⁴¹ however, is a community who bears and suffers with them, not taking their experience away but absorbing, resisting, and helping guide it to transformation through Christ's ultimate word.⁸⁴²

Isolation

It is perhaps for this reason that Bonhoeffer explicitly talks about the terrible suffering that occurs when Christians find themselves in isolation, when the person can find no comfort from others, and no one to bear with them in their suffering. This becomes a consistent theme in Bonhoeffer's work from the Finkenwalde era, into his circular letters, and prison correspondence.

For example, Bonhoeffer writes in September 1935, at the early inception of Finkenwalde, that 'pastors, especially young pastors, suffer from isolation. The burden of proclamation is especially heavy today for individual pastors, who are ministers of the church, not prophets. Both in terms of the content and the actual way they preach, they need the help and fellowship of their brothers.'⁸⁴³ Christian suffering is made worse when isolated because we cannot share our burdens with others. Indeed, as Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*, Christians who live dispersed 'are comforted' even by the briefest of visits from another Christian, 'a prayer together... by letters written by the hands of other Christians.'⁸⁴⁴

Because Christian community is constituted in and through Christ alone, there can be no replacement for it. To love another through Christ, recognising in others their created freedom in the image of God, and to be loved as that in return, with no other goal other than to be free-for the other, is what makes Christian community unique. It is for this reason that we ought not try

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁴¹ The church is fallible to fail at this, so I say this with the caveat that the church also exists under the No and Yes of Christ.

⁸⁴² Such a perspective I believe is important for Bonhoeffer's concept of sin and pride, considered in the Marriage Mandate case study, pp. 143-148. The person who is free for the other does not give themselves up entirely; they enter community where they serve others but are also served in return.

⁸⁴³ DBWE 14:95; DBW 14:76.

⁸⁴⁴ DBWE 5:30; DBW 5:18.

to fill ‘those gaps’ in communities ‘that God has ripped open,’⁸⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer says, because they cannot be filled or replaced. As Bonhoeffer writes in correspondence from prison,

If we are forcibly separated for a long time from the people we love, then we *cannot* procure for ourselves a cheap substitute from other people like most others do – I don’t mean out of moral scruples but simply because of our very being. The substitute repulses us. We simply have to wait and wait; we have to suffer indescribably from the separation; we have to experience longing practically to the point of becoming ill – and only in this way do we sustain communion with the people we love, even if in a painful way.⁸⁴⁶

And in another circular letter,

As painful as [being separated] is, there is also something good about it; it is a time of testing for each of us as to whether we can faithfully do our work alone for a while. We still do not know how it will all come out, but as far as I can see, I do not have the impression that the whole endeavour is suffering by this. Whoever has learned by now what this is all about will stand fast, even if he must stand alone for a time, *provided it is not too long...* Most of you are bearing enough already. Each of us must know how to fight his way through his tasks with God’s word, and while doing so he may be certain of the intercessions of the community and the power of Jesus.⁸⁴⁷

Christians can live, work, and suffer alone, as these constitute times of testing for the person and their strength of faith. However, this can only continue ‘provided it is not too long’, for Christians are not created to exist in isolation but in a community of mutual bearing. It is for this reason that community cannot be replaced because it is in community that one is borne, and brought the word of Christ, and simultaneously one bears and brings the word of Christ to others. This is why isolation is so painful for the Christian, and why community is irreplaceable. It is also here where intercession and prayer during times of separation become important, as I will discuss in the next chapter.⁸⁴⁸

Interesting for my argument is what Bonhoeffer writes to his parents in September 1943; that it is *especially* when separated and going through suffering that one realises ‘how interwoven one’s own life is with the life of other people, indeed, how the center of one’s own life lies outside oneself and how little one is an isolated individual.’⁸⁴⁹ When a Christian suffers in isolation, knowing there are others suffering in isolation, too, one is reminded how one’s

⁸⁴⁵ DBWE 15:273; DBW 15:267.

⁸⁴⁶ DBWE 8:227; DBW 8:243.

⁸⁴⁷ DBWE 16:45; DBW 16:29. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁴⁸ See Prayer chapter, pp. 231-235.

⁸⁴⁹ DBWE 8:149; DBW 8:152.

existence is linked to the other, is borne by and is directed to bearing others. When prevented from this opportunity, suffering worsens, because there is no one to bear it alongside me.

It is such an understanding that I take to be Bonhoeffer's meaning in *Discipleship* when he speaks of an easy yoke. Christ's yoke is 'easier' because in Christ's community one does not suffer alone. Here, and here alone, can suffering become 'grace'. Entering the church community, one becomes part of the communal person of Christ. This communal person does not exist without individuals who make it up, but neither ought it be understood as only being made up of individuals. We *become* persons, able to love and be free for others *only as the communal person of the church comes into reality at the same time*.⁸⁵⁰ In community, suffering is taken in, is loved, and absorbed. This does not mean that the suffering goes away for the individual person, nor is it diminished. Conversely, the suffering is acknowledged, it is taken in by others, and transformed into a suffering that all in the community can bear with love.

Being called to be in Christ means being called to bear the suffering of others and take suffering into oneself, but this is never done without simultaneously being borne by the rest of the church community. I suffer with my community, bearing and helping them. I *also* suffer in my own life but know that I am in turn borne.

Placing these passages in wider context, it becomes clear that although Christian life involves taking on suffering and bearing, no *one* person is asked to take on suffering without the support of the whole church community and ultimately Christ himself. As Bonhoeffer writes in his prison materials '[c]ertainly, we are not Christ, we are not called to redeem the world through our own deed and our own suffering.'⁸⁵¹ We cannot avoid being large hearted in conformation in Christ, but as humans we 'are not to burden ourselves with impossible things and torture ourselves with not being able to bear them.'⁸⁵² Christians participate as instruments of Christ, looking ahead to him who can suffer and redeem all. We are called into conformation with him to share 'only in a limited measure in the suffering of others,'⁸⁵³ and even then, only in the community in which Christ places us. This is crucial for our understanding of Bonhoeffer. The church community bears the whole world and its sufferings in Christ, but the *individual person alone is not expected to do this*. Each person is called to take a share, within their own means, and according to their strength, knowing their total strength in the community is larger than the sum of their own parts; because community is sustained in Christ. Each person may be given

⁸⁵⁰ As we established in the Church chapter, pp. 106-111.

⁸⁵¹ DBWE 8:49; DBW 8:34.

⁸⁵² Ibid.

⁸⁵³ Ibid.

their own cross to bear, but they are given the strength to bear it knowing they are borne in Christ's redeeming love, and in the knowledge that this cross is never borne alone.

Conclusion

This chapter has established that suffering is more nuanced than perhaps initially presented in Bonhoeffer's corpus. I have sought to show how our understanding of the theme can be aided by placing suffering within the total theological orientation established in this thesis. Bonhoeffer seems to speak about suffering in favourable terms in some of his texts. It would appear in some materials that he instrumentalises, diminishes, or even sacralises suffering. In this chapter, however, having placed suffering within his broader Christologically shaped ecclesiology and theological anthropology, and Christian life constituted in discernment of Christ's word, I have shown that this is not the case.

I have demonstrated through Bonhoeffer's understanding of the ultimate and the penultimate that when we are encountered by Christ, our previous existence is killed, and we live by his ultimate word. Dying to oneself is not a crowning achievement of any existence, but rather a complete break.⁸⁵⁴ Suffering is *involved* in this break because our previous existence is shattered (the No) and replaced by a new reality (the Yes). Suffering is not what is of importance, however, but only the death into new life in Christ.

Having been encountered by Christ, the world *continues to exist*. We live in the world, praying for Christ's ultimate word to come to us again. Suffering is an experience the Christian hopes will *become relative* to Christ's ultimate word of grace. We cannot, however, give the experience any ultimate meaning ourselves. Instead, we must live in the world of suffering, seeking, and hoping for Christ's ultimate word. Crucially, it is only through *my encounter* with the ultimate that my experience may receive meaning – and become penultimate. No one can give that to me, nor can I give it to myself ahead of time. Only Christ can encounter me and give value (if any is possible) to my suffering. Suffering is therefore understood within a life of active discernment.

In conformation to Christ's freedom-for and representative action of the world, Christians are called *into* the world on behalf of Christ. Suffering is therefore not to be ignored but is to be engaged with and battled against. Although I cannot bring the ultimate word to others through my own actions, I can make it easier for others to receive it, by making their worldly circumstances better. I can create the circumstances to make their experience open to receiving Christ's ultimate word.

⁸⁵⁴ DBWE 6:151; DBW 6:142.

For Bonhoeffer, the image of God in humanity is to be free for others, to bear one another and live for and with one another. The Christian does not exist without others. Our freedom consists in *being in relation* with community. Suffering must also therefore be placed within this understanding of the Christian person – we suffer, but only within our church community, in and alongside others. I suffer and bear others; I am borne in return when I suffer. Suffering occurs in the social context and activity of the church.

Importantly, heroism or excessive suffering for the sake of the other has no place in the church community Bonhoeffer envisions. The church exists as a *community of persons*, where each person is created in the image and freedom-for of Christ. Such an understanding prevents one individual from taking on more than what is possible for them to bear. Christ does not ask us to bear suffering alone.

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked whether Bonhoeffer could be accused of being a theodist, or generalising and diminishing the human experience of suffering. When looking at certain passages, the answer could have been yes.

To return to the material considered at the very beginning of this chapter, we can now answer that, yes, Christians do suffer the call summoning them away from their ‘attachments to this world’, bringing ‘the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ.’⁸⁵⁵ The suffering associated with this death, however, has no inherent value. As Bonhoeffer says, the call to discipleship is costly ‘because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner.’⁸⁵⁶ The death of the self is costly; it includes suffering. The value associated with this death, however, comes solely from the life that Christ transforms this death into. Death leads to life; suffering does not receive the same transformation. What matters is that one’s reality is confronted and shattered by Christ’s ultimate reality. Christians continue to live in the sinful world, but their suffering is never given inherent meaning and value. It can only be transformed in and by Christ’s ultimate word.

Bonhoeffer continues, saying ‘[g]race is costly, because it forces people under the yoke of following Jesus Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, ‘My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’⁸⁵⁷ Our suffering is transformed when we enter discipleship. I now suffer with Christ – and under his

⁸⁵⁵ DBWE 4:87; DBW 4:80-81.

⁸⁵⁶ DBWE 4:44-45; DBW 4:30-31.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid.

yoke – in the world. Because the call constitutes my being in community with others, however, I never suffer alone. Christ's 'easy yoke' is only possible within a community of freedom-for where my suffering is borne alongside others.

I have established in this chapter that Bonhoeffer's concept of suffering is a constituent part of a much greater reality. That reality being what it is to be conformed to Christ, to encounter Christ's reality in the present, and to live within a church community who I bear and am simultaneously borne by. Suffering is therefore understood within – and further develops our understanding of – Bonhoeffer's broader presentation of Christian personhood in community and active discernment of Christ's word.

Chapter 4: Prayer

Introduction

This final chapter is similar to the previous in that it will consider prayer as another important theme in Bonhoeffer's corpus and how it is understood through his interrelated Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, and Christian life lived in discernment of Christ's word. The chapter will slightly differ, however, in that it will also argue for viewing prayer as a way of *naming and living this life of discernment*. My claim is that Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christian life, being free-for others, in active discernment for and in response to Christ's divine No and Yes, can otherwise be described as a life oriented by prayer, which is where this thesis will end.

Prayer is understood in different ways within the Christian tradition. For example, prayer is often discussed in relation to different modes; from prayer filled with words, set or extemporised, to contemplative prayer without words. We can also differentiate between types of prayer, like prayers of supplication, prayers of confession, or prayers of gratitude. We might also consider the difference between communal prayer and individual prayer, or prayer which is done in the church vs. prayer in a more personal setting.

In this chapter, I will argue that such categorisation collapses when viewed through the common substance that all prayer shares: namely, Jesus Christ, the 'Crucified',⁸⁵⁸ or the 'Who'⁸⁵⁹ at the centre of reality. For Bonhoeffer, prayer is the living response to Christ's revelation, within the context of the church community. Prayer as response is *made possible* through Christ's revelation.⁸⁶⁰ We pray *in Christ* and *with Christ*. Regardless of the form, mode, or content, prayer relies on one thing only – whether it is done *with Christ*, and in living *response to Christ*.

As we have explored throughout this thesis, Christ encounters the human person, simultaneously bringing them into his church community. I will argue in this chapter that prayer is understood

⁸⁵⁸ We pray through Christ the Crucified; DBWE 14:392, 427, 847, 969; DBW 14:376, 415, 853, 987. This will become relevant in this chapter, especially when exploring praying the imprecatory psalms.

⁸⁵⁹ Christ is the Who of revelation, who encounters us when we pray and bids us to pray along with him. See Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures, DBWE 12:302-307; DBW 12:282-288.

⁸⁶⁰ We can seek and ask for the "Who" of revelation, *only when already encountered*. We have covered this in the Church chapter, pp. 108-111.

precisely *as* the living response to such encounter.⁸⁶¹ To pray is to recognise that I exist only in and through Christ's reality, which is simultaneously to exist in his church-community and in relation to the world. Prayer is therefore to respond to Christ's reality with my whole being and bring others into recognition of that reality. I will argue that prayer is the very fabric of Christian life in freedom and obedience to Christ. Prayer is therefore both a concrete *activity* offered up, but also a daily *orientation* or pattern of response to Christ's reality.

I will demonstrate that prayer is understood through Bonhoeffer's Christology and related ecclesiology and theological anthropology. I do not pray to gain something from God, nor to seek a God I do not already know myself in relation to. Instead, for Bonhoeffer, I pray to God in response to having already received his divine word. I pray in response to Christ's word, and in so doing, regain this word for myself and bring others into the same encounter. I pray in response to my life in Christ's reality, which is also to recognise my prayer in and alongside my fellow church-community. Therefore, prayer is mine – and truly mine – only insofar as it is also Christ's and his church-community's. To pray is to live under Christ's word.

Prayer is not therefore merely a recitation of a formula or a creed but is a *response*. As I will argue in this chapter, scripture is a type of prayer, in so far as it is also Christ's. Intercession is also a type of prayer, again, in so far as it is also Christ's. Personal prayer, confession, prayers of gratitude, supplication, or prayers in silence; all are prayers, in so far as they are made possible through and in response to Christ. Through this understanding, we can develop our characterisation of prayer. As I will show, for Bonhoeffer, *action* can be a type of prayer. Indeed, a work of *theology* can be a prayer.

When prayer is viewed as an activity but also a pattern of living response in discipleship, prayer can be communal but also deeply individual; it can be entirely Christ's word but also wholly mine; it can be scriptural but simultaneously concrete and contemporary; it can be contemplative but can also constitute action; it can be in service to God but also in response to God's grace. To pray is to recognise oneself in Christ's reality. It is to live under God's divine No but only as one is also caught up in God's divine Yes.

⁸⁶¹ For more on prayer as response, see Jean-Louis Chretien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. by Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2013). Also Simon Oliver, 'Creation and Prayer', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, by Ashley Cocksworth and John C. McDowell (London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), pp. 155–175.

Three Problems

In this chapter, I will initially focus on three apparent “problems” regarding prayer found in Bonhoeffer. I will look at these primarily through Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the psalms in *Life Together* and *The Prayerbook of the Bible*,⁸⁶² but also some of his meditations, sermons, and studies.⁸⁶³ I will demonstrate, through Bonhoeffer’s interrelated Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, that we can understand prayer beyond seemingly contradictory modes, forms, or types, and instead view prayer in the context of a life in response to Christ’s word, and the reality he reveals in his community. The three apparent problems I would like to consider are essentially a case of “Who?”, “When?”, and “Where?”.

Who is Praying?

I will first consider the issue of “Who is praying?”. Bonhoeffer identifies the psalms as the “Prayerbook of the Bible”. In the psalms, the church is taught how to pray according to Christ’s revealed word. It is in the psalms that we receive Christ’s prayer and learn how to pray alongside him. How, though, does one join Christ in praying the psalms of vengeance? Prayers which call for the destruction of God’s enemies? Bonhoeffer is clear that *we* cannot ever pray such psalms, because only the innocent, crucified one can pray them. Does this mean, therefore, that there are certain prayers I cannot join Christ and the church community in praying? And therefore, is my voice silenced and only Christ prays?

I will demonstrate that for Bonhoeffer, psalms are prayers *to* God but are also God’s own word in Christ, encountering and inviting me to pray alongside him and his church-community. We can pray the psalms, only ‘insofar as Christ prays within them’; we pray not in our own name, but ‘in the name of Jesus.’⁸⁶⁴ However, it is precisely because the psalms are Christ’s words, encountering us in our lives, *that we are able to pray using the words of the psalm in response*. We are invited by Christ’s encounter to join with his voice, adding our witness to his word. This does not reduce my voice but rather invites me to recognise my existence in relationship to Christ and the church.⁸⁶⁵

Although *I* cannot pray certain prayers as an individual person, I can pray them *in and alongside Christ and his church community*, having been judged and freed into responsibility. I may pray the

⁸⁶² *Life Together* and *Prayerbook of the Bible* are both published in DBWE 5/DBW 5.

⁸⁶³ For example, “Sermon on Psalm 42”, June 1935, DBWE 14:845-854, DBW 14:851-860; notes on “Christ in the Psalms”, July 1935, DBWE 14:386-393, DBW 14:369-377; “Sermon on Psalm 58”, July 1937, DBWE 14:963-970, DBW 14:980-988; and, “Meditation on Psalm 119”, 1939-1940, DBWE 15:496-528, DBW 15:499-537.

⁸⁶⁴ DBWE 5:55; DBW 5:39-40.

⁸⁶⁵ This theme will be reminiscent of the Agency chapter.

psalms of vengeance in the knowledge that in this prayer Christ is the one praying, encountering me in his Divine word(s), judging me through his No and redeeming me through his Yes. I will show that in praying, one is joined by Christ and the whole church community who have been encountered, judged, redeemed, and living in response to Christ.

When is God's word spoken?

Bonhoeffer suggests in *The Prayerbook of the Bible* and in various meditations on the psalms, that Christians need to be taught to pray.⁸⁶⁶ We are taught primarily using the words of scripture, including the Lord's Prayer and the psalms. Christ invites us to pray using his words.

How, however, do we pray for our contemporary needs or intercede for our church-community in the world, if we are using ancient words from scripture? What is the relationship between prayer in scripture and prayer which responds to the concrete needs of today?

I will demonstrate that what matters is that my prayer is made in response to and in and alongside Christ's word. Prayer is contemporary – I can intercede for the world, and for the concrete needs in my community – but only as I simultaneously recognise my prayer as belonging within the movement of God's unfolding reality. Therefore, I can pray using scripture, or my "own words". What matters is that I recognise my prayer in accordance with Christ's divine word.

I will demonstrate this through looking at Bonhoeffer's figural interpretation of scripture.⁸⁶⁷ Scripture – including the Old Testament – is understood by Bonhoeffer as Christ's word revealed to the world. We can therefore pray for current events using our own words or the words of scripture, so long as our words are mediated by and in response to Christ. We see this, for example, in Bonhoeffer's annotated reaction to *Kristallnacht* in his personal bible, as we will discuss.⁸⁶⁸

⁸⁶⁶ For example, DBWE 5:155; DBW 5:107.

⁸⁶⁷ For more on figural interpretation, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 73-76, 194-197; David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 16, 85-86, 217.

⁸⁶⁸ Discussion of this annotation is found in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, ed. by Edwin Robertson, trans. by Eric Mosbacher and others, English Edition (London: Collins, 1970), pp. 511-512; Eberhard Bethge, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer: One of the Silent Bystanders?', *European Judaism*, 25.1 (1992), pp. 33-40; David A. R. Clark, 'Psalm 74:8 and November 1938: Rereading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Kristallnacht Annotation in Its Interpretive Context', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 71.3 (2018), pp. 253-255; Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 83-108; Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. 87-138; Jeremy Worthen, 'Praying the Psalms and the Challenges of Christian-Jewish Relations:

Where is prayer?

Bonhoeffer appears to have a regimented approach to pray.⁸⁶⁹ Prayer is a daily activity offered as a service to God and to the fellow church-community every morning and evening. However, in *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer also suggests that prayer is not just a delineated activity, but something which orients and surrounds the whole day.⁸⁷⁰ Prayer is therefore a conscious activity, for which we make time in our day, but also characterises a way of *being*, a way of life in response to Christ, that remains with us in the world, beyond the dedicated time of the activity itself.

I will explore this especially through Bonhoeffer's presentation of the morning and the evening, or the day alone and the day together. As well as literal times for prayer, I will suggest that these categories of time also more broadly describe Christian life in response to Christ. There are times we feel judgement, times we feel grace; times we feel alone, and time when we feel connected to community. There are times to intercede, and times we need to be interceded for; times when prayer is formal, times when prayer becomes my ethical action for others, and so on. Through such an understanding, I will show how prayer is a dedicated activity and a description of life in response to Christ.

Prayerful life under the word

Having explored the three interrelated problems of the "Who", the "When" and the "Where" of prayer, primarily through Bonhoeffer's discussions of the psalms, I will conclude the chapter with the suggestion that prayer describes Christian life in response to the divine No and Yes of God. I will also argue that through such an understanding, prayer can be *action* and ultimately prayer can be *theology*.

This will lead us to the conclusion of my thesis. My argument throughout has been that, for Bonhoeffer, Christian life is constituted in free active response to Christ and human others, seeking, discerning, and responding to Christ's divine No and Yes in all our encounters in the world. This involves being placed under judgement, and living in repentance of where we err; but

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton', *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 9.1 (2014), pp. 10-11; Patrick D. Miller, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Psalms', in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology*, 2000, p. 352; Geoffrey B. Kelly, 'Prayer and Action for Justice: Bonhoeffer's Spirituality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 256-257; Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 152-156.

⁸⁶⁹ Daily life at Finkenwalde was regimented by worship, a practice Bonhoeffer continued into prison. See Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 106; Burton Nelson, 'Bonhoeffer and the Spiritual Life', pp. 34-38.

⁸⁷⁰ DBWE 5:76; DBW 5:60.

simultaneously hearing and responding to Christ's graceful word anew. There is no area of life that is not incorporated into Christ's reality. Another way we can think of Christian life under the No and Yes is therefore as a life of prayerful discernment. Prayer, as an activity and a pattern of life, seeks and responds to Christ's encounter, as a practice which orients the life of the Christian person and their freedom-for others in the world. In this sense, Bonhoeffer's theology can be described as a commitment to prayerful discernment.

Bonhoeffer's Use of Scripture

The psalms were of limited importance to Bonhoeffer during his early academic training. In two sermons delivered in 1927 and 1928 respectively, he largely treats them as historical documents and nowhere relates them to revelation, Christology, or to the church's prayer life in the present.⁸⁷¹

Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the psalms, and scripture more generally, changes, moving from a reliance on historical criticism, to an attempt at bringing scriptural criticism into harmony with a theology of revelation.⁸⁷² As Pribbenow suggests, it is difficult to place exactly when Bonhoeffer's scriptural interpretation changes but it is often plotted to around the time of delivering his 1932-33 *Creation and Fall* lectures.⁸⁷³ Biographers point to personal letters, where Bonhoeffer reflects on this change. For example, he writes to Elisabeth Zinn,⁸⁷⁴ expressing that prior to 1930-1931,⁸⁷⁵ he worked in an 'extremely un-Christian and not at all humble fashion.'⁸⁷⁶ But then,

a change took place, a change that transformed my life to this very day. For the first time, I came to the Bible... I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it – and yet I was not yet a Christian... I turned the cause of Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, for my crazy vanity. I pray to God that will never happen again. Nor had I ever prayed, or had done so only very rarely... The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this. Since then everything has changed.⁸⁷⁷

Bonhoeffer identifies his coming to the bible with his becoming "a Christian". Bonhoeffer had used the bible in his preaching and theological work, but there is a change in the *way he reads it*. Instead

⁸⁷¹ Sermon on Psalm 127.1, May 20th 1926 in DBWE 9:470-475, DBW 9:520-526 and Sermon on Psalm 62.1, July 15th 1928 in DBWE 10:500-505, DBW 10:479-485. See discussion in Brad Andrew Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 43-46. Pribbenow notices in these sermons Bonhoeffer only chooses to focus on one verse rather than a whole psalm. He sees this as evidence of Bonhoeffer analysing from a historical critical perspective rather than his later approach, allowing the whole psalm to reveal itself as Christ's word.

⁸⁷² Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, pp. 44-45; Dejonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation*, p. 4. For more on Bonhoeffer's use of scripture, see Stephen J. Plant, "In the Bible It Is God Who Speaks": Peake and Bonhoeffer on Reading Scripture', *Epworth Review*, 33.4 (2006), pp. 7-22; Stephen J. Plant, *Taking Stock of Bonhoeffer: Studies in Biblical Interpretation and Ethics*, first edition (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2014); Jay C. Rochelle, 'Bonhoeffer and Biblical Interpretation: Reading Scripture in the Spirit', *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 22.2 (1995), 85-95; Jameson Ross, *Bonhoeffer as Biblical Interpreter: Reading Scripture in 1930s Germany*, T&T Clark New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics, first edition (London, England: Zed Books, 2021).

⁸⁷³ See Bethge *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian*, pp. 202-206; Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition" of *Schöpfung und Fall* DBWE 3:147, DBW 3:137; Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, pp. 45-46.

⁸⁷⁴ DBWE 14:134; DBW 14:112-113; cf. Editor's Introduction to DBWE 10:35-40.

⁸⁷⁵ See n.2 DBWE 14:134, which relates this change to Bonhoeffer's encounter with the Sermon on the Mount at Union Theological Seminary and the influence of his friendship with Jean Lasserre; cf. Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*, second revised edition (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021).

⁸⁷⁶ DBWE 14:134; DBW 14:112.

⁸⁷⁷ DBWE 14:134; DBW 14:113.

of reading it according to his own aims, he allows himself to be encountered by Christ's word and therefore be transformed.

In a letter written to Rüdiger Schleicher in April 1936, Bonhoeffer expands on this:

Let me first admit quite simply: I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we merely need ask perpetually and with a bit of humility in order to get the answer from it. One cannot simply read the Bible like other books. One must be prepared genuinely to query it... Of course, one can also read the Bible just as one does any other book, for example, from the perspective of textual criticism, etc. There can be no objections to such reading. It merely is not the use that genuinely discloses the essence of the Bible; it discloses merely its surface... Can you then somehow also understand that I am more willing to engage in a *sacrificium intellectus*... that is, that I am willing to grant that this or that passage of Scripture cannot yet be understood, though with the certainty that one day this passage will indeed be revealed as God's own word, and that I would prefer to take this position rather than to say at my own discretion: This is divine, while that is human!? And now I really would also like to say to you personally, that since having learned to read the Bible in this way— and it has not been at all that long— it becomes more miraculous to me each day.⁸⁷⁸

One can read the bible as one does other books, analysing it according to its history, authorship, and reception. Nowhere does Bonhoeffer deny the role of textual historical criticism. However, alone it is not enough.⁸⁷⁹ Textual criticism, he says, does not 'disclose[] the essence of the Bible.' There may be passages which are difficult to understand as God's word, but we cannot, on this basis, decide what is divine or human word. Rather, Bonhoeffer says, we must read the entirety of the bible as the source of revelation, and humbly ask for God's word to encounter us. We do not deny that it is the work of human creativity, but it is simultaneously the word of God encountering us in the world.⁸⁸⁰

We see this change of interpretation take place in Bonhoeffer's analysis of the psalms. For example, if we look at a sermon he preached in London in April of 1934 on Psalm 98.1, according to Pribbenow, 'he demonstrates a perceptible interpretive alteration that results in less concern

⁸⁷⁸ DBWE 14:167-169; DBW 12:144-147, cited in Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, p. 46.

⁸⁷⁹ For more on Bonhoeffer's approach to scriptural interpretation; Ross, *Bonhoeffer as Biblical Interpreter*.

⁸⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer combines historical and theological readings of scripture, often described as a Christological figural interpretation; Arnold Huijgen, 'The Key to the Bible: Bonhoeffer's Approach to the Psalms as Theological Interpretation', *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 37.2 (2021), pp. 147-155. For more on Bonhoeffer's figural interpretation of scripture; Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real*, pp. 218-227; K. W. Clements, 'How I Love Your Law: Bonhoeffer and the Old Testament', in *What Freedom?: The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol: Baptist College, 1990), pp. 137-152, especially pp. 137-142; David A. R. Clark, 'Psalm 74:8 and November 1938', pp. 255-260.

for recreating the psalm's *Sitz im Leben* and more concern for the psalm's theological and Christological meaning.⁸⁸¹ As Bonhoeffer says in this sermon,

Let us keep this clearly in mind: the word of God, as it comes to us in [the] Bible and in the proclamation of his gospel, does not need ornamentation. It is clothed in its own glory, its own beauty – that certainly is true. But like exceptional human beauty, even the word of God cannot escape being adorned by those who love it. However... every adornment... adorning the word of God cannot be anything other than letting its own beauty shine even more gloriously. Nothing foreign to it, nothing false, nothing artificial, no glittering trinkets or cosmetics, nothing that conceals its intrinsic beauty, but rather that which reveals it and makes it visible, should be used to adorn it.⁸⁸²

This is important for our discussion. Scripture is the word of God and therefore encounters the reader or listener as such. It does not require ornamentation. However, Bonhoeffer says, scripture *can be 'adorned'* by those who love it, who add their own witness, use their own words, or apply their own experience to it. This can be done, but only in so far as it remains the word of God and does not become something 'foreign', outside of God's ongoing revelation in the world in Christ.⁸⁸³

Why focus on the psalms?

Bonhoeffer's approach to scripture as the revealed word of God has important ramifications for our understanding of the Psalms. As Chapman suggests,

The core conviction animating Bonhoeffer's approach is that Jesus Christ is the one who prays the Psalms – that is, the speaking voice within the Psalter is best understood theologically as that of Christ. This conviction is carefully framed: Bonhoeffer does maintain that the one who originally prayed the Psalms "remains himself." In other words, the pre-Christian roots of the Psalms are real. Bonhoeffer does not mean to efface the historical particularity of the Psalms, nor does he operate with a binary distinction in which the Psalms can have only a historical *or* a Christological sense.⁸⁸⁴

⁸⁸¹ Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, p. 46; DBWE 13:353-357; DBW:351-356.

⁸⁸² DBWE 13:355; DBW 13:353.

⁸⁸³ For more on scripture as the voice of God, see Ralf K. Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmermann, *God Speaks to Us: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics*, International Bonhoeffer Interpretations (IBI) (Bern, Suisse: Peter Lang, 2013).

⁸⁸⁴ Stephen B. Chapman, 'Who Prays the Psalms? Bonhoeffer's Christological Concentration', *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 37.2 (2021), p. 168.

The psalms do not merely predict Christ's coming or foreshadow Christ. Rather, for Bonhoeffer, *Christ is present in the voice of Psalter*. The psalms are therefore historical and human but are simultaneously Christ's word encountering us as revelation in the present day.⁸⁸⁵

The psalms were of huge importance to Bonhoeffer in relation to scriptural revelation, but also for the structure of Christian life, especially in the church-community. This is evidenced by the central role he gave them during his directorship of Finkenwalde. After visiting three Anglican monasteries in 1935, including the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, Bonhoeffer was inspired by the daily routine of praying according to the psalms,⁸⁸⁶ a practice that he brought to Finkenwalde with him. He was seeking to establish a 'scripture-soaked'⁸⁸⁷ spiritual community.

As Kuhns notes, '[t]he first exercise [at Finkenwalde] after rising each morning was a formal prayer: alternate psalms and hymns,'⁸⁸⁸ and before breakfast the seminarians sat down for half an hour to meditate on a short passage on the bible. They were to 'listen to what the text spoke, to pray over it and interpret their lives according to it.'⁸⁸⁹ This practice did not stop with the closure of Finkenwalde. Indeed, up to the outbreak of the war, a *Rundbrief* was sent to seminarians, containing pastoral support, and news of Finkenwalde. These circular letters also listed the texts chosen for morning meditations.⁸⁹⁰

Bonhoeffer's conviction of the tightly knit relationship between the psalter, prayer, and community is a distinctive theme in *Life Together*. Here, he summarises church-community life under 5 headings: Community, the Day Together, the Day Alone, Service, Confession, and the Lord's Supper. Much of the "Day Together" section is dedicated to praying the psalter, recommending Christian community to intentionally begin and end their day praying the psalms. As Bonhoeffer says,

From ancient times in the church a special significance has been attached to the *praying of Psalms* together. In many churches to this day the Psalter is used at the beginning of every

⁸⁸⁵ It has been suggested Bonhoeffer's approach to the psalms does not give enough space for historical context; Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, pp. 179-180; Jens Zimmermann, 'Reading the Old Testament with Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *Acts of Interpretation: Scripture, Theology, and Culture*, ed. by S.A. Cummins and Jens Zimmermann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 215. Chapman offers an alternative view, that Bonhoeffer could expand his hermeneutical theory, Chapman, 'Who prays the Psalms?' pp. 169-172.

⁸⁸⁶ Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945*, p. 175; Mary Bosanquet, *Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1968), p. 148; Jeremy Worthen, 'Praying the Psalms and the Challenges of Christian-Jewish Relations', p. 4; Ann L. Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom*, p. 106; Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, p. 59.

⁸⁸⁷ Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, p. 60.

⁸⁸⁸ William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1967), p. 94.

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 96.

service of daily worship together. The practice has been lost to a large extent, and we must now recover the meaning of praying the Psalms.⁸⁹¹

According to Bonhoeffer, regularly praying the psalms is important, because they teach us three interrelated things:

First, praying the psalter teaches the Christian what prayer means. We 'learn to pray on the basis of Christ's prayer... praying on the basis of the word of God... Christian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed word and has nothing to do with vague self-seeking desires.'⁸⁹² We pray correctly, Bonhoeffer says, when we relinquish our self-seeking desires and instead realise prayer is made in response to and on the basis of Christ's encounter alone.⁸⁹³

Second, if we learn to pray in and through Christ's word rather than our independent desires, we also learn *what* we should pray. We learn the content of what we should pray, according to what has been graciously revealed to us in Christ's encounter.

Third, because we pray in and alongside Christ's revealed word, prayer also teaches us to pray as a community. The body of Christ is praying and I 'recognize that my prayer is only a tiny fraction of the whole church. I learn to join the body of Christ in its prayer. That lifts me above my personal concerns and allows me to pray selflessly.'⁸⁹⁴

These three learnings immediately direct us to Bonhoeffer's christologically informed ecclesiology and theological anthropology.

The psalter teaches the Christian that prayer is possible only on the basis of the word of God: to pray is to have received Christ's word and to respond to it. I do not seek out a strange God in my prayer; rather, I pray to the one who has already encountered and judged me in the divine No, and transformed me through the divine Yes. To pray is to seek and respond to the one who has encountered and transformed me, and who continues encountering me and transforming me as I live in the world. I pray in and alongside Christ who has invited me to conform myself to his freedom-for. Therefore, the content of my prayer is made in accordance with this transformation. I pray according to Christ's reality, which means to exist for others, and their needs.

⁸⁹¹ DBWE 5:53; DBW 5:38.

⁸⁹² DBWE 5:55; DBW 5:40.

⁸⁹³ But this *is* precisely to pray for my true desires in conformation with my created nature. See Agency chapter, pp. 46-51.

⁸⁹⁴ DBWE 5:57; DBW 5:42.

Because Christ's word is a word *for others*, not kept to himself but given to the world, therefore to pray is also to recognise that I never pray in isolation. To pray according to Christ's word means praying in and alongside his church-community, the community I find myself in upon encounter. To understand prayer, therefore, we must place it within Bonhoeffer's Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology. This will become evident in the next sections, where I will work through the three "problems" present in Bonhoeffer's discussion of praying the psalms.

Who is Praying?

Bonhoeffer begins *Prayerbook of the Bible* with a reflection on Luke 11.1 “Lord, teach us to pray!”

So spoke the disciples of Jesus. In doing so, they were acknowledging that they were not able to pray on their own; they have to learn. ‘To learn to pray’ sounds contradictory to us. Either the heart is overflowing that it begins to pray by itself, we say, or it will never learn to pray. But this is a dangerous error, which is certainly very widespread among Christians today, to imagine that it is natural for the heart to pray. We then confuse wishing, hoping, sighing, lamenting, rejoicing – all of which the heart can certainly do on its own – with praying. But in doing so we confuse earth and heaven, human beings and God. Praying certainly does not mean simply pouring out one's heart. It means, rather, finding the way to and speaking with God, whether the heart is full or empty. No one can do that on one's own. For that one needs Jesus Christ.⁸⁹⁵

Praying, Bonhoeffer says, is not about reaching out to God from the ‘natural desires’ of one's own heart. It is instead ‘finding the way to and speaking with God’, which a person can do only if they have already been encountered by Christ. As we have explored earlier in this thesis, obedience does not chronologically lead to faith, nor faith to obedience.⁸⁹⁶ So it is with prayer. I pray to find my way to God; but I can do this only after having already been found and encountered. To pray is therefore to have been encountered, and simultaneously to seek encounter again. It is for this reason, Bonhoeffer says, that the disciples *want* to pray (they are seeking the God who has already encountered them), but simultaneously they ‘do not know how’ (they cannot pray from their own resources, but only as those who have been encountered and conformed to Christ).

We respond to Christ and join in his prayer. Simultaneously, in responding to Christ's word and joining his prayer, it is revealed *we cannot pray* from our own resources. This is how Bonhoeffer understands prayer; we are incapable of prayer and yet are granted ability to pray in Christ. It is only praying with Christ that we can be certain that God hears us. ‘When our will, our whole heart, enters into the prayer of Christ, *then we are truly praying*.’⁸⁹⁷ In other words, it is *when we are encountered* and conformed to Christ in our entire beings that we become able to pray.

We can pray the psalms, Bonhoeffer says, as those who are praying in and alongside Christ. As I will argue, however, this requires being *encountered by Christ's word* and recognising oneself in

⁸⁹⁵ DBWE 5:155; DBW 5:107.

⁸⁹⁶ See Church chapter, pp. 106-111.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

Christ's reality. In joining Christ's prayer, I am called *out of* my sinful existence, judged under the divine No; I am simultaneously *called into* free responsibility to others in the world, under the divine Yes. This is nowhere seen to a greater extent than in the so-called imprecatory psalms.

Praying the Imprecatory Psalms

Bonhoeffer accepts that no part of the psalter 'causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called psalms of vengeance,'⁸⁹⁸ otherwise known as the 'imprecatory psalms'.⁸⁹⁹ With 'shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire psalter'⁹⁰⁰ and we are doomed in any attempt to pray them from our own desires.

Bonhoeffer preached on Psalm 58 in 1937, a psalm which includes lines such as 'O God, break their teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O, Lord!' and 'The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked, such that people will say: there is a reward for the righteous; God is still the judge on earth.'⁹⁰¹ Bonhoeffer asks, 'is this terrible psalm of vengeance really our prayer? Are we even permitted to pray in this way?'⁹⁰² His answer is no,⁹⁰³ 'we are certainly not permitted to pray in this way!'⁹⁰⁴

We cannot pray this psalm, not because we are *too good*, Bonhoeffer says, but rather because '*we are too sinful*.'⁹⁰⁵ Only the innocent Christ is able to step into the world and accuse it. Therefore, *we* do not accuse the sinful, but *Christ* does.

⁸⁹⁸ DBWE 5:174; 'die sogenannten Rachepsalmen' DBW 5:128-129.

⁸⁹⁹ Brent A. Strawn, 'Bonhoeffer on Enemies and Imprecation in the Psalms: A Biblical-Theological Commentary', *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 37.2 (2021), pp. 156-159; Nadine Hamilton, 'Praying the Imprecatory Psalms? Reflections on an Unresolved Theological Problem with Dietrich Bonhoeffer', *International Journal of Systematic Theology: IJST*, 24.3 (2022), pp. 380-401; Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ*, pp. 74-78.

⁹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer lists psalms of vengeance, as numbers '5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 137, and others,' DBWE 5:174; DBW 5:129.

⁹⁰¹ Psalm 58, cited at the beginning of Bonhoeffer's Sermon on Psalm 58, DBWE 14:963-970; DBW 14:980-988. Such psalms feel contradictory to the Christian message of forgiveness of enemies. Some theologians, especially in Bonhoeffer's time therefore read them 'as belonging to a lower level of religious consciousness when compared to the New Testament. According to this perspective, the desire for vengeance and even murder expressed in these passages is something ancient, even primitive, and must be relegated to a lower theological echelon or simply ignored,' Hamilton, 'Praying the Imprecatory Psalms?' p. 381. She cites Werner Elert, *Zwischen Gnade und Ungnade* (Munich: Evang. Presseverband für Bayern, 1948), pp. 135-136; cf. Friedrich Baumgärtel, *Die Eigenart der alttestamentlichen Frömmigkeit* (Schwerin: Bahn, 1932), p. 45; Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real*, p. 209.

⁹⁰² DBWE 14:964; DBW 14:981.

⁹⁰³ Bonhoeffer uses the verb *scheinen* here – it may *seem* impossible to pray the psalms, but it becomes possible through participating with Christ DBW 14:981; cf. Strawn, 'Bonhoeffer on Enemies and Imprecation in the Psalms' p. 157.

⁹⁰⁴ DBWE 14:964; DBW 14:981.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid. emphasis mine.

The wicked must die so that God's righteousness may be victorious.... Anyone who shrinks back in horror from such joy in God's vengeance and from the blood of the wicked does not yet understand what happened on the cross of Christ. God's righteous wrath at the wicked has, after all, already come down upon us. The blood of the wicked has already flowed. God's death sentence over the wicked has already been pronounced. God's righteousness has been fulfilled. All this happened on the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died the death of the wicked, struck by God's wrath and vengeance. His blood is the blood demanded by God's righteousness for transgressions against his commandments.⁹⁰⁶

It is Christ who died the death of the wicked. It is Christ who is struck by God's wrath. Christ prays for the vengeance of God to come down on himself. In so doing, he takes the place of those who are the deserving recipients. Included in his prayer for vengeance is therefore also a prayer that through him, the wicked will 'be forgiven, for he alone freed us from God's wrath and vengeance, bringing forgiveness to his enemies.'⁹⁰⁷ God's wrath has come down once and for all on the cross of Christ. It is Christ's cross that therefore judges us for our sinfulness (the No); but simultaneously releases us from this wrath through his grace (the Yes).

We are therefore permitted to pray the psalm so long as we recognise it from the revelation of Christ's reality. Through Christ's prayer, we recognise *ourselves* among the wicked, and it is *we* who stand 'immediately among the accused'.⁹⁰⁸ As Hamilton suggests, the vengeance and violence is not directed at some unknown enemy but at 'the very person praying the Psalm.'⁹⁰⁹ In hearing and praying this psalm, we recognise it is *we* who are sinful. We are struck by Christ's divine No. As Bonhoeffer says at the beginning of the sermon, '[w]e have to admit that it is God's just punishment that afflicts and humbles us sinners... It is God who has risen up against us in wrath to punish our sins... our profound lack of discipline in daily life under the divine word.'⁹¹⁰

And, yet, in joining Christ's praying this psalm, we recognise that *God's vengeance has already been fulfilled* in the cross and resurrection. When we look to Christ, the crucified 'we recognize God's true living wrath on us, the wicked, and in that very moment we also recognize our liberation from this wrath, and we hear: Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'⁹¹¹ The divine No we hear includes the divine Yes.

⁹⁰⁶ DBWE 14:968-969; DBW 14:986.

⁹⁰⁷ DBWE 14:969; DBW 14:986.

⁹⁰⁸ DBWE 14:965; DBW 14:983.

⁹⁰⁹ Hamilton, 'Praying the Imprecatory Psalms,' p. 391.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹¹ DBWE 14:969; DBW 14:987.

The psalm encounters the person praying, revealing them as ‘simultaneously accuser and accused... *simul iustus et peccator*.’⁹¹² I am judged as deserving of divine wrath; but I am simultaneously released from this wrath in Christ’s grace. It is through Christ’s divine No *and* Yes that I pray this psalm (and all others). Indeed, if we are *genuinely* to pray the psalms, we cannot be selective or expunge those which make us feel uncomfortable.⁹¹³ We must pray all of them, including those that encounter and condemn us, for it is only through this divine No and that we can also hear the Yes.

It is having been encountered by Christ’s word(s), that we are able to bring his word to others. As Bonhoeffer’s sermon ends, ‘Christ bore God’s wrath *for everyone*. Whoever comes to him, abides with him, will no longer be struck by God’s wrath or vengeance.’⁹¹⁴ To pray this psalm therefore involves the responsibility of bringing this message to others and encounter them with Christ’s reality.

Is Prayer Mine?

Christ’s encounter is not something I keep for myself. As we have explored throughout this thesis, I am encountered by Christ and his divine No kills my sinful, isolated self; but only as his divine Yes releases me into freedom for others. I therefore pray in Christ, with and for others.

It is for this reason I can pray the imprecatory psalms. Indeed, I can pray *any prayer* because I do not pray from my “own” desires, but with and for others. As Bonhoeffer says,

Jesus Christ has brought before God every need, every joy, every thanksgiving, and every hope of humankind. In Jesus’ mouth the human word becomes God’s word. When we pray along with the prayer of Christ, God’s word becomes again a human word. Thus all prayers of the Bible are such prayers, which we pray together with Jesus Christ... Otherwise there are no true prayers, for only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray.⁹¹⁵

When we pray the psalms, we do not, Bonhoeffer says, ask what they have to do with us, ‘but what they have to do with Jesus Christ.’⁹¹⁶ Indeed, it ‘does not matter whether the Psalms express exactly what we feel in our hearts at the moment we pray.’⁹¹⁷ Bonhoeffer even ponders whether ‘it is precisely the case we must pray against our own heart in order to pray rightly’⁹¹⁸

⁹¹² Hamilton, ‘Praying the Imprecatory Psalms,’ p. 400.

⁹¹³ Expunging certain psalms is to refuse to be encountered; Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms, Second Edition: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, second edition (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2007), p. 68.

⁹¹⁴ DBWE 14:969; DBW 14:987. Emphasis mine.

⁹¹⁵ DBWE 5:157; DBW 5:108.

⁹¹⁶ DBWE 5:157; DBW 5:109.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid.

⁹¹⁸ Ibid.

because it is not for that which we pray ourselves that is important – but rather for that which God wants us to pray.

This sounds as if we must reduce our own needs and desires in order to pray the word of Christ. It could easily sound like prayer through encounter institutes a replacement of my sinful thoughts and feelings with the thoughts and feelings that Christ gives me – thoughts and feelings that match my true purpose as God's creature, but that have nothing to do with the thoughts and feelings that have emerged from my particular history so far. However, given what we have said in this thesis about non-competitive divine relations, this is not the case.⁹¹⁹ We 'pray against our own heart' *only* insofar as that heart is turned in upon itself in selfish desire. The authentic prayer into which we are led is prayer that recognises our *true situation* of dependence upon and responsibility for one another. It is an opening of our eyes to our true gifts and needs and the gifts and needs of those around us. So understood, 'authentic' prayer takes us *deeper* into our specific context, rather than away from our particular desires and situation.

In letting go of my apparent desires in prayer, I am released to pray *authentically* alongside Christ's word. As Bonhoeffer says in the passage above, Christ's word *becomes again a human word* when we join his prayer. In prayer I am brought to the face of God through joining with Christ's word. Simultaneously, however, in joining Christ's word, I am transformed into an authentic human, living with and for others. Prayer is therefore Christ's word *and* human word, not in competition with one another.

As Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together*,

God's word, the voice of the church, and our prayer belong together. So we must now speak of prayer together... we have heard God's word and we have the privilege of joining in the song of the church, but now we are to pray to God as a community, and this prayer must really be *our* word, *our* prayer- for this day, for our work, for our community, for the particular needs and sins that commonly oppress us, for the persons who are committed to our care.⁹²⁰

Prayer does not take me away from my life or needs. Prayer belongs in the church community, where I encounter others with Christ's word and my own human word; and am encountered in return.

⁹¹⁹ See Agency chapter, especially pp. 39-45 and 46-51.

⁹²⁰ DBWE 5:68-69; DBW 5:53.

Bonhoeffer says in *Sanctorum Communio*, that the church must therefore have and practice ‘one common prayer.’⁹²¹ It is in such a way that prayer ‘is one of the major sources of strengthening, gathering and unifying congregations’⁹²² because it is where we encounter Christ and one another, and bring the church-community into Christ’s unfolding reality. This is especially seen in intercessory prayers, which I will focus on next.

⁹²¹ DBWE 1:118; DBW 1:126.

⁹²² DBWE 1:202; DBW 1:135.

When is God's Word Spoken?

Bonhoeffer says that we must learn to pray. As a child learns to speak 'because the parent speaks to the child... so we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us.'⁹²³ We learn by 'repeating God's own words', because God 'wishes to hear us, not in the false and confused language of our heart but in the clear and pure language that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.'⁹²⁴ God's speech meets us in scripture – and therefore, Bonhoeffer says – scripture must be the firm foundation of our prayer.

The issue we therefore need to consider is how we can pray according to scripture, using words written long ago in very different contexts, and yet simultaneously pray for our current situation and community. How can we intercede for our congregation, for example, if we are using the historical words of scripture?

Kristallnacht Annotation

At the beginning of a short article on Bonhoeffer's spiritual life, Nelson mentions 'a rare privilege' of his, that he got to 'spend a night and a day with the Bible which Dietrich Bonhoeffer has used throughout much of his adult life.'⁹²⁵

Originally given as a Confirmation Bible to his older brother, Walter, it had been presented to Dietrich after his brother had been killed in World War I. The Bible must have been well-used because it is well-worn; underlinings and marginal comments are found on many of the pages. Numerous passages are marked several times over.⁹²⁶

It is one example of such marginalia that I want to discuss here. Bethge, among others,⁹²⁷ draws attention to pencil marks and a note in the bible Bonhoeffer used for daily meditation, and a sentence he inserted in a circular letter prepared for his former students.

According to Bethge,

In the Luther Bible which he used daily, beside Psalm 74, verse 8, there is the date 9.11.38 [the date of *Kristallnacht*] with an exclamation mark and several lines against the following verses, all in his own hand. In Psalm 74 from verse 9 onwards it says: "They said in their hearts, let us plunder their goods! They burn all the houses of God in the land. Our signs we

⁹²³ DBWE 5:156; DBW 5:108.

⁹²⁴ Ibid.

⁹²⁵ Burton Nelson, 'Bonhoeffer and the Spiritual Life', p. 34.

⁹²⁶ Ibid.

⁹²⁷ See note 868 in introduction to this chapter, p. 211.

see no more and no prophet preaches anymore and there is no one among us who knows how long. O God, how long is the foe to scoff? How long will the enemy revile your name? Why do you turn your hand away? Take your right hand from your bosom and bring an end to it."⁹²⁸

In addition to the marginalia, Bonhoeffer also adds a sentence to his 20th November circular letter, saying '[i]n the last few days, I have thought much about Ps. 74, Zech. 2:8, Rom. 9:4-5, and 11:11-15. That leads deeply to prayer.'⁹²⁹ He recommends brethren meditate on these scriptural passages *in order to respond prayerfully to the contemporary events*.

Although Bethge and others have rightly recognised the possible political and historical implications of the marginalia,⁹³⁰ Clark proposes that it is also an example of Bonhoeffer's figural interpretation of the psalter, important for this chapter.

Instead of Bonhoeffer constructing connections 'between psalms and the present-day in terms of linear, temporal and historical correlation,'⁹³¹ what Bonhoeffer demonstrates is closer to figural exegesis. In a figural approach, one can posit a 'simultaneity of what is not simultaneous.'⁹³² There is a connection between the people and events of the Old and New Testaments with the present day, not through any connection between those contexts *themselves* – but through the revelatory activity of God in Christ.⁹³³ In this marginalia and Bonhoeffer's broader treatment of scripture,

he endeavors to show the way that these people and events, separated in time and space, nonetheless belong together as two aspects of a single economy or pattern orchestrated around the one divine utterance made incarnate in Christ. Though events never repeat themselves identically, there is the contention that a nonidentical repetition is at work in God's redemptive activity in the world, a repetition articulated through typological interpretation.⁹³⁴

This is not parallelism or figurative interpretation, where the Old Testament becomes a vehicle or allegory for Christ's present revelation. Rather, Bonhoeffer reads the bible *as Christ's revelation*. It truly speaks to the context of the Old Testament *and truly speaks now*.

⁹²⁸ Bethge, 'One of the Silent Bystanders?', p. 36.

⁹²⁹ DBWE 15:84; DBW 15:84.

⁹³⁰ Clark, 'Rereading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Kristallnacht Annotation', p. 261; Bethge, 'One of the Silent Bystanders?', p. 36; Martin Rumscheidt, 'The View from Below: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Reflections and Actions on Racism', *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 24, Supplement 1 (2008), p. 69.

⁹³¹ Clark, 'Rereading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Kristallnacht Annotation', p. 262.

⁹³² Friedrich Ohly, *Sensus Spiritualis: Studies in Medieval Significance and the Philology of Culture*, ed. by Samuel P. Jaffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 40.

⁹³³ See Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real*, p. 227.

⁹³⁴ Ibid.

Through praying or meditating on the psalms, therefore, one can pay attention to Christ's reality unfolding in the world, not in such a way that I am distracted from my own needs and church-community but rather can encounter Christ's word *as occurring there and then* but also entirely and fully *now*. As Grove suggests, we can approach the psalms and acknowledge that God speaks, the original speaker speaks, I speak, *and* the church speaks.⁹³⁵

Bonhoeffer accepts that in the bible, it is David praying the psalms.⁹³⁶ However, for Bonhoeffer, David does not pray 'only out of the personal raptures of his heart, but from Christ dwelling in him.' To be sure, 'the one who prays these psalms, David, remains himself; but Christ dwells in him and with him.'⁹³⁷ David prays from his own context, for his own people, but simultaneously prays in Christ. Reading the bible today, we can pray as ourselves, acknowledging Christ who encounters us now, but also speaks in the words of David, 'Solomon, Asaph, etc'.⁹³⁸ Indeed,

Christ prays. We pray. We who pray are, first of all, the whole community of faith in which alone the entire richness of the Psalter can be prayed. But those who pray are also, finally, all individuals insofar as they have a part in Christ and in their congregation and share in the praying of their prayer. David, Christ, the congregation, I myself... we become aware of the wonderful path that God follows in order to teach us to pray.⁹³⁹

As Bonhoeffer points out, the psalms have always been antiphonal.⁹⁴⁰ We should also allow them to be antiphonal across the ages in Christ's continuing revelation.

Bound Prayer and Intercession

We have established that Bonhoeffer recommends prayer and meditation through scripture. As he suggests in a meditation guide written in 1935, there is meditation that 'is free and

⁹³⁵ Grove suggests that in such a way, psalms are prosopological, Kevin G. Grove, 'Transfiguring Speech: Prayer and the Psalms', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, by Ashley Cocksworth and John C. McDowell (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), pp. 47-48; Kevin G. Grove, "'The Word Spoke in Our Words That We Might Speak in His': Augustine, the Psalms and the Poetry of the Incarnate word", in *Poetic Revelations: Power of the word III*, ed. by Mark S. Burrows, Jean Ward, and Małgorzata Grzegorzewska (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 29-42; Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (Or the Defense of Poesy)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 22-24). Prosopology has been associated with Augustine's treatment of the psalms; Jonathan D. Teubner, *Prayer after Augustine: A Study in the Development of the Latin Tradition*, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology, first edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially pp. 66-73; Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 171.

⁹³⁶ DBWE 5:158-159, DBW 5:110-111; DBWE 14:870-893, 964-965, DBW 14:878-904, 981-982.

⁹³⁷ DBWE 5:159; DBW 5:111. We have considered the issue of supersessionism in Bonhoeffer's thought in relation to the *Akedah*, on p. 120.

⁹³⁸ DBWE 5:160; DBW 5:112.

⁹³⁹ DBWE 5:160; DBW 5:112-113.

⁹⁴⁰ DBWE 5:161; DBW 5:114.

meditation that is bound to Scripture. To ensure the certainty of our prayer, but also to discipline our thinking, we recommend meditation bound to Scripture.’⁹⁴¹

In notes for a lecture, written within a few months of this guide, he develops this thinking. Bonhoeffer suggests that the difference between Christian prayer and other prayer is that Christian prayer,

is *not immediate prayer*, such that in prayer, we might acquire immediate access to God, which we otherwise do not have. Our prayer is *mediated prayer*, mediated by Christ, the mediator... no prayer can find the way to God that our *intercessor* Jesus Christ does not himself pick up and pray for us, that is not prayed *in the name of Jesus*. This is a reference not to a formula but to substance; namely that our prayer is bound prayer, bound to the human being Jesus Christ, to his life, death, and resurrection; bound to God's own previously executed act, to the spoken word of God that absolves us.⁹⁴²

What matters, then, is not the format or ‘formula’ of what we pray, but its *substance*. Christian prayer recognises itself as encountered and made possible in Christ. Christian prayer speaks through Christ's word, and encounters others with his word.

Bonhoeffer therefore recommends praying from scripture not because he does not believe in the efficacy of praying in another format, but rather because it is here that God has spoken his word in Christ. We can pray through our own words, *so long as our word is mediated by Christ*. It is in such a way that we can negotiate between scriptural prayer but prayer that is also deeply responsive to the needs of the day. As Bonhoeffer says in his meditation guide,

If during meditation your thoughts move to people who are close to you or to those about whom you are concerned, then linger there. This is the proper setting for intercession. Do not pray in general but make your prayer quite specific concerning those commended to you. Let the word of Scripture itself tell you what you should ask for.⁹⁴³

Prayer is specific and concrete to the extent that we pray in response to Christ's encounter in our context.

We can therefore ‘ornament’⁹⁴⁴ scripture, to quote Bonhoeffer's 1934 sermon. We can ‘tie our personal prayers to the words of the bible’ and do the ‘same with our intercessions.’⁹⁴⁵ Offering intercessory prayer – using my words or the words of scripture – means nothing other than

⁹⁴¹ DBWE 14:933; DBWE 14:947.

⁹⁴² DBWE 14:388; DBW 14:371.

⁹⁴³ DBWE 14:933-934; DBW 14:948.

⁹⁴⁴ DBWE 13:355; DBW 13:353.

⁹⁴⁵ DBWE 5:90; DBW 5:73.

'bringing one another into the presence of God, seeing each other under the cross of Jesus.'⁹⁴⁶ In so doing, I am 'granting other Christians the same right we have received, namely, the right to stand before Christ and share in Christ's mercy.'⁹⁴⁷

Prayer that is bound to Christ is prayer that emerges as I learn to see the other person in the light of Christ. It is prayer that emerges as I learn our interdependence; as I learn to recognise myself as living for others and others for me; it is prayer that emerges as I learn to see the life into which we are being drawn together by Christ. This occurs ever again in Christian life. I pray in response to encounter with Christ, and I pray in the hope of being encountered with Christ again. Christian prayer is therefore undertaken in recognition of this continued need to be encountered and turn towards Christ.

I intercede for others to bring them to the same understanding of their created personhood and interdependence on one another through Christ. Bound intercession brings me closer to the other person, for in prayer that is bound from Christ, I learn to see that person through Christ's reality.⁹⁴⁸ It is only through bound prayer that 'everything about other people that repels me falls away. Then I see them in all their needs, hardship, and distress.'⁹⁴⁹ This does not occur once and for all, but rather through a life in encounter. I therefore must return to prayer regularly, to ensure my prayer remains bound to Christ the mediator. It is in such a way that prayer remains mindful of the No and the Yes I live my life under.

⁹⁴⁶ DBWE 5:90; DBW 5:73.

⁹⁴⁷ DBWE 5:90-91; DBW 5:73-74.

⁹⁴⁸ E.g. Bonhoeffer's intercessory prayers for other prisoners, written in his own words but in the style of the psalms, DBWE 8:194-198; DBW 8:204-198; cf. J. C. Hampe, *Prayers from Prison* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 45; Michael Northcott, 'Who Am I? Human Identity and the Spiritual Disciplines in the Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology Through His Poetry*, ed. by Bernd Wannenwetsch, first edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2012), pp. 11-30.

⁹⁴⁹ DBWE 5:90; DBW 5:74.

Where is Prayer?

Kelly admits that those who read Bonhoeffer's prison letters and hear about his involvement in political conspiracy, are 'often astonished to learn that he was also a man of daily, at times childlike, prayer.'⁹⁵⁰ During his directorship of Finkenwalde and in his personal life, Bonhoeffer was a keen advocate for prayer as a daily service, especially in the morning and the evening. Kelly suggests that Bonhoeffer's schedule of prayer was a source of 'Bonhoeffer's inner stamina... without which he could never have persevered in his struggle against Nazism.'⁹⁵¹

I agree with Kelly and will explore in this section how prayer is not only an activity offered as service at a particular time of the day, but also orients, influences, and strengthens the daily life of the Christian. Having prayed, prayer also 'surrounds the whole day,'⁹⁵² before one returns again to prayer. Prayerful life does not therefore just describe discreet moments of prayerful activity, done at regular intervals. Rather, prayerful life is life *lived in and from* encounter – framing everything I do, the relationships I have, and the actions I take, before I offer prayer again in response to encounter, seeking further strength for the days going forward. Prayer in this way describes a rhythm of encountered Christian life.

Bonhoeffer speaks about the daily routine of worship most explicitly in *Life Together*. Prayer 'should be part of the daily morning worship,'⁹⁵³ Bonhoeffer says. Worship will take on different forms, as there are different forms of Christian community, but 'the *word of scripture, the hymns of the church and prayer of the community* should form a part of every daily worship that they share together.'⁹⁵⁴

In his guide of scriptural meditation, written in 1936, Bonhoeffer describes daily prayer as being a service:

Prayer is not a free offering to God but rather service that we owe to God, service that God demands. We are not free merely to deal with prayer as we might wish. Prayer is the first worship service of each day. God makes a claim on our time for precisely this service (Ps. 119:147-58, 164). God needed time before coming to us in Christ for our salvation. And God needs time before coming into my heart for my salvation... our proper, generous service each day can only come from the peace of God's word.⁹⁵⁵

⁹⁵⁰ Kelly, 'Prayer and Action for Justice', p. 246.

⁹⁵¹ Ibid.

⁹⁵² DBWE 5:76; DBW 5:60.

⁹⁵³ DBWE 5:52; DBW 5:38.

⁹⁵⁴ DBWE 5:52-53; DBW 5:38.

⁹⁵⁵ DBWE 14:932; DBW 14:946.

Prayer is a service that we owe God. We come to pray daily in acknowledgement of God's divine No; in acknowledgement that God makes a claim on us, to which we must respond in worship.

But we also come to prayer as something we 'want to come away from... differently than we go to it.'⁹⁵⁶ We are 'anxious to hear what Christ wants to say and give to us today through his word.'⁹⁵⁷ In such a way, this service we owe God simultaneously becomes a means of replenishing faith, of receiving the divine Yes and beginning the day 'strengthened anew'.⁹⁵⁸ Through offering prayer in the morning, we receive Christ's encounter before meeting other people and before the day lays its burdens upon us. We are therefore able bring everything burdening us to Christ, allowing 'him to become Lord over such things before new obstacles appear.'⁹⁵⁹ This is why 'the daily word should come before one's daily bread. Only thus do we also receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.'⁹⁶⁰ We receive the world through receiving Christ's No and Yes in prayer.

Prayer Surrounds the Day

In his description of prayer and work, Bonhoeffer says

it is also God's will that every day should be marked for the Christian both by prayer and work. Prayer also requires its own time. But the longest part of the day belongs to work. The inseparable unity of both will only become clear when work and prayer each receives its own undivided due. Without the burden and labor of the day, prayer is not prayer; and without prayer, work is not work.⁹⁶¹

The day contains both work and prayer, with an inseparable unity between the two. The work of the world can only be accomplished, Bonhoeffer says, when people 'forget themselves, where they lose themselves in a cause, reality, the task, the *It*.'⁹⁶² Work becomes a 'remedy for the lethargy and laziness of the flesh.' But this only happens when Christians have broken through the "It" of the day to the "You" of God 'who commands the work and the deed.'⁹⁶³

Bonhoeffer continues that this is

⁹⁵⁶ DBWE 14:932; DBW 14:946-947.

⁹⁵⁷ DBWE 14:932; DBW 14:947.

⁹⁵⁸ DBWE 14:933; DBW 14:947.

⁹⁵⁹ DBWE 14:932; DBW 14:946-947.

⁹⁶⁰ DBWE 14:865; DBW 14:873.

⁹⁶¹ DBWE 5:74-75; DBW 5:59.

⁹⁶² DBWE 5:75; DBW 5:60.

⁹⁶³ Ibid.

what Paul means by his admonition to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). The prayer of the Christian reaches, therefore, beyond the time allocated to it and extends into the midst of the work. It surrounds the whole day, and in so doing, it does not hinder the work; it promotes work, affirms work, gives work great significance and joyfulness. Thus every word, every deed, every piece of work of the Christian becomes a prayer, not in the unreal sense of being constantly distracted from the task that must be done, but in a real breakthrough from the hard It to the gracious You [Du].⁹⁶⁴

The daily activity of prayer is therefore inseparable from the day it surrounds. Having been encountered in prayer, the ‘whole day now acquires an order and a discipline gained by winning this unity of the day.’⁹⁶⁵ It is in morning prayer where this order is found. Prayer offered ‘in the early morning is decisive,’ because the decisions demanded of us in the day ‘will become simpler and easier when they are made not in fear of other people but solely before the face of God.’⁹⁶⁶ In such a way the whole day becomes mediated by God and becomes a living prayer.

The Day as a Theological Category

Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together* that Christians should ‘come together early in the morning to praise their God and hear the word and pray together.’⁹⁶⁷ In so doing, Christians learn ‘again of God the Father and creator who has preserved our life through the dark night and awakened us to a new day... God the Holy Spirit who pours the bright light of God’s word into our hearts early in the morning, driving away all darkness and sin and teaching us to pray the right way.’⁹⁶⁸

Although Bonhoeffer certainly envisions morning and evening prayer literally, having championed this daily routine at Finkenwalde, it is my judgment that “day” and “night” are also theological categories of Christian life. Indeed, there are times for Bonhoeffer in the early 1940s, Dahill explains, where he was less strict in his daily practice of bible meditation.⁹⁶⁹ This might suggest that “daily prayer” is more about a spiritual pattern of response to Christ, rather than simply the literal period of time.⁹⁷⁰

⁹⁶⁴ DBWE 5:76; DBW 5:60.

⁹⁶⁵ *ibid*

⁹⁶⁶ DBWE 5:76; DBW 60-61.

⁹⁶⁷ DBWE 5:49; DBW 5:36.

⁹⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹⁶⁹ A number of letters are mentioned in Lisa E. Dahill ‘Bringing Voice to Life: Bonhoeffer’s Spirituality in Translation’, in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues (1517 Media, 2013), pp. 84-85.

⁹⁷⁰ *Creation and Fall* describes God’s gathering and separating rather than a literal period of time, DBWE 3:49; DBW 3:45-46. See treatment of day and night as theological pattern in DBWE 11:430-433, DBW 11:410-414; DBWE 14:851-852, 933, DBW 14:857, 947.

We can apply this directly to the practice of prayer. In Bonhoeffer's wedding sermon on 1 Thessalonians in 1936, for example, he says 'you realize that everything today is uncertain as far as the future and even tomorrow are concerned; and yet one thing must and should be absolutely certain, namely, that at such a moment we understand ourselves to be one with God's will for us. That suffices for us and helps us get through all else that might be uncertain.'⁹⁷¹ He directly links this with prayer; he advocates to 'pray together every day, morning, midday, evening.'⁹⁷² It is encounter with Christ that can give certainty and direction to the day. Bonhoeffer therefore recommends prayer "in the morning" to strengthen the Christian during 'the day and night' which are 'long and inconsolable... when they are without God.'⁹⁷³

There are times we are able stand before God in prayer and receive encounter. There are times we are separated from God in the work of the day. For Bonhoeffer, one ought to seek times to pray, and this prayer will strengthen us through the time we are unable to pray. This does not necessarily require 'day' be taken literally, but rather places prayer in the context of a rhythm of life in response.

Psalms and the Rhythm of Christian Life

In notes for a lecture on Christ in the psalms, Bonhoeffer says that praying the psalms 'is a strange up and down, falling and yet being supported, being humbled and yet uplifted, through which we pass when we pray the psalms one after the other.'⁹⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer says,

the congregation that prays the Psalter daily experiences here in the inexhaustible variety of the life of the church-community before God. Wilderness, drought, distress, despair, loneliness, illness, revilement, and humiliation, crying and hunger for the living [God], the penitence and remorse of the sinner, anxiety and terror before God... adoration to God through the creation and history, praise of God's power and majesty, confidence, faith, hope, assertions of one's own innocence, appealing to God's court concerning one's own righteous works, summoning God's wrath upon enemies and mockers, summoning God's vengeance and God's day, yearning for the temple and for worship, joy in God's law, peace and quiet with God, the Omnipresent.⁹⁷⁵

In prayer, (through the psalter but also more generally) one views life – suffering and joy, isolation and community, illness and health – in and through Christ's encounter. Prayer is not

⁹⁷¹ DBWE 14:914; DBW 14:926.

⁹⁷² DBWE 14:915; DBW 15:928.

⁹⁷³ DBWE 14:851; DBW 14:857.

⁹⁷⁴ DBWE 14:386-387; DBW 14:370.

⁹⁷⁵ DBWE 14:386; DBW 14:369-370.

just an activity but an orientation to *life* in the world. It is what enables the person to respond to the world *in Christ*. As we have explored elsewhere in the thesis, the Christian lives from the divine No and Yes of Christ, living in the world, but viewing it through Christ's ultimate word. Phrased differently, this is to live *prayerfully*.

Bonhoeffer says, for example,

For most people the enforced renunciation of planning for the future means that they have succumbed to living only for the moment at hand, irresponsibly, frivolously, or resignedly; some still dream longingly of a more beautiful future and try thereby to forget the present. For us both of these courses are equally impossible. What remains for us is only the very narrow path, sometimes barely discernible, of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future. 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought to this land,' [Jer 32:15] Jeremiah is told.⁹⁷⁶

Christians, Bonhoeffer says, live in faith and responsibility freed through Christ's encounter. It is this encounter alone that allows one to simultaneously act for the future but also live in the present. I would argue that this can otherwise be described as living prayerfully; living from and towards Christ's encounter, which surrounds "the day" of our lives.

As Bonhoeffer reflects in a letter to Bethge,

Everything we may with some good reason expect or beg of God is to be found in Jesus Christ... we must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus' life, his sayings, his actions, suffering and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfils. What is certain is that we may always live aware that God is near and present with us and that this life is an utterly new life for us; that there is nothing impossible for us anymore because there is nothing that is impossible for God... what is certain is that in all this we stand within a community that carried us. To all this, God has said Yes and Amen in Jesus. This Yes and Amen is the solid ground upon which we stand.⁹⁷⁷

In Christ, one stands on solid ground amidst 'turbulent times.' It is how one lives fully in 'the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.'⁹⁷⁸ It is through one's daily 'childlike'⁹⁷⁹ prayer which surrounds the day that the Christian navigates through life's variety and sometimes fragmentariness.

⁹⁷⁶ DBWE 8:50; DBW 8:35-36. Many of Bonhoeffer's personal letters include references to scripture; Ian Stockton, 'Bonhoeffer's Wrestling with Jeremiah', *Modern Believing*, 40.3 (1999), pp. 50-58.

⁹⁷⁷ DBWE 8:514-515; DBW 8:572-573.

⁹⁷⁸ DBWE 8:486; DBW 8:542.

⁹⁷⁹ Kelly, 'Prayer and Action for Justice', p. 246.

Prayerful Life under the Word

We have demonstrated in this chapter that prayer means being encountered by and living under the divine word of Christ. I pray in response to Christ's encounter using the words of scripture because I am invited to join my voice with Christ's own word. I can also use my own words, to the extent that they are joined with Christ and reflect his freedom-for the world and the church-community.

We have also established that prayer belongs to me only as it simultaneously belongs to others, whether separated by context or time. I pray in and alongside the whole of Christ's reality. This does not take my word away from me; for to speak as one who has been encountered and released into Christ's freedom-for is precisely to speak in and alongside Christ's word and the community I exist in relation with.

We have finally recognised that prayer is an activity done in response to Christ's encounter, but it also describes the pattern of life in discernment and response to Christ's reality. The whole of my life, whatever fragmentariness I experience, is guided and oriented by my prayerful response to Christ's word. I offer prayer in service and response to Christ, and through Christ's grace, this prayer surrounds and establishes my "day" before I offer prayer again. In such a way, all of encountered Christian life *becomes prayer*.

With this established, we can therefore collapse categories of prayer – the formula of prayer – and instead consider all prayer through its source: as being from Christ, in Christ and in response to Christ.⁹⁸⁰ We can also broaden our definition of prayer beyond a single demarcated activity, to more generally describe *life* in conformation to Christ.

Prayer as action

Elsewhere in this thesis, we have discussed the importance of Bonhoeffer's, 'only the believers obey, and only the obedient believes.'⁹⁸¹ Faith is inseparable from the obedient response of following after Christ in our everyday existence. One is encountered in their whole being by Christ, and therefore must respond with their whole being, conformed to the freedom of Christ who is precisely free *for* others.

⁹⁸⁰ DBWE 14:388; DBW 14:371.

⁹⁸¹ DBWE 4:63; DBW 4:52. Church chapter, pp. 106-111.

I would suggest that it is through the same simultaneity of faith and obedience that we can understand the relationship between ethical action and prayer,⁹⁸² and that with such a characterisation, we can define ethical action *as prayer*. To act ethically in the world, for Bonhoeffer, is nothing other than to respond in faith and obedience to Christ's encounter. Christian action is therefore "surrounded" by, and is an embodiment of, prayer.

We can understand this through the relationship of the ultimate and the penultimate. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer says the following:

To give the hungry bread is not yet to proclaim to them the grace of God and justification, and to have received bread does not yet mean to stand in faith. But for the one who does something penultimate for the sake of the ultimate, this penultimate thing is related to the ultimate.⁹⁸³

Giving bread to the hungry is not itself a proclamation of God, as Bonhoeffer says. However, for the individual who does any human action *for the sake of the ultimate*, in other words, an action which is made in response to and in the light Christ's encounter, then that action is understood entirely *in* this relation. We can apply this to prayer. An action done in response to Christ's reality can be described *as prayer* because it is done in living response to Christ's encounter, participating in Christ's reality.

As Ford suggests, 'union with Christ in faith means union with his being for God and for others in history.'⁹⁸⁴ Therefore prayer involves being encountered and taking responsibility for action. It is precisely in 'this free participation... that God's purpose is enacted.'⁹⁸⁵ We ought not break the intrinsic link between Christian prayer and responsible action; for action in an important way is prayer. After all, it is precisely prayer and action (together) that Bonhoeffer called the church to be in his *Letters and Papers*.⁹⁸⁶ Action is inseparable from its prayerful orientation to Christ's word.⁹⁸⁷ As Bonhoeffer says, it is by prayer surrounding the whole day that 'every word, every deed, every piece of work of the Christian becomes a prayer, not in the unreal sense of

⁹⁸² "Doing the just thing among men' keeps praying from escaping into self-sufficient piety, and praying keeps the doing of the just thing from self-righteousness,' Eberhard Bethge, *Prayer and Righteous Action in the Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Christian Journals Import, 1980), p 26.

⁹⁸³ DBWE 6:163; DBW 6:155.

⁹⁸⁴ David F. Ford, 'Prayer and Righteous Action: Exploring Bonhoeffer's Suggestion', *New Blackfriars*, 66, (1985), p. 341. Ford here is inspired by Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸⁶ DBWE 8:389; DBW 8:435.

⁹⁸⁷ Den Hertog sees the psalms as a hermeneutic key between liturgy (prayer) and action. Gerard den Hertog, "'God Waits for and Responds to Sincere Prayer and Responsible Actions': Liturgy and Ethics in Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *Liturgy and Ethics*, Studies in Reformed Theology vol. 33, ed. by Pieter Vos (Leiden: BRILL, 2017)

being constantly distracted from the task that must be done, but in a real breakthrough from the hard It to the gracious You [Du].'⁹⁸⁸

Theology as Prayer

Bonhoeffer states in his biblical reflection on Morning that, 'Young theologians will find it enormously helpful to set aside fixed times for quiet prayer and worship and then to keep those times with great perseverance and patience.'⁹⁸⁹ He continues that,

Every Christian needs time for quiet prayer. Theologians who claim to be Christians need it even more than others. They need more time for God's word and for prayer insofar as they are specially appointed for precisely those things.⁹⁹⁰

Theologians ought to spend time on prayer, Bonhoeffer says. My suggestion is that for him prayer is also inseparable from theological work itself.

Indeed, Bonhoeffer writes to his brother Karl Friedrich in 1935, with an illuminating statement:

I know that the day I become more "reasonable", to be honest, I should have to chuck my entire theology. When I first started in theology, my idea of it was quite different – rather more academic, probably. Now it has turned into something else altogether. But I do believe that at last I am on the right track, for the first time in my life. I often feel quite happy about it.... I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus sky-high... 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.⁹⁹¹

Bonhoeffer names his theological approach as stemming from taking the sermon on mount seriously – by which he means following the word of Christ. Theology is inseparable from prayerful response to Christ's word. In such a way, theology can be considered *as* a work of prayer.

Cocksworth has explored recent contributions to systematic theology as prayer.⁹⁹² A concern he raises there is where prayer directs theology but without enough attention paid to what he calls

⁹⁸⁸ DBWE 5:76; DBW 5:60.

⁹⁸⁹ DBWE 14:866; DBW 14:873.

⁹⁹⁰ DBWE 14:866; DBW 14:873-874.

⁹⁹¹ DBWE 13:284-285; DBW 13:272-273.

⁹⁹² Theology *as* prayer has been explored by Ashley Cocksworth, 'On Prayer in Anglican Systematic Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology: IJST*, 22.3 (2020), pp 383–411; Cocksworth highlights the work of three theologians he sees combining systematic theology and prayer: Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*

the *Schattenseite* (or shadow side) of prayer.⁹⁹³ Theology, he says, must stand under judgement.⁹⁹⁴ For Bonhoeffer, to pray is not just to receive Christ's divine Yes but also the divine No. At the beginning of this chapter, we looked at a letter from Bonhoeffer to Elisabeth Zinn. There, he reflects on his early attitude to theology. He had previously approached his work, he says, in an 'extremely un-Christian and not at all humble fashion.'⁹⁹⁵ He 'had seen a great deal of the church, had spoken and written about it – and yet I was not yet a Christian... I turned the cause of Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, for my crazy vanity.'⁹⁹⁶

Theology goes wrong when it is turned into a tool for pursuing one's own goals, without allowing oneself and one's work to also come under judgement. Instead, theology as prayer ought to respond *to Christ's encounter*, not seeking to know beyond what is revealed, and not seeking to manipulate it into one's own desire. Indeed, as Higon suggests, '[d]octrinal theology hazards articulations of the knowledge of God that lives in prayer.' It does so 'in the hope that it might enrich and sometimes guide lives of prayerful discipleship, and its precarious work of articulation itself needs to be offered to God in prayer.'⁹⁹⁷ Theology is done in the service of prayer and is offered up to God in prayer. This is how I believe Bonhoeffer's own work ought to be read.

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and, Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁹⁹³ Cocksworth, 'On Prayer in Anglican Systematic Theology', pp. 406-411; cf. Ashley Cocksworth, 'When Prayer Goes Wrong: A Negative Theology of Prayer', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 76.1 (2023), pp. 10-23; and, Ashley Cocksworth, 'Karl Barth's Very Theological Theology of Prayer', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, ed. by Ashley Cocksworth and John C. McDowell (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), pp. 447-467.

⁹⁹⁴ See Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) for a general discussion of issues with too much confidence in Christian practice; Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Interventions (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012), who criticises Balthasar for a prayerful theology which overreaches and does not allow itself to come under scrutiny; instead, Balthasar speaks 'of matters theological with all the confidence of a 'God's eye view', p. 13. Cocksworth lays the same criticism against Sarah Coakley's work in Cocksworth, 'On Prayer in Systematic Theology', pp. 410-411.

⁹⁹⁵ DBWE 14:134; DBW 14:112.

⁹⁹⁶ DBWE 14:134; DBW 14:113.

⁹⁹⁷ Mike Higon, 'Doctrine and Prayer', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, by Ashley Cocksworth and John C. McDowell (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), p. 123.

Conclusion

This thesis has covered a number of themes, from a consideration of Christian agency, to the relationship of the church to the world; from the experience of Christian suffering, to the character of prayer as response. I have argued throughout that Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christian life in all its diversity is made consistent by placing it in the context of a life lived in response to Christ's personhood. Christian living is constituted in a freedom-for others under Christ's divine No and Yes. Put otherwise, it is explained through Bonhoeffer's Christology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology.

The rhythm of Christian life, as I have argued, consists of orienting oneself and one's freedom for others again and again through Christ's encounter, living under his divine No and Yes in time, seeing oneself, one's actions, and one's relationships with others as under divine judgement, and redeemed only to the extent that one is and continues to be oriented Christ's own freedom-for.

Christian life therefore consists of *discernment*, of seeking Christ's ultimate word (the No and the Yes) afresh 'daily'⁹⁹⁸ through prayer, scripture, and the words and encounters of my community, to show me where I have erred, and how I can be reoriented to Christ's reality. This discernment is true at the level of the individual person, the church community, the divine mandates, and ultimately the world as a whole (whether it recognises it or not).⁹⁹⁹ Living according to Christ's encounter also involves discerning *when* and *how* we need to hear the No and Yes. This knowledge cannot be determined in the abstract but only in specific situations and relationships in the world. Because Christian life exists *in community*, this is not a discernment that one attempts alone, but only within the community through which one is encountered and brought back into relationship with Christ. The church therefore lives under a pattern of discernment, judgement, and encounter, as do the persons within it.¹⁰⁰⁰

⁹⁹⁸ Not necessarily literally daily but in a pattern of response. Prayer chapter, pp. 232-235.

⁹⁹⁹ This is something I am aware I have not had space to cover in this thesis.

¹⁰⁰⁰ As does Bonhoeffer's own theology, as I demonstrated through critique of his Marriage Mandate, pp. 158-167.

Christian Life as Prayer

In the final chapter, I considered how prayer and righteous action are inseparable, as faith is inseparable from the obedient response of following Christ in everyday existence. Because a person is encountered in their whole being by Christ's word, the corresponding response must also include one's whole being, conformed to the freedom of Christ who is precisely free *for* others.

I would suggest that it is through this concept of *wholeness* – of the simultaneity of faith and obedience, of a life of discernment and encounter, and living in the penultimate through the ultimate – that we can understand Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christian life *as prayerful*. As Bonhoeffer says in his thoughts on the baptism of his great nephew,

we can be Christians today only in two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.¹⁰⁰¹

The Christian remains a Christian, in thinking, talking, and organising, by prayer and doing justice among human beings, acting in the world in conformation to Christ's freedom-for. In the same way that obedience for Bonhoeffer is inseparable from faith, it is my argument that Christian action is inseparable from prayer. Christian action in this sense *is life lived in prayerful discernment*, with prayer as an activity one offers to Christ in particular moments, but also characterising an orientation of one's whole being to Christ that surrounds the 'day' and all relationships in the world. To live in Christ's reality, and to see the world through Christ as mediator, *is to live prayerfully*, seeking Christ's ultimate word(s) of No and Yes again and again in the world.

Stations on the Way to Freedom¹⁰⁰²

I would like to finish this thesis by looking at Bonhoeffer's poem, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom', which I believe captures this sense of prayerful orientation to Christ.

First, Discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, then you must learn above all things
discipline of your soul and your senses, lest your desires
and then your limbs perchance should lead you now hither, now yon.
Chaste be your spirit and body, subject to yourself completely,

¹⁰⁰¹ DBWE 8:389; DBW 8:435.

¹⁰⁰² DBWE 8:512-514; DBW 8:570-572.

in obedience seeking the goal that is set for your spirit.
Only through discipline does one learn the secret of freedom.¹⁰⁰³

Second, Action

Not always doing and daring what's random, but seeking the right thing,
Hover not over the possible, but boldly reach for the real.
Not in escaping to thought, in action alone is found freedom.
Dare to quit anxious faltering and enter the storm of events,
carried along by your faith and by God's good commandments,
then true freedom will come and embrace your spirit, rejoicing.¹⁰⁰⁴

Third, Suffering

Wondrous transformation. Your hands, strong and active, are fettered.
Powerless, alone, you see that an end is put to your action.
Yet now you breathe a sigh of relief and lay what is righteous
calmly and fearlessly into a mightier hand, contented.
Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet touch of freedom,
Then you gave it to God, that God might perfect it in glory.¹⁰⁰⁵

And fourth, Death

Come now, highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal,
Death lay down your ponderous chains and earthen enclosures
walls that deceive our souls and fetter our mortal bodies,
that we might at last behold what here we are hindered from seeing.
Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action and suffering.
Dying, now we discern in the countenance of God your own face.¹⁰⁰⁶

Hans Ulrich highlights the dangers of reading this poem as if the various periods or stations *lead* to a certain goal, 'perhaps to the goal to become a saint.'¹⁰⁰⁷ Such a reading 'suggests that the poem is a teaching on what a Christian life should be like... but discipleship, in the sense of being delivered into God's will and plan, is something altogether different. Discipleship cannot be taught in a catechetical fashion, or described in a catechetical manner – it is a way of living with

¹⁰⁰³ DBWE 8:512; DBW 8:570-571.

¹⁰⁰⁴ DBWE 8:513; DBW 8:571.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁶ DBWE 8:514; DBW 8:571-572.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Hans G. Ulrich, "Stations on the Way to Freedom", pp. 147-74; cf. the letter to Bethge we considered in the Church chapter, pp.92-94 (DBWE 8:485-486; DBW 8:541-542).

God, who is present in this life in a way that cannot be foreseen... we can only be ready for God's will and plan.'¹⁰⁰⁸

It may not escape the reader's notice that the 'Stations on the Way to Freedom' resemble the themes I have focused on in this thesis. The freedom which orients the life of the Christian in their discipline (responsibility for others), action (ethical actions in the world), suffering (suffering and bearing sin in the world), and ultimately death (physical death but also the daily death of returning to Christ's word), is not a concept but a *person*. The freedom we seek *is Christ*. As Bonhoeffer says at the end of the poem, '[f]reedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action, and suffering. Dying, now we discern in the countenance of *God your own face*.'¹⁰⁰⁹

Freedom, as we have discussed, is not an attribute one possesses for oneself but is a relationship of love and responsibility for others in the world, conformed to Christ's freedom-for. The pursuit of freedom is therefore characterised by living in prayerful discernment of Christ's word, living in repentance under the divine No and pursuing re-conformation to Christ's divine Yes, seeking to be there for others, and bring Christ's word and revelation to the world.

It is this prayerful discernment which orients the 'stations' of Christian life. The stations do not represent a *chronology of life*, as if one ought to pass through each one in order to receive freedom.¹⁰¹⁰ Rather, they depict *variation* in Christian life, where each station is 'surrounded' by and lived in response to Christ's freedom and ultimate word, which we have received once and for all, but continue to seek in the world.

To use Bonhoeffer's words in his description of the stations, it is in response to Christ's freedom that we must be obedient, disciplined in 'soul and... senses', 'seeking the goal that is set forth' in Christ's encounter.¹⁰¹¹ It is in response to Christ's encounter that the Christian does not do 'what's random' but 'seeks the right thing', acting in accordance with 'the real[ity]' of Christ.¹⁰¹² When we suffer, it is in the knowledge that we suffer with Christ and his church community who are free for us. We can therefore 'breathe a sigh of relief and lay what is righteous... calmly and

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁹ DBWE 8:514; DBW 8:572. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰¹⁰ This would add instrumentality absent in Bonhoeffer's thought; cf. Suffering chapter, pp. 192-194.

¹⁰¹¹ DBWE 8:512; DBW 8:570-571.

¹⁰¹² DBWE 8:513; DBW 8:571.

fearlessly into a mightier hand, contented,' feeling 'the sweet touch of freedom' in our church community who bears us.¹⁰¹³

Christian life is comprised of responding to Christ's freedom-for, through prayerful discernment of his No and Yes. This No and Yes is received as ultimate word, sought again and again through prayer, scripture, and encounter with human others, as we live in response to Christ's reality in the world. It is this freedom which orients Christian life, until we are at last perfected in Christ's ultimate reality. Then and only then,

we might at last behold what here we are hindered from seeing.

Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action, and suffering.

Dying, now we discern in the countenance of God your own face.¹⁰¹⁴

¹⁰¹³ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁴ DBWE 8:514; DBW 8:572.

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