

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Embodied Christology

An Exploration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Lifelong Quest

for the Self-Manifesting Christ

Endre György Kovács

A Dissertation Submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Supervisor: Dr. András Csepregi

Department of Systematic Theology

Lutheran Theological University, Budapest

2024

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

That is 'metanoia,' not thinking first of one's own needs, questions, sins, and fears but allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks, into the messianic event, in which Isa. 53 is now being fulfilled!

(Bonhoeffer's letter of July 18, 1944, to Eberhard Bethge)

Abstract

The dissertation focuses on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's portrayals of Christ throughout the distinct phases of Bonhoeffer's life, as expressed in his theological writings. The study proposes that Bonhoeffer's perspectives on Christ can be best understood as a fusion of influences from the biblical depictions of Christ and the prisms that were shaped by his life experiences amidst the circumstances of his narrative.

By emphasizing the contextual backdrop of Bonhoeffer's journey, this study depicts Bonhoeffer's perception of Christ as an evolving perspective, maintaining a focus on seeking the identity of Christ, much like the unfolding narrative of a film. In this narrative, Christ intentionally reveals himself dynamically within and through Bonhoeffer's pursuit of truth. The analysis will encompass the five books published during Bonhoeffer's lifetime (*Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *Creation and Fall*, *Discipleship*, and *Life Together*) and his two major posthumous works (*Ethics* and *Writings from Prison*). Additionally, supplementary materials from the seventeen volumes of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works* are referenced, along with relevant secondary literature.

The dissertation proposes that Bonhoeffer's portrayal of the incarnate God in Christ serves as the focal point for understanding the breadth of Bonhoeffer's theological legacy and holds the potential to reconcile the multifaceted dimensions of our contemporary life. The study contends that Bonhoeffer's Christology can serve as a framework for interpreting the world through the perspective of the reconciling and unifying action of God in Christ and providing a cohesive principle for navigating existence in the fragmented world today.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

“Das ist die ‘metanoia’, nicht zuerst an die eigenen Nöte, Fragen, Sünden, Ängste denken, sondern sich in den Weg Jesu mithineinreißen lassen, in das messianische Ereignis, daß Jes 53 nun erfüllt wird!”

(Bonhoeffers Brief vom 18. Juli 1944 an Bethge *DBW* 8, 535-536.)

Zusammenfassung

Die Dissertation befasst sich mit Dietrich Bonhoeffers Christusdarstellungen in den verschiedenen Lebensphasen Bonhoeffers, wie sie in seinen theologischen Schriften zum Ausdruck kommen. Die Studie geht davon aus, dass Bonhoeffers Perspektiven auf Christus am besten als eine Verschmelzung von Einflüssen aus den biblischen Christusdarstellungen und den Prismen verstanden werden können, die durch seine Lebenserfahrungen inmitten der Umstände seines Narrativs geformt wurden.

Durch die Betonung des kontextuellen Hintergrunds von Bonhoeffers Lebensweg stellt diese Studie Bonhoeffers Wahrnehmung von Christus als eine sich entwickelnde Perspektive dar, die den Schwerpunkt auf die Suche nach der Identität Christi legt, ähnlich wie sich ein Narrativ in einem Film entfaltet. In diesem Narrativ offenbart sich Christus absichtlich dynamisch in und durch Bonhoeffers Streben nach Wahrheit. Die Analyse wird die fünf zu Lebzeiten Bonhoeffers veröffentlichten Bücher (*Sanctorum Communio*, *Akt und Sein*, *Schöpfung und Fall*, *Nachfolge* und *Gemeinsames Leben*) und seine beiden großen posthumen Werke (*Ethik* und *Widerstand und Ergebung*) umfassen. Darüber hinaus werden ergänzende Materialien aus den siebzehn Bänden von *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werken* sowie relevante Sekundärliteratur herangezogen.

In der Dissertation wird vorgeschlagen, dass Bonhoeffers Darstellung des menschengewordenen Gottes in Christus als Fokus für das Verständnis der Breite von Bonhoeffers theologischem Erbe dient und das Potenzial hat, die vielfältigen Dimensionen unseres heutigen Lebens miteinander zu versöhnen. Die Studie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Bonhoeffers Christologie als Rahmen dienen kann, um die Welt aus der Perspektive des versöhnenden und einenden Handelns Gottes in Christus zu interpretieren und ein kohärentes Prinzip für die Navigation in der fragmentierten Welt von heute bieten kann.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

”Ez a *metanoia*, amikor nem a magam bajaira, problémáira, bűneire, aggodalmaira gondolok először, hanem hagyom magamat odarángatni a Jézus útjára, belebonyolódni a messiási eseménybe, hogy most teljesebben be az Ézs 53!”

(Bonhoeffer levele Eberhard Bethge-nek, 1944. július 18-án, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Börtönlevelek, Harmat-Luther, Budapest, 2023, 171. oldal)

Absztrakt

Az angol nyelvű tanulmány Dietrich Bonhoeffer Krisztus-ábrázolásait veszi górcső alá Bonhoeffer különböző életszakaszaiban és teológiai írásaiban. Alapvetése, hogy Bonhoeffer Krisztusról alkotott nézetei legteljesebben a bibliai Krisztus-ábrázolások hatásainak, valamint Bonhoeffer személyes élettapasztalata és narratívájának körülményei által formált látásmódjainak fényében, kiváltképpen ezek kölcsönös egymásra hatásában érthetők meg.

Bonhoeffer életútjának kontextusát szem előtt tartva a disszertáció Bonhoeffer Krisztus-képét egy élethosszig tartó Krisztus keresésben fokozatosan kibontakozó narratívaként ragadja meg. E narratívában Krisztus szándékoltan dinamikus módon – egy film kibomló történetéhez hasonlóan – más és más hangsúlyokkal tárja fel magát az igazságot kereső Bonhoeffer előtt. A releváns szekunder szakirodalomra, továbbá a teljes Bonhoeffer korpuszban, nevesül a tizenhétkötetes angolnyelvű *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*-ben található Bonhoeffer műveit elemző kiegészítő forrásanyagokra építve a dolgozat részletesen elemzi Bonhoeffer életében megjelent öt könyvét (*Sanctorum Communio*, *Akt und Sein*, *Schöpfung und Fall*, *Követés*, *Közösségben*) és két posztumusz művét (*Etika és Börtönlevelek*).

A disszertáció fő megállapítása szerint Bonhoeffer Krisztusban megtestesült Isten ábrázolása egyfelől kulcsfontosságú Bonhoeffer összetett teológiai örökségének megértésében, másfelől a 21. századi élet szétszabdaltságával küzdő ember számára a fókuszpont lehetőségét kínálja fel. Bonhoeffer krisztológiája egyfajta értelmezési keretet adhat ahhoz, hogy a világot Isten Krisztusban kiengesztelő és egyesítő tevékenységének perspektívájából szemlélhessük, és a mai élet széttöredezettségében egy összetartó princípiumot kaphassunk.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Acknowledgements

Composing a doctoral dissertation cannot be the work of an isolated researcher and the present project is no exemption. From the many friends, colleagues and family members in Hungary, Belgium, and Canada, few people must be distinguished for the major roles they played throughout my studies.

First, my dear wife, Kati, who together with our children, Lilien and Robin, has endured many and long hours of waiting and supported me all along. Her unwavering support has been a pillar of strength throughout this journey. Her sacrifices, from allowing me to immerse myself in stacks of books and spend long hours in trying to find the connections in Bonhoeffer's spiritual legacy behind a computer screen to supporting my distant research journeys and assisting in editing my early manuscripts, have been invaluable. Without her selfless and loving presence, this work would have remained a distant dream.

Additionally, I wish to convey my gratitude to William Armerding of Vancouver, B. C., Canada for his steadfast support throughout the initial phases of my application to and studies at the *Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (ETF)* in Leuven, Belgium, to start my doctoral work there as well as during the subsequent years. His support facilitated the commencement of my doctoral studies. I also extend my appreciation to *ETF* for their financial assistance, which has rendered my academic pursuits achievable. I am particularly appreciative of my supervisor at the ETF, Professor Ronald T. Michener. His guidance has consistently provided me with encouragement and support, which I have always regarded as a gift. Furthermore, his insightful conceptualization of post-liberalism has introduced new dimensions to my research.

My indebtedness extends to Professors James M. Houston and Eugene H. Peterson from Regent College in Vancouver, B. C., Canada. Their teachings between 1994 and 1998 introduced me to the approach that underscores the paramount importance of narrative in interpreting the spiritual heritage of the representatives of historical Christianity. Their mentorship and wisdom have provided a foundational framework that underpins my current work, forming the basis for my study of Bonhoeffer.

I must convey my heartfelt appreciation to another Regent College professor from the late 2010s onwards, Jens Zimmermann. His continuous emphasis in his academic work on

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer's dedication to humanization, coupled with his encouragement to press on during our personal discussions, has been a significant motivation for me to persevere in my pursuit of studying Bonhoeffer.

I would also like to extend special acknowledgment to Andras Csepregi for his guidance and the creative space he provided, he was instrumental in facilitating significant enhancements to my work. I am indebted for his encouragement to delve deeper into Charles Marsh's *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Marsh's method of interpreting Bonhoeffer through the lens of Bonhoeffer's narrative, rather than through the primary filter of Bonhoeffer's thoughts alone, has played a catalytic role in shaping my work.

Each of these individuals has played an indispensable role in expediting the completion of this dissertation. Their diverse perspectives have collectively aided me in transcending my own biases, which were rooted in the tendencies of modernity to interpret the world outside the context of its actual story, a view that influenced my early development. To each of these mentors and friends, I extend my deepest gratitude. Without their unwavering and gentle guidance, this study could not have reached fruition.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	5
1. The Centrality of Embodied Christology for Bonhoeffer	5
2. Primary Assumptions and the Significance of the Research for Systematic Theology.....	7
3. Research Question.....	9
4. Review of Secondary Literature Related to Bonhoeffer’s Christology.....	9
5. Methodology, Delimitations, and the Use of Primary and Secondary Resources.....	21
5. A. Methodology.....	21
5. B. Delimitations.....	23
5. C. The Use of and the References to Primary Resources	23
5. D. The Use of Secondary Resources	24
6. Thesis Statement Briefly Stated and Anticipated Contributions	25
7. Overview of Dissertation.....	26
CHAPTER ONE: <i>SANCTORUM COMMUNIO</i> , CHRISTOLOGY AS SOCIALITY.....	27
Introduction to Chapter One.....	27
1. The Background to the Formulation of Bonhoeffer’s Christology in His First Dissertation	28
1. A. The Nature of Social Existence and the Language Used to Convey It: A Dissonance	28
1. B. The Experiential Basis of Describing Community	29
2. The Specific Contributions of <i>Sanctorum Communio</i> to Bonhoeffer’s Christology.....	31
2. A. The Sociality of Christ as the Key Principle for Human Existence.....	32
2. B. Factors of Sociality	34
2. B. i. Singularity	34
2. B. ii. Reciprocity	36
2. B. iii. Unity as Capacity for Inclusivity.....	39
2. C. The Vicarious Representation of Christ.....	41
3. In the Big Picture: Being in the Process of Christ Becoming Concrete	44
CHAPTER TWO: ACT AND BEING, A PHILOSOPHICAL QUEST FOR DIRECT	
PARTICIPATION.....	47
Introduction to Chapter Two	47
1. Background for Understanding the Import of <i>Act and Being</i> to Bonhoeffer’s Christology.....	48
1. A. The Philosophical Background for <i>Act and Being</i> : A Self Turned upon Itself	48
1. B. The Impact of the Early Years of Trying to Build the Career of a Theologian	49

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

2. The Contributions of <i>Act and Being</i> to Bonhoeffer's Early Christology: The Openness of the Self versus the Self-Contained Self	51
2. A. The Gift of Being Placed in the Truth	52
2. B. Faith Directed to Christ.....	53
3. Placing the Christology of <i>Act and Being</i> in Bonhoeffer's Narrative	57
3. A. The Problematic Nature of Bonhoeffer's Attempt to Formulate a Methodology Suitable for Theology.....	57
3. B. Toward the Consciousness of the Child.....	59
CHAPTER THREE: <i>CREATION AND FALL AND CHRISTOLOGY, THE RADICAL MOVE TOWARD THE CONCRETE</i>	
Introduction to Chapter Three	65
1. Background to the Turning Away from the Phraseological to the Real.....	66
1. A. The Nature of the Paradigm-Shift that Took Place in Bonhoeffer during 1932.....	67
1. B. Three Individuals of Great Impact.....	68
2. Bonhoeffer's New Realism as Represented in <i>Creation and Fall</i>	71
2. A. Concreteness Expressed in Ethical Action	73
2. B. The Interpretation of the Bible as a Response to God Addressing the Self.....	76
2. C. The Church as the Collective Manifestation of Christ.....	78
3. The 1932-1933 Phase of Bonhoeffer's Views of Christ Placed in the Overall Development of his Christology	80
3. A. Content: Existence in and with God Becomes Concrete	80
3. B. Bonhoeffer's View of a Christ Who is Becoming Concrete Echoed in His Christology Lectures	81
CHAPTER FOUR: <i>DISCIPLESHIP, CONNECTING WITH THE GOD-REALITY BY FOLLOWING CHRIST, AS THE INCARNATE GOD</i>	
Introduction to Chapter Four	83
1. Background	84
1. A. Personal Liberation.....	85
1. B. When Darkness and Light Meet: Decisions Become Inevitable.....	87
2. The Nature of Following Christ from within the Perspective of <i>Discipleship</i>	89
2. A. Grace as the Active Presence of God	90
2. B. Willingness to Endure Suffering.....	93
2. C. Obedience as Orientation toward the Present Moment.....	95
3. The Christology of Discipleship Placed in the Bonhoeffer's Narrative as a Whole	99
3. A. Bonhoeffer's Focus on the Here and Now	100

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

3. B. A Tension Waiting to Be Resolved	101
CHAPTER FIVE: <i>LIFE TOGETHER</i> , COMMUNITY AS THE EMBODIMENT OF CHRIST	103
Introduction to Chapter Five	104
1. Background	104
1. A. The Felt Need to Correct the Individualism of Academic Training	104
1. B. The Theology Behind Seeing Community as an Extension of the Existence of Christ.....	107
2. Spiritual Disciplines as Ways of Participation in Christ as Community	109
2. A. Meditation.....	110
2. B. The Finkenwalde Rule	113
2. C. Forgiving Sins and Receiving Forgiveness.....	114
3. The Theological Prospects and the Practical Limitations of the Finkenwalde Community.....	116
CHAPTER SIX: <i>ETHICS</i> , CHRIST AS RESPONSIBLE ACTION	121
Introduction to Chapter Six	121
1. Factors Impacting the Formation of Bonhoeffer’s Christology While Working on his <i>Ethics</i> ...	122
1. A. Disillusionment in the Confessing Church, but not in Christ	123
1. B. Experiencing the Affirmations of Humanity from the ‘Unconscious’ Remnant	126
2. Bonhoeffer’s New Integration Around the Christ, who Defines the World in its Entirety	128
2. A. Nature as a Representation of God’s Ongoing Activity	129
2. B. The Transient World as a Work of Christ in Progress.....	131
2. C. Humanization.....	132
3. Towards a Christ Who Is Lord Over All	134
CHAPTER SEVEN: <i>LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON</i> , CHRIST AS POWER IN POWERLESSNESS	139
Introduction to Chapter Seven.....	139
1. Factors Impacting the Making of the Prison Writings	141
1. A. Imprisonment, Friendship, and a Move towards a New Sense of Freedom	141
1. B. Karl Barth’s New Theological Affirmation of The World	144
2. The Specific Contributions of the Prison Writings to Bonhoeffer’s Christology	145
2. A. The World That Has “Come of Age”	146
2. B. Religion and its Antidote as Religionless Christianity	150
2. C. The “Discipline of Secret”	153
2. D. The Christological Synthesis of the Prison Writings: Power in Weakness	157
3. The Christology of the Prison Writings Within the Entirety of Bonhoeffer’s Narrative	160

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

CHAPTER EIGHT: SYNOPSIS	165
1. The Contributions of Bonhoeffer's Individual Writings to His Mature Christology	166
1. A. The Christ of <i>Sanctorum Communio</i> as a Conceptual Skeleton for the Idea of Sociality ..	166
1. B. The Representation of Christ as the Pattern for Human Consciousness in <i>Act and Being</i> .	167
1. C. The Christ in Whom God Encounters People in <i>Creation and Fall</i> and <i>Christology</i>	168
1. D. Christ as the Lord Who Calls People to Follow Him in Bonhoeffer's <i>Discipleship</i>	169
1. E. Christ as Community in <i>Life Together</i>	170
1. F. Christ as the Human Being for the Other in the World in <i>Ethics</i>	171
1. G. Christ as the One, who Unites Himself with the Powerless in <i>Letters and Papers from Prison</i>	173
2. The Core Argument of the Dissertation	175
3. The Progressive Nature of Bonhoeffer's Christology	176
3. A. Christology as Foundation for Progressiveness.....	176
3. B. Essence and Form in Bonhoeffer's Christology	178
3. C. The Christ Whose Sphere of Influence Continuously Expands.....	180
4. Implications of Bonhoeffer's Christology for the Fragmentation of Human Existence in the Twenty-First Century	185
SUMMARY	189
BIBLIOGRAPHY	191
Primary Sources	191
Secondary Sources	195

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Preface

The study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christology arises from a personal quest to know God. The current researcher believes that this quest is a response to God's work. The teachings of Jesus, which were echoed by his followers, including the Apostle John, Augustine of Hippo, and Bernard of Clairvaux, emphatically state that the pursuit of God originates from God's pursuit of us, thus confirming this view. The aspirations to know the God-reality and progress toward a more integrated fusion of thought and experience in the life of the present researcher, and to inspire a similar transformation in potential readers, drove the ensuing study. By delving into Bonhoeffer's theology, the goal has been to enrich a personal journey and impact those who may engage with this study in a similar direction.

Two observations, or to be more precise, the overlap of two observations led to the further formation of the above-named quest. The first observation was that in our day and age, one of the most threatening factors appears to be the fragmentation of the multicolored aspects of existence. There are gaps between generations and ethnic groups. Ever sharpening opinions exist between people of different persuasions further intensified by the digital media where anyone can say whatever they wish without following it up in action. The distraction of attention that is the result of contemporary information overload and the multiplicity of choices that need to be made every minute leads to a lengthy list of psychological disorders. These dualisms represent tendencies in society at large and the fragmentation of our age. They are accompanied by a loss of traditional societal values and structures, resulting in the inner divisions of one's identity. This raises the awareness of the need for a cohesive center that holds life together as a united whole. In programs for theological and spiritual formation, the situation is not any better. Theoretical knowledge and direct experience are often treated as opposing polarities.

Secondly, I aimed to identify a theologian whose work and personality could serve as a case study and reference for my research – someone attuned to the complexities of contemporary existence, treating them with genuine respect, while also recognizing the necessity for the above-mentioned unifying core. Dietrich Bonhoeffer emerged as an ideal candidate.

My initial encounter with Bonhoeffer occurred in 1996, through a reading assignment during my studies at Regent College, in Vancouver, B. C., in a course led by Professor Allan

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Torrance. As I engaged with Bonhoeffer's work *Christ the Center*, it became evident that he embodied a blend of attributes. The harmony Bonhoeffer sought and found, not only within the pages of this book but as I later learned across his life-long theological work, did not arise from facile solutions to superficial questions. Rather, it emerged as a rootedness in his vision of Christ and as a product of profound integration, nurtured amidst the tensions of Bonhoeffer's own life.

The more engaged I became in studying Bonhoeffer, the clearer it became that the phenomenon of fragmentation present in our day is noticeable in Bonhoeffer scholarship as well. In the secondary literature, Bonhoeffer has been represented as a theologian who contributes to discourses relating to ecumenism, pacifism, ecology, social involvement, ethics, politics, etc., but I noticed that, in the end, the reader is too often left with a picture whose parts do not hold together. Despite the frequent references to Bonhoeffer's Christology and the consensus among Bonhoeffer scholars that Christology is the uniting thread in Bonhoeffer's thought, there is an apparent lack of reading Bonhoeffer's writings through this lens. Important studies attempted to reconstruct Bonhoeffer's Christ-centered paradigm majoring on certain phases or aspects of his work, leading to composite pictures of ideas. But to me Bonhoeffer's Christology, interpreted from within the framework of Bonhoeffer's narrative, seemed more like a movie, with frequently changing scenes of an unfolding story rather than a composite picture with fixed pieces patched alongside each other. The question of how Bonhoeffer's Christology would look like when viewed systemically in all of Bonhoeffer's individual writings and interpreted from his perspective in the life phases in which they emerged, and how such Christological center could hold his thought together, became pressing.

My approach to Bonhoeffer's Christology as an unfolding story stemmed from my studies at two distinct stages of my life, each teaching me the same lesson. In the 1990s, in my studies of Christian spirituality in Vancouver, B.C., I began to recognize how Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, manifested himself in different ages and movements of Christianity in harmonious and yet distinct ways. Reading the great medieval authors of the Christian faith taught me to interpret their writings from the perspective of the historical Christ of the Gospels who revealed himself through them in the age and narrative in which they lived. Since my time at Regent College, approaching Christology as both the self-

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

revelation of Christ and the existential reality of the one in whose narrative Christ expresses himself became my working method.

Another significant phase in my life, during which I learned the lesson of encountering the reality of Christ through engagement with the historical embodiment within specific individuals and locations, took place in the 2000s in Leuven, Belgium. It was during my studies under Ronald T. Michener that I came across the works of Hans W. Frei and George A. Lindbeck, who illuminated for me the approach of honoring an author's intent by situating all information about them within the original narrative from which they emerged. My exposure to postliberal thinkers helped me to approach truth as a reality that is inherently woven into the fabric of personal and corporate history. I realized that every concept, even the ones presented in the most abstract philosophical or theological writings, are best interpreted within the contextual narrative that gave birth to it.

Guided by these convictions, I embarked on the journey to explore Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christology within the framework of his narrative.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

INTRODUCTION

The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) spent the last 18 years of his life, which encompass the entirety of his theological work, examining possible answers that can be given to the question: ‘Who is Christ, who is he for us today?’¹ This dissertation embarks on an in-depth exploration of the diverse responses Bonhoeffer gave to this question and attempts to formulate a synthesis of these responses as a way of reflecting Bonhoeffer’s Christology.

1. The Centrality of Embodied Christology for Bonhoeffer

Understanding the identity and the appearance of Christ did not only accompany Bonhoeffer as one of several interests. Understanding the identity and appearance of Christ provided Bonhoeffer with a primary compass for the entirety of his life’s journey. As early as 1928 Bonhoeffer opened one of his first lectures in Barcelona with the following words:

The question before us today is whether in our own day Christ still stands in the place where decisions are being made concerning the most profound matters we are facing, namely, concerning our own lives and the life of our people. We want to examine whether the spirit of Christ can still speak to us concerning the ultimate, final decisive matters.²

The ensuing examination of Bonhoeffer’s writings will show that for the early Bonhoeffer Christ was more an idea than a concrete reality. This does not blur the fact that

¹ Cf. *Berlin 1932-1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12. (DBWE 12), ed. Larry L. Rasmussen. trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 314. (*Berlin 1932-1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Band 12. (DBW 12), eds. Carsten Nicolaisen und Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth, Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997, 295-296).

² “Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity,” *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 10. (DBWE 10), ed. Clifford Green. trans. Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008) 342 (DBW 10, 302).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer sensed, in a way he could not name at that time, that Christ himself sought to manifest himself in and through those concepts.

Four years later, Bonhoeffer's Christ was a radically different personal reality, who calls and confronts the human self with a force that commands a personal response. The recollections of Bonhoeffer's students in Berlin in 1932 reveal that Bonhoeffer frequently posed the question to them as the Christian's most essential concern in the following manner: "Who is this Jesus Christ, the one who encounters us in the Word of God?"³

In May of 1933 at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer teaches a course on Christology and says: "The question may not run, 'How is the incarnate one thinkable?', but 'Who is he?'"⁴ At that time Bonhoeffer suggests that the 'Who is Christ' question is the singularly most important question one can ever ask in theology. Bonhoeffer's answer is unambiguous: Christ is "the center of human existence, of history, and of nature."⁵

Nearly a decade later, Bonhoeffer, being convinced that God wants to reveal himself in and for the world, sees the role of a theologian as one who serves the purpose of "God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God's creatures."⁶ In his *Ethics*, which is Bonhoeffer's most mature theological work, Bonhoeffer describes the re-appearances of Christ in and through those who imitate Christ in the world.

³ Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, I knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer (eds. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith. trans. Kathie Gregor Smith, London: Collins, 1966): 61, quoted in Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 150.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (London: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1966), 102.

⁵ *DBWE 12*, 324. (*DBW 12*, 307.)

⁶ *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6 (*DBWE 6*), ed. Clifford J. Green, trans Reinhard Krauss, Charles West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 49. (*DBW 6*, 34.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Towards the end of Bonhoeffer's life, the same desire emerges in his correspondence with his closest friend, Bethge. In Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer asks: "What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?"⁷

Thus, the present endeavor to reconstruct Bonhoeffer's Christology is not only an interest of the researcher, who inevitably brings his own questions to the table when studying Bonhoeffer. This endeavor runs parallel with a quest that holds paramount importance for Bonhoeffer himself.⁸

2. Primary Assumptions and the Significance of the Research for Systematic Theology

The ensuing study of Bonhoeffer's Christology rests on the assumption that the discipline of systematic theology, along all other forms and categories of Christian theology, serves the purpose of providing guidance on essential aspects of human existence and as such it serves as a catalyst for finding meaning for human existence.

Christology, as a branch of theology, is defined by the same goal. Since in the Christian faith Christ is regarded as both the origin of all creation and the head who controls it all, when Christ is described in him the entirety of God's reality is referred to with an intensity that is more focused than in any other intellectual field and even theological discipline. The lordship that Christ claims over people and the entirety of the world reaches into all aspects of the creaturely existence.

The implication of this assumption, namely that Christology is meant to bring cohesion and connect all aspects of reality to all other aspects, including the person who learns about reality. This process of bringing parts that are far close and of making that which is disjointed into an integrated whole is an integral ingredient of Christology. Any exploration of

⁷ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge (*DBWE 8, Letters and Papers from Prison.*, ed John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 362., *DBW 8*, 402.)

⁸ Andreas Pangritz in his essay "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?" articulates the scholarly consensus when he writes that: "It has become customary to regard Christology as the centre of Bonhoeffer's thought" (Andreas Pangritz, "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 134).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Christology implicitly has a pastoral intent embedded in it and a transforming impact following it. Consequently, this proposition rejects the notion that a mere assortment of theological concepts based solely on its engagement with thoughts pertaining to the identity of Christ can qualify as Christology, because Christology by definition has an invitational, confronting and connecting impact embedded in it, the fulfilment of which belongs to the very essence of what Christology is about.

The objective of the current dissertation is to address a particular affliction of the human spirit that affects both individuals and communities across various domains today. This malady can be characterized as a form of disintegration. Culture, art, science, ecology, ethics, economics, sociology, and even psychology reflect the contemporary phenomenon that the world has become fragmented. The knowledge we attain, our abilities, desires, limitations, and experiences often appear disjointed rather than forming a cohesive whole. The compartmentalizing tendencies of our life today characterize even theology. Christian theology, instead of amending this tendency of falling apart, by focusing on the specialization of the different fields often intensifies this fragmentation.⁹

As one of the subsequent sections of this Introduction will elucidate it, the studies concerning Bonhoeffer express the same fractured view. The exploration into Bonhoeffer's Christology aims at bringing the interest in a movement towards coherence and integration in the midst of a world which in many respects is falling apart. Attempts will be made to seek the paths of integration by delving into Bonhoeffer's perspectives on Christology and endeavoring to point to a path toward healing the pervasive fragmentation in our existence. Thus, the theological significance of this study lies in its potential to reinstate and nurture a sense of cohesion in reality as a whole.

⁹ An early analysis of the disintegrating effects of rationalism is Harry Blamires's *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1980). Alan Torrance in his preface to Justin Thacker's *Postmodernism and the Ethics of Theological Knowledge* (London: Routledge, Ashgate Publishing, 2007) addresses the fragmentation of theological studies. The book written by Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God*, is an outstanding theological attempt to respond to the "abiding out-of-jointness to things, witnessed (but not exhausted) by the abiding disquietude of human hearts" (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, Baker, 2022, 1).

3. Research Question

The forthcoming study is led by the present researcher's quest: in what ways could an in-depth analysis of Bonhoeffer's Christology, which fosters a perception of the world as a unified entity from a Christ-focused perspective, enhance an integrated interpretation of Bonhoeffer's theological thought? The specific question that guides this exploration is as follows: *How does an exploration of Bonhoeffer's Christology, contextualized within the framework of his life experiences, contribute to a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted nature of his theology?*

4. Review of Secondary Literature Related to Bonhoeffer's Christology

Ever since the earliest attempts to study Bonhoeffer's theological legacy, there has been a recognition of the inherent organic development within Bonhoeffer's thought. Sixteen years after Bonhoeffer's death, Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's close friend and first major interpreter, during his lecture in England, proposed the existence of three distinguishable yet interconnected and evolving phases in Bonhoeffer's theology: 'foundation,' 'concentration,' and 'liberation'¹⁰. The present dissertation will adopt this perspective of progression and extend its application to Bonhoeffer's Christology. It will be shown that interpreting Bonhoeffer's Christology as a movement towards an increasingly incarnate presence of Christ in the shaping of those who follow him is in close harmony with Bonhoeffer's own understanding of Christology.

Despite the above-mentioned awareness of the progressive nature of Bonhoeffer's thought, many have invoked Bonhoeffer to serve their own social, political, or theological agendas, often leading to fragmented views of his work in which an emphasis on discontinuity was prioritized over continuity. As the following brief survey of the extensive secondary literature on Bonhoeffer's theology reveals, the thread of Christology and its

¹⁰ In 1961 in the Alden-Tuthill lectures entitled "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology", Bethge presented the following three categories as distinct but interrelated phases of Bonhoeffer's theological development: "Foundation: The Quest for the Concrete Nature of the Message" (1927-1933), "Concentration: The Narrow Pass for Christianity" (1933-1939), and "Liberation: Christianity without Religion" (1940-1945). Bethge's lecture was published six years later in *World Come of Age, A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* edited by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: St James Place, 1967), 25.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

uniting impact on Bonhoeffer's theology was often disregarded during the initial four decades of Bonhoeffer scholarship.¹¹

Between 1945 and 1974 (the publication of the last volume of Bonhoeffer's collected works in German) except for the very last years of this season, people had limited access to Bonhoeffer's works. In these decades, Bonhoeffer was known through his *Discipleship, Life Together*, and a selected version of his *Prison Letters* (first published in 1951 in Germany). Some people knew of his *Ethics* as well, but these works were received as if they would be representing a rather sporadic view, like a montage.

In 1956, Hanfried Müller proposed that the prison letters should serve as a prism through which all of Bonhoeffer's works are to be understood. Müller maintained that Bonhoeffer's concept of religionless Christianity supported Müller's own argument against the relevance of religion in the modern world. This perspective led Müller to suggest a fundamental discontinuity within Bonhoeffer's thought. He argued for a gap between the early and the mature Bonhoeffer.¹² Similarly, in 1967, John A. Philips, in his work *The Form of Christ in the World: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, put forth the notion of a profound discontinuity in Bonhoeffer's theology.¹³ Throughout these initial decades, the theory of discontinuity seemed to dominate the interpretations of Bonhoeffer's theology more extensively than Bonhoeffer's progressive but cohesive thought warranted.

In England, the surge of liberal theology played a pivotal role in igniting the initial interest in Bonhoeffer. In 1953, Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* introduced the proposition of Bonhoeffer's perspective on the notion of a distant God as one that had become obsolete. Robinson advocated for substituting this view with Paul Tillich's concept

¹¹ See three helpful overviews: Ernst Feil, "Bonhoeffer studies in Germany: A Survey of Recent Literature" (*Bonhoeffer Studies*, no.1, Geoffrey B. Kelly, Series Editor, Philadelphia, PA: International Bonhoeffer Society English Language Section, Bonhoeffer Center, 1997); John W. de Gruchy, "The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 93-109); Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide to the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010).

¹² Hanfried Müller, *Von der Kirche zur Welt: Ein Beitrag zu der Beziehung des Wort Gottes auf die Societas in Dietrich Bonhoeffers theologische Entwicklung* (Leipzig and Hamburg-Bergstedt: Reich, 1966.)

¹³ John A. Philips, *The Form of Christ in the World, A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology* (London: Collins, 1967). Philips represents Bonhoeffer from a rather reduced perspective.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

of a God who serves as ‘the ground of our being.’ Robinson perceived Bonhoeffer as a kindred spirit aligned with his vision.¹⁴ Then, Ronald Gregor Smith, who developed a close friendship with Bethge, discovered in Bonhoeffer’s writings a source of validation for engaging with the secular world.¹⁵

To give an indication of how arbitrary these interpretations of Bonhoeffer’s works appeared to be and how limited the availability of Bonhoeffer’s writings were, it is worth recalling the story of James Patrick Kelley, who in 1990 served as a professor of theology, treasurer, and editor of the Newsletter of the English Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society. He shared his story at a convocation address¹⁶, a story that originated from a time thirty years earlier in 1960s, when Kelley, as a student, approached his professor, Hans Frei, at Yale to serve as his doctoral supervisor in his studies about Bonhoeffer. In response, Frei reproached Kelley for the immaturity of his request; since Frei knew of no substantial material to work on for an academic undertaking on Bonhoeffer.

Aside from the limited availability of Bonhoeffer’s writings, the theological climate of the day also forced Bonhoeffer’s theology to the background. During the 1960s and 1970s, the discourse that dominated the initial interpretations of Bonhoeffer in Germany was, to a significant degree, centered around the debates between Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer’s stance was frequently scrutinized through the lenses of either Bultmann or Barth. For a considerable period, Bonhoeffer’s perspectives were framed within the context of the polemics between these two theologians.¹⁷ Since that time in numerous academic

¹⁴ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia, PA: SCM Press, 1963).

¹⁵ Ronald Gregor Smith became close friends with the Bethges when they moved to London in 1953, he published several of Bonhoeffer’s works in English and as a Professor of Divinity he played a crucial role in popularizing Bonhoeffer in Britain.

¹⁶ James Patrick Kelley, “Recent Bonhoeffer Research: On Making Sense of Bonhoeffer’s Ethics,” Convocation at Lexington Seminary, 20 April 1990, in *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 25, UTS Archives, Bonhoeffer Secondary Papers, Series 2A Box 2. (October 1990): 112-115. Cf. Newsletter of the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, 41, May 1989.

¹⁷ Cf. Gerhard Ebeling “The Non-Religious Interpretation of Biblical Concepts”, in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Lutterworth, 1971), Jürgen Moltmann and Jürgen Weissbach *Two Studies in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Trans. Reginard H. Fuller, New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967). Jeffrey Jon, Richards, *Hermeneutics and Homiletics of Rudolf Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the American Discussion* (PhD dissertation, Marburg, Germany: Theological Faculty of the Philips-University Marburg, 2008.)

discussions the primary focus in Bonhoeffer scholarship remained on the resemblances and divergences between Bultmann and Barth, or between liberal theology and post-liberal theology. In this context, Bonhoeffer was and has often been instrumentalized as a tool for the Bultmann-versus-Barth dialogue.¹⁸ John D. Godsey's *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1960) was the first English-language study that revealed the depth of affinity between Barth's theology and Bonhoeffer's theology, showing it more substantial than what Bonhoeffer's criticism of Barth's 'positivism of revelation' might imply. Godsey was one of the earliest significant Bonhoeffer scholars, who suggested that Bonhoeffer merits independent examination on his own terms.¹⁹

The publication of Eberhard Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie* in 1967 (and its subsequent translation into English by Eric Mosbacher, et al. in 1970, along with its later revision by Victoria J. Barnett based on the seventh German edition in 1989 and published in 2000) marked a significant milestone.²⁰ This work not only raised awareness but also nurtured the understanding that Bonhoeffer's Christological focus in his writings indeed exhibited continuity. The theologian who most profoundly developed this Christological thesis was Ernst Feil in his 1971 work *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers: Hermeneutik, Christologie, Weltverständnis*; Bethge himself referred to Feil's study as a "sisterly book" to his own biography.²¹

Between 1958 and 1974, the first anthology of Bonhoeffer's works, the *Gesammelte Schriften* was made available in six volumes.²² Bonhoeffer studies were given a further

¹⁸ For more recent examples see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) and Jeffrey Jon Richard, *Hermeneutics and Homiletics of Rudolf Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the American Discussion* (Philipps-University Marburg, 2008) for interpreting Bonhoeffer through the prisms of either Barth or Bultmann.

¹⁹ John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960).

²⁰ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1967).

²¹ Ernst Feil, *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers: Hermeneutik, Christologie, Weltverständnis* (Mainz: Matthias-Grunewald-Verl, 1971). In English it was published as *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985).

²² *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Gesammelte Schriften*, Bände 1-6 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958-1974).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

impetus by the formation of the International Bonhoeffer Society in 1971, and the publication of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* first in German (starting in 1986 and ending in 1999) and in English (starting in 1993 and ending in 2014).

In 1972, with the formation of the English Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society, a new era began. From the first International Bonhoeffer Conference in Düsseldorf-Kaiserwerth in 1976 and the proceedings of the other Bonhoeffer conferences, which have been held in every four years ever since, scholars like Victoria Barnett, Friederike Barth, Eberhard Bethge, Ernst Feil, Peter Frick, John D. Godsey's, Clifford J. Green, Rainer Mayer, Christiane Tietz-Steiding, John W. De Gruchy, Christian Gremmels, James Patrick Kelley, Geoffrey B. Kelly, Burton F. Nelson, Hans Pfeifer, and many more presented resources for fresh research providing a deeper understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology. Just to highlight one of the several dozens of the significant early works, the French André Dumas' *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Theologian of Reality* offered significant corrections to one-sided Marxist and atheistic interpretations of Bonhoeffer that existed earlier and helped to re-center Bonhoeffer scholarship on Bonhoeffer's Christological intent.²³

One might anticipate that the publication of Bonhoeffer's own works, along with the multitude of articles and books related to him, would foster a collective sense of inherent coherence in the exploration of his literary legacy, especially concerning his Christological concentration. However, within the vast array of new articles and essays that delve into various themes present in Bonhoeffer's writings, a certain lack of harmony becomes apparent. Similarly, in several of the theological conferences today, the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is still frequently evoked to substantiate perspectives that are otherwise contrasting, often lacking the necessary contextual foundation. As John D. Godsey lamented earlier, numerous studies focusing on Bonhoeffer's theology neglect to accord the necessary emphasis to the paramount concept of Christ's lordship – a pivotal aspect that holds significant relevance within his writings.²⁴

²³ André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Theologian of Reality* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1971).

²⁴ Cf. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 263.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

How shall one make sense of this diversity of emphases? In certain countries, Bonhoeffer was referred to as a political activist and an exemplar of civil disobedience. This was the dominant tendency in the second part of the twentieth century in some of the former Communist countries, like Eastern Germany and Hungary.²⁵ To mention a third category, Bonhoeffer was also seen as a pacifist, who was an ally against repressive regimes. In the fight against the apartheid in South Africa, one of his primary interpreters, John W. de Gruchy, saw him in this way.²⁶ Fourthly, in the last three decades, Georg Huntemann asserts that Bonhoeffer was a radical evangelical at heart.²⁷

The fragmentary nature of Bonhoeffer's work has often been approached by seeking explanations that justify the diversity his work. Some historians point out that Bonhoeffer did not have the chance to produce his mature positions on various issues or add his reflections on his writings before he died. Had he had the opportunity to offer his own reflections on his writing, his readers today would certainly have a clearer understanding of Bonhoeffer's thought. Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer died young, leaving his work incomplete and leaving it to posterity to fill in the blanks.²⁸

²⁵ In 1997 De Gruchy characterizes Bonhoeffer as a man for a time of transition: "*Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997.) The focus of the first Bonhoeffer Conference in 2015 in Hungary was the role of political resistance in Bonhoeffer's life (John Wesley Theological College, Budapest, April 2015).

²⁶ Cf. John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

²⁷ One of the earliest characterizations of Bonhoeffer as an Evangelical is Georg Huntemann's *The Other Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Todd Huizinga (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993).

²⁸ Richard Weikart reflects this puzzlement about Bonhoeffer, when he writes: "What then should we make of Bonhoeffer? While recognizing his many admirable traits—compassion, courage, commitment, and integrity—we should be wary of many elements of his theology. He imbibed large doses of Continental philosophy, including Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—that profoundly influenced his worldview. His theology reflected Barth's neo-orthodox theology, which called Christians to get back to Scripture as the source for religious truth, but without believing that Scripture is historically true. Bonhoeffer always considered himself a follower of Barth, though most Bonhoeffer scholars rightly consider Bonhoeffer more liberal than Barth. Stephen Haynes and Lori Hale, for instance, accurately present Bonhoeffer as a theologian "charting his own course in the charged space between liberalism and dialectical theology" (Richard Weikart, "The Troubling Truth About Bonhoeffer's Theology," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 35, number 06, 2012. Weikart cites Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale's *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 13). For an attempt to explore the fragmented nature of Bonhoeffer's legacy see Victoria J. Barnett, "The Bonhoeffer Legacy as Work-in-Progress: Reflections on a Fragmentary Series," in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* eds. Clifford J. Green & Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 93-100. In a radio interview Andras Csepregi voices the opinion that the fragmentary nature of Bonhoeffer's works can be attributed to the fact that he often wrote things he did not sufficiently think

From the turning point of the millennium, the proliferation of Bonhoeffer studies continued. In 1999, Christiane Tietz-Steiding's *Bonhoeffers Kritik der verkrümmten Vernunft* delves into Bonhoeffer's critique of the distorted rationality found within German idealism, as evidenced in his early works, particularly *Akt und Sein*. Tietz-Steiding asserts that, from Bonhoeffer's standpoint, Immanuel Kant's conception, wherein the self is regarded as an ontological entity turned inward, falls short. Tietz-Steiding argues that, according to Bonhoeffer, Kant's perspective inadequately defines the essence of the human being.²⁹ Peter Frick's collection of essays, *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought* (2008) demonstrate how Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas à Kempis, Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Carl Gustav Adolf von Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth impacted Bonhoeffer's mind.³⁰ Friederike Barth in her *Die Wirklichkeit des Guten: Dietrich Bonhoeffers "Ethik" und Ihr Philosophischer Hintergrund* (2011) explores how Bonhoeffer integrates the different systems of thought into his work in understanding what 'good' is in the context of the theology of Martin Luther and Karl Barth. While focusing on the philosophical influences of Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and offering an analysis of systems of thought, like neo-Thomism, *Lebensphilosophie* and personalism, she gives a thorough background to Bonhoeffer's theology in his *Ethics*.³¹ Other essays explore the philosophical sources of the formation of Bonhoeffer's mind, yet others focus on gender,

through because of the haste Bonhoeffer had to live in (Andras Csepregi, Interview by Agnes Fekete, *Reformed Half-hour* [Református Félóra], Kossuth Radio Broadcasting, Budapest, October 21, 2015).

²⁹ Christiane Tietz-Steiding, *Bonhoeffers Kritik der verkrümmten Vernunft: Eine erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 112 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1999). In her "Bonhoeffer's Strong Christology in the Context of Religious Pluralism" in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issue*, eds. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013, 181-196.) the author extends the argument to interreligious dialogue in a consistent way. Tietz-Steiding's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologe im Widerstand*, München: C. H. Beck, 2013 (published in English as *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016) offers a concise biography as a primary introduction to Bonhoeffer.

³⁰ Peter Frick's *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought* (Religion in Philosophy & Theology, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 29, 2008). Other works that explore Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation include Wayne Whitson Floyd's *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988) and Charles Marsh's *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), which shows how Martin Heidegger impacted Bonhoeffer.

³¹ Friederike Barth, *Die Wirklichkeit des Guten: Dietrich Bonhoeffers "Ethik" und ihr philosophischer Hintergrund* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 156, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

religion, race, ecology, politics, philosophy, literature, on certain historical periods and geographical regions that relate to Bonhoeffer's thought. In 2013 two collections of studies were published comprising about forty different authors, applying diverse aspects of Bonhoeffer's theology to different themes.³²

To summarize, while most of these works are thorough and analytic, many leave the perspective of the cohesive center of Bonhoeffer's thought aside. Considering Bonhoeffer's own convictions, however, this oversight is a real mistake. Fixating on any single work or issue within Bonhoeffer's work by overlooking the essence of his theology, which has to do with integration, may prove to be too costly. Bonhoeffer himself vehemently opposes segregating Christ's reality from worldly reality. According to him, isolating either concepts or external phenomena from the reality of Christ, who intends to reveal himself through them, would be counterproductive. (The attempts that isolate concepts, nature or even moral standards from Christ will be discussed in more detail in chapters on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and prison letters). At this point, it suffices to state that emphasizing sociological concerns or any insights in Bonhoeffer's works at the expense of preserving their connection to Christ as their uniting center contradicts Bonhoeffer's intentions. For Bonhoeffer, it is crucial to avoid the pitfall of separating Christology from the social phenomena that manifest the Christ-reality. While studies that apply Bonhoeffer's perspectives on non-violence, feminism, ecumenism, or spirituality abound and are valuable, Bonhoeffer's viewpoint suggests that the risk of fragmenting his legacy by isolating these issues from Christ is real. Therefore, it is important to read Bonhoeffer in a manner that keeps his intention for integration consistently in focus.

One of the contemporary theologians who attempts to make sure that Bonhoeffer is interpreted consistently within the confines of Bonhoeffer's own intent – which can be identified by setting Bonhoeffer's written legacy within the context of the circumstances and

³² Peter Frick and Clifford J. Green published one of the collections of these essays under the title *Bonhoeffer and Interpretative Theory, Essays on Methods*, and Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter published the other collection entitled as *Understanding and Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (International Bonhoeffer Interpretations 6, ed. Peter Frick, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2013). Cf. also Paul Ricoeur, "The Non-Religious Interpretation of Christianity in Bonhoeffer", trans Brian Gregor, in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought, Cruciform Philosophy*, eds. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 156-176. A study on the implications of Bonhoeffer's theology for environmental ethics is Van den Heuvel, Steven, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology and Fundamental Debates in Environmental Ethics* (PhD. Dissertation, Leuven: Evangelische Theologische Faculteit and Kampen: TU, 2015).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

events he worked in, instead of treating his theology within a system of thought as a frame of reference – is Jens Zimmermann. Recognizing the hermeneutical dangers of oversimplifying Bonhoeffer’s ideas as abstract concepts, which is a misstep of modernism (as Kevin Vanhoozer called it),³³ Zimmermann is attuned to the risk of neglecting the intricate influences that shape ideas. With his interpretative concerns, Zimmerman argues for never treating ideas in isolation. In Bonhoeffer’s theology itself, Zimmermann maintains, humanization happens through participating in Christ. Zimmermann states that for Bonhoeffer, demanding careful considerations of specific contexts, times, and circumstances, where Christ’s influence becomes manifest, is crucial. Consequently, in his work, entitled *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism*, Zimmermann describes Bonhoeffer’s incarnation-centered Christology by putting great weight on the historical and narrative contexts of each phase of Bonhoeffer’s life.³⁴

However, as a philosopher, although Zimmerman sees Bonhoeffer’s theology in harmony with classical Christian humanism, where authentic humanity arises from Christ’s presence being shaped within everyday life, he remains in the realm of ideas and does not shift his interpretative structure to Bonhoeffer’s narrative entirely. Zimmermann presents his views in two chapters of his book *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, as well as in several articles and monographs, notably in his latest work *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism*, but does not provide a comprehensive analysis of Bonhoeffer’s Christology based on a systematic study of Bonhoeffer’s works either.³⁵ This is a trait in most of the scholars who approach Bonhoeffer’s Christology, they analyze it from the perspective of selected works or specific issues, rather than considering Bonhoeffer’s Christological contributions across all his writings in a systematic manner. Even Ernst Feil does this, who, in his section

³³Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 260-261.

³⁴ Jens Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020)

³⁵ Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics, An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); “Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological Humanism” in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, eds. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 25-48.; “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Heidegger: Two Different Visions of Humanity” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, eds. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 102-136.; “Recovering Incarnational Humanism.” in *Tradition and Formation: Claiming an Inheritance. Essays in Honor of Peter C. Erb*, eds. Michel Desjardins and Harold Remus (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2008), 361-379.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

about Bonhoeffer's Christology in his foundational work *The Theology of Bonhoeffer*, offers a consistent overview, proceeds thematically rather than chronologically through Bonhoeffer's writings, and he takes the prison letters as his governing paradigm for all of Bonhoeffer's works.³⁶

Bethge's foundational biography of Bonhoeffer undoubtedly moves towards a hermeneutic where he interprets Bonhoeffer's theology through the lens of Bonhoeffer's life, providing a great wealth of resources. However, due to Bethge's close friendship with Bonhoeffer and his desire, as a German, to present an alternative interpretation of genuine Christian faith under Nazism to Western Christians after World War II, his portrayal of Bonhoeffer tends to lean somewhat one-sided, towards a positive view. When Eric Metaxas refers to Bonhoeffer as a 'Church Father for the Post-Modern Era,' and writes about him hagiographically, he extends Bethge's representation.³⁷

This is where Charles Marsh's approach to Bonhoeffer's intellectual legacy is refreshing. In his work, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (2014), Marsh, instead of interpreting Bonhoeffer's theology within the framework of Bonhoeffer's own thoughts or through the lens of influencing thinkers, aims to uncover the man behind these thoughts. Notably, in his 1989 doctoral dissertation on Bonhoeffer's philosophy,³⁸ Marsh primarily approached Bonhoeffer in a conceptual way. However, two and a half decades later, in this new biography, his approach has evolved. While he builds upon Bethge's biographical foundations and his own new research, especially concerning Bonhoeffer's first visit to the United States, he now delves deeper into Bonhoeffer's internal developmental processes

³⁶ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

³⁷ Eric Metaxas, author of the New York Time best-seller *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, martyr, prophet, spy: A righteous gentile vs. the third Reich* (Thomas Nelson Inc, 2010) in an interview quotes Greg Thornbury's words from Union University, who sees Bonhoeffer as a "Church Father for the Post-Modern Era" (Justin Taylor, "Interview of Justin Taylor with Eric Metaxas", *The Gospel Coalition*, (April 26, 2010), <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2010/04/26/an-interview-with-eric-metaxas-on-bonhoeffer>, accessed on Feb. 7, 2016). Cf. Eberhard Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance, Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Geneva: WCC Publications; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), John W. de Gruchy a similar sentiment about Bonhoeffer's heroic role in his *Daring, Trusting Spirit, Bonhoeffer's Friend*, Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, London, 2005).

³⁸ Charles Marsh's doctoral dissertation was later published as *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994, reprinted in 2023).

without seeking to portray Bonhoeffer as a saint. In his attempt to grasp Bonhoeffer's thought, he reads it from the perspective of Bonhoeffer's own narrative.³⁹

Some of Marsh's suggestions, especially those concerning Bonhoeffer's sexual orientation, have sparked debate. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen believes that some of the hints that suggest a homosexual orientation go too far and he finds them too problematic. Based on the available sources, Schlingensiepen may have a valid point in his criticism of Marsh in this respect.⁴⁰ However, Schlingensiepen's focus of criticism misses the value of Marsh's use of a narrative lens, which can reveal connections that an analysis of ideas might easily overlook.⁴¹

³⁹ In his *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.) Marsh does not argue with Bethge but does not buy into the hegemony of any given interpretation, either. Marsh suggests that there might be aspects of Bonhoeffer's narrative and personhood that can be seen from perspectives that differ from Bethge. This view differs from the approach that characterizes most Bonhoeffer scholarship today which leaves anything that Bethge suggests unexplored. The very title of Elesa Coffman's article written at the death of Bethge characterizes the dominant view: "Dietrich's Friend Eberhard, A fellow resister of the Nazis, editor, and biographer dies half a century after his subject and companion," *Christianity Today* (April 28, 2000), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/aprilweb-only/55.0c.html?start=1> (accessed October 31, 2015), the title of Edwin Robertson's article written for the same occasion echoes this approach to Bethge: "Eberhard Bethge, Theologian who took Bonhoeffer's message to the world," *The Guardian* (3 April, 2000), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/apr/03/guardianobituaries1> (accessed on October 31, 2015). Another author, who provides helpful background to Bonhoeffer's life, who is also close to Bonhoeffer, is his twin sister but that data is very fragmented. Cf. Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, Sabine. *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968.)

⁴⁰ In *Strange Glory*, which is probably the most discerning and authoritative interpretation of Bonhoeffer's life after Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, published fourteen years after Bethge died, Marsh writes: "If he [Bonhoeffer] could mirror the arrangement that Bethge had entered into with natural gladness, he might be able to remain close to his true companion. [...] But Bethge harbored no such hopes for preserving their intimacy" (Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 337). Marsh writes respectfully but insightfully. In an interview conducted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. about the Bonhoeffer biography Marsh has written, Marsh explains his argument in a more explicit way: "Bonhoeffer had a romantic attraction to Eberhard Bethge. That is from the evidence, from the letters, from the documentary evidence, indisputable. He imagined some kind of a spiritual marriage with this fellow Christian who had become for him a soul mate that clustered around shared devotional practices and a love of Jesus and also I should add celibacy. Eberhard, it is clear, never was able to reciprocate the intensity of Bonhoeffer's affections and he never quite accepted this kind of implicit proposal for a spiritual partnership that would endure. So the bookends of the story are this: a clear romantic attraction to Eberhard; at the same time a priestly commitment Bonhoeffer understood as an abbot of an evangelical seminary; a kind of monastic experiment in evangelicalism that celibacy for him should be a practice; and he remains celibate; and he died a celibate" (Charles Marsh, interview by R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Christianity amid the Ruins: A Conversation about Dietrich Bonhoeffer with Professor Charles Marsh", An Interview of "Thinking in Public", April 13, 2015, <https://albertmohler.com/2015/04/13/thinking-in-public-charles-marsh>, accessed December 16, 2015). In some way Bethge continues to keep this distance from Bonhoeffer all through his life. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen accuses Marsh of interpreting Bonhoeffer too much within the context of the contemporary conflict between conservatives and the gay rights movement in the United States, and his review articulates a valid concern (cf. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, "Making Assumptions About Dietrich: How Bonhoeffer Was Made Fit for America." *International Bonhoeffer Society Newsletter* 110 (2015): 23-27).

⁴¹ Charles Marsh published his response to the critiques of his biography in his *Resisting the Bonhoeffer Brand: A Life Reconsidered* (Atlanta, GA: Cascade Books, 2023), and his position is that Bonhoeffer scholarship requires the rejuvenating force of the theologian's life story free from academic preconceptions. Marsh's *Strange Glory: A life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* was honored with the esteemed *Christianity Today Book Award in History*

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Marsh's emphasis on the role of narrative as the primary context of interpreting Bonhoeffer's theology overweighs his comments about Bonhoeffer's special relationship to Bethge. Methodologically, Marsh's narrative approach to Bonhoeffer's theology aligns more closely with Bonhoeffer's embodied Christology perspective, which is the focal point of the present research, than examining a theological legacy primarily through a prism of ideas that the hermeneutics of modernism majors on.

The realism embedded in a narrative approach is also instructive from the viewpoint of spiritual formation. While biases inherently influence the narrative, with each biographer highlighting certain aspects and concealing others (which is true for all history writing, as there is no such thing as entirely neutral historical writing), by ensuring transparency in the portrayal of an individual's life in a biography (which seems to be Marsh's intent more than it is Bethge's), there is the potential to guide the readers toward a spiritual benefit, which comes from a renewed understanding of God's work in given person's life and their own lives. The recognition of God's active presence in the individual about whom they read (in this case Bonhoeffer) may arise not only from observing the willing cooperation of the individual with God but, conversely, from witnessing it despite one's weaknesses and limitations. This may open the eyes of the reader to notice God's similar work in their lives. This is the argument of the Apostle Paul in his letter written to the church of Corinth as he boasts of his weaknesses, discloses things that may be shameful, and is open about things that may seem like failures.⁴² The underlying logic is that through authenticity, the light of Christ can become visible.

In summary, based on the preceding review of secondary literature, the present researcher suggests that to truly grasp Bonhoeffer's Christology in line with his original intent and mindset, diligent attention to Bonhoeffer's narrative is essential. To avoid primarily approaching Bonhoeffer's theology from concept-driven viewpoints and to maintain space for the reality of Christ, who, in Bonhoeffer's faith, seeks to manifest himself, the focus in studying and interpreting Bonhoeffer's Christology will remain on Bonhoeffer's specific understanding and experience of Christ within the individual phases of his life. The study of

in 2015 (a year after its publication), this may underscore not only the importance but also the legitimacy of Marsh's understanding.

⁴² Cf. 2 Cor 11: 21-23 *NIV*

Bonhoeffer's Christology will be conducted using methods appropriate for the task at hand, which the following section will delineate.

5. Methodology, Delimitations, and the Use of Primary and Secondary Resources

The dissertation will scrutinize all of Bonhoeffer's theological works chronologically, commencing with his initial dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* in 1927 and culminating with his *Letters and Writings from Prison* until 1945. The Christological insights of Bonhoeffer's complete body of work will be interpreted within the framework of his narrative.

5. A. Methodology

When determining the method by which Bonhoeffer's Christology will be interpreted, the critical consideration is its appropriateness to the subject under examination. In seeking such method, Bonhoeffer's following words from 1933 can serve as a valuable guide:

If we speak of Jesus Christ as God, we may not say of him that he is representative of an idea of God ... This man is no abstract God.⁴³

The concrete is the best antidote to the abstract. The methodology aligned with a perspective resonating with Bonhoeffer's perception of Christ must encompass both a divine presence and personal engagement. The framework of modernism may suggest a composite depiction, akin to assembling diverse mosaic pieces side by side with a loose cohesion. In Bonhoeffer's Christology these pieces might be concepts like the vicarious representation of Christ, Christ-as-community, salvation confined to the Confessing Church, Christ as a man for others, and more. Yet a depiction of reality as a system of concepts contradicts Bonhoeffer's intent. Examining Bonhoeffer's Christology mandates the study of individual works and accommodates shifting emphases, even the evolution of his understanding of Christ's identity.

⁴³ *Christ the Center*, 104.

This dissertation will interpret Bonhoeffer's Christology as an unfolding narrative. In exploring Bonhoeffer's Christology according to Bonhoeffer's intent, it seems wise to build on the hermeneutical insights of postliberalism. The postliberal awareness of needing to move "beyond modernist reductions of truth of linguistic or historical positivism (truth as one-to-one correspondence between propositions and references) to a more relational or communal understanding of truth"⁴⁴, is an approach that is particularly relevant when studying Bonhoeffer's Christology.⁴⁵

In practical terms, Bonhoeffer's story as the context within which the Christ-reality can be identified will be kept in the forefront of all interpretative efforts in the present dissertation. Attempts to interpret Bonhoeffer's Christological emphases will be made to constantly move back and forth between the parts and the whole, resembling the 'hermeneutical spiral'.⁴⁶

The structure of each of the seven chapters that explore Bonhoeffer's major writings will also reflect the above-mentioned methodology. Each chapter will follow a format consisting of three sections:

⁴⁴ Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 98-99.

⁴⁵ The postliberal caution is to avoid the danger of imposing external interpretative frameworks on Bonhoeffer's texts. External systems of thought may be applied to the interpretation of a text (rules and assumptions foreign to the text artificially ascribed to it) at the expense of disrespecting the specific life situation in which the text originates. This recognition goes back to Martin Heidegger's emphasis on Dasein, "being-there" (thrown into a pre-given world) and Paul Ricoeur's emphasis on identity being formed only within particular 'emplotments.' Postliberal theologians have taken these arguments further and asserted that statements of truth "stem from storied realities," as Ronald T. Michener puts it. (Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 126.) As Michener writes, "If we work from the world to the relevance of the Gospel, we will continually compromise the Gospel narrative for the sake of relevance" (Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 6). To list just a few basic studies of the postliberal approach to interpretation see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (London and New York, NY: Yale University Press, 1974); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001). Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984) and Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.) From the more recent authors Kevin J. Vanhoozer's work deserves mentioning, especially his "Postliberal Theology" in *Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, "Hermeneutical Circle" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 282.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

a) In every chapter from Chapter One through Seven, the first section will provide an analysis of the main factors and circumstances that influenced the formulation of Bonhoeffer's Christological statements when he wrote the specific work being studied.

b) The second section of each chapter will explore the details and emphases concerning Bonhoeffer's Christological views within the work being studied, interpreting them within the context of that individual writing.

c) The third section of every chapter will offer reflections that interpret Bonhoeffer's ideas identified in that specific writing within the broader context of his overall theological work, which evolved throughout his lifetime.

5. B. Delimitations

The abundance of materials in Bonhoeffer's writings and of the secondary literature on Bonhoeffer's Christology makes the consistent focus on Bonhoeffer's own views on Christ mandatory. Issues that lie beyond the focus of the research question expressed above, intriguing as they might be, will be left undiscussed.

5. C. The Use of and the References to Primary Resources

Throughout the forthcoming study, the overall aim is to give Bonhoeffer's voice the authority in interpreting his thoughts. I primarily construct my study based on Bonhoeffer's own works. The edition I use is the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English (DBWE)*, comprising seventeen volumes that align with the German edition, albeit with a few supplementary materials added by the editors post the completion of the German version.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ The initial volumes encompass Bonhoeffer's writings that he intended to be formal theological texts (volumes 1-6), while the subsequent volumes comprise a diverse array of his other writings, including lectures, notes, sermons, correspondence with both personal and theological content in them, and legal documents (*DBWE 7-16*). The final volume features a comprehensive Index (*DBWE 17*).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

The English translation began in 1993 and the 17 volumes were published between 1996 and 2014.⁴⁸

For all the Bonhoeffer citations I will use *DBWE*. The only time when I use a translation that differs from *DBWE* (which will only occur exceptionally) will be if I use an author (other than Bonhoeffer) who uses a particular translation of Bonhoeffer's work that differs from *DBWE* and the particular translation seems important for the given author when making his or her point. Then I will cite the translation that the given author chooses to use.

The citations will be referred to by the number of the volume (for example *DBWE* 7) and the number of the page. The publishing information of the *DBWE* volumes will be indicated both at their first occurrence in the footnotes and listed at the end of the dissertation in the Bibliography.

References to the German text will be taken from the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (*DBW*).⁴⁹

5. D. The Use of Secondary Resources

Secondary resources will be employed to illuminate critical inquiries. To ensure that the dissertation stays faithful to Bonhoeffer's intent in interpreting his perspectives on how God in Christ reveals himself within the concrete circumstances of different phases in Bonhoeffer's life, his narrative, as detailed by the biographies of Eberhard Bethge and Charles Marsh, together with the helpful biographical details recorded in the seventeen volumes of Bonhoeffer's works, serves as the interpretive framework for the Christology that emerges from his writings. Putting it differently, the voyage upon which the following

⁴⁸ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 1-17, general ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996-2014).

⁴⁹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 1-17., ed. Eberhard Bethge, et al. (Munich and Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser-Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1986-1999). The first *DBW* volume, which was the new edition of Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, appeared in German in 1986, and the final German volume, Bonhoeffer's complete prison writings, appeared in April 1998. Volume 17, an index for the entire series, appeared in 1999. I refer to the German texts always from the *DBW* edition, the volumes will be referred to by their volume number (like *DBW* 7) followed by the page number.

endeavor will embark, in relation to Bonhoeffer's Christology, will be guided by the insights from the biographical details of Bonhoeffer's life illuminating his theological works and other writings alongside the findings of numerous Bonhoeffer scholars who specialize in distinct aspects or works within the Bonhoeffer corpus. From among the many secondary sources special attention will be paid to Jens Zimmermann, because of his consistent concentration on the incarnation in Bonhoeffer's work.

As previously noted, the risk of interpreting Bonhoeffer's Christological emphases through either philosophical, political, or theological agendas is that they can originate from the readers' world and then these agendas can be imposed onto Bonhoeffer. To prevent this error, the primary attention of the dissertation in interpreting Bonhoeffer's Christological emphases will be on Bonhoeffer's own texts and the immediate context of his life circumstances and relationships. The interpretative views of other researchers will be subjected to Bonhoeffer's own interpretations.

6. Thesis Statement Briefly Stated and Anticipated Contributions

The main assertion of this dissertation is that Bonhoeffer's Christology offers the potential to establish a focal point through which Bonhoeffer's readers can discern the unity within Bonhoeffer's multifaceted theological legacy. It will be argued that Bonhoeffer's Christology is best understood as Bonhoeffer's articulation of God's ever-present and increasingly unfolding presence in Christ, as a journey toward its telos, the incarnation, rather than as a static ideal or destination. This incarnation of Christ is seen as something that continuously seeks to be repeated in people today.

To anticipate the results of the examination of Bonhoeffer's Christological statements and emphases in his theological writings, in the first period of Bonhoeffer's work, Bonhoeffer sees the incarnation of Christ primarily as an intellectual concept. In the second period of his writing, he sees the incarnation as a concrete reality becoming manifest primarily in the conversational encounter between God and the human person, expressed most supremely in the Christian community. In the third period Bonhoeffer sees the incarnation of Christ as a transforming presence in the world incorporating all who follow Christ whether consciously or unconsciously. The study will conclude that Bonhoeffer's

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Christology is best represented, therefore, as a dynamic approach to the incarnation of Christ, who is becoming increasingly real in the people who follow him among the specific circumstances that shape one's life, just as it was the case in Bonhoeffer's own life.

Bonhoeffer's Christology, beyond its significance in Bonhoeffer studies, also holds the promise to offer guidance to people grappling with the fragmented nature of contemporary life today. A perspective rooted in a consciousness, wherein Christ's reconciliation permeates all aspects, enables a dynamic yet grounded engagement in meaningful existence.

7. Overview of Dissertation

Throughout the dissertation, Bonhoeffer's diverse responses to the persistent question 'Who is Christ for us today?' will serve as a pathway toward reconstructing Bonhoeffer's Christ-centered view of reality. The study will aim at achieving this by delving into the various dimensions of Bonhoeffer's Christology. Each of his theological writings will be examined in the chronological order of their composition. After this *Introduction*, individual chapters will be dedicated to analyzing works such as *Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *Creation and Fall* in conjunction with *Christology*, *Discipleship*, *Life Together*, *Ethics*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. After exploring the diverse Christological aspects within these works and interpreting them within both their distinct and collective contexts, Chapter Eight will conclude by providing insights relevant to contemporary Christians, offering guidance for harmonizing the myriad experiences of human existence.

CHAPTER ONE: *SANCTORUM COMMUNIO*, CHRISTOLOGY AS SOCIALITY

Bonhoeffer's first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* focuses on issues that were raised by the enlightenment philosophy and the sociology of Bonhoeffer's day. It takes descriptions of community life that do not claim to rely on revelation and recasts them into a theological framework. In this chapter the Christological import of Bonhoeffer's first doctoral dissertation will be reviewed.

Introduction to Chapter One

Bonhoeffer's first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, marks the beginning of his academic work to articulate an integrative view of Christology. Bonhoeffer wrote *Sanctorum Communio* when he was only twenty-one. He completed it within less than two years, along with his course work and seminar papers. It was accepted for his licentiate in theology on July 18, 1927, at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University of Berlin. The oral defense of his doctoral thesis took place, and the degree was awarded *summa cum laude* in December of the same year.¹

The researcher's argument in Chapter One is that Christology in *Sanctorum Communio* is a highly creative but primarily conceptual tool. It is Bonhoeffer's attempt to make sense of community from a theological viewpoint.²

This Chapter will show how Bonhoeffer interprets sociality by looking at three of its basic factors: singularity, reciprocity, and unity. After considering each of these three dimensions of sociality, Bonhoeffer's view of the vicarious representation of Christ will be

¹ References to and citations from *Sanctorum Communio* in English are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1 (DBWE 1), Sanctorum Communio, A Theological Study of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Richard Kraus and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); references in German are based on from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 1 (DBW 1), Sanctorum Communio. Eine Dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche (1930)*, ed. Joachim von Soosten (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986).

² A helpful background can be found in Martin Rumscheidt's "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology" (in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. J. W. de Grouchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.), 50-70.

highlighted as an essential bridge between the world of revelation and the world of creation. Apart from the sources of direct revelation, Bonhoeffer sees the vicarious representation of Christ as the link between human wisdom and experience and the actual outworking of God's intent in humanity. Chapter One concludes with a trajectory based on indications in *Sanctorum Communio* that point toward more concrete expressions of Bonhoeffer's thought concerning his Christology in the future.

1. The Background to the Formulation of Bonhoeffer's Christology in His First Dissertation

1. A. The Nature of Social Existence and the Language Used to Convey It: A Dissonance

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer fights with the climate of the late Enlightenment era and finds the elevation of the self-sustained individual and the ensuing elimination of the dignity of the human person problematic. Bonhoeffer views individuality from the perspective of the personhood of Christ and takes the sociality of Christ as a prism through which individuality can be reassessed. Bonhoeffer highlights that the identification of individuality is meaningful only within a social context.³

In such a relational enterprise, employing a distanced approach, however, which Bonhoeffer is doing, is counterproductive. As Maxwell Lloyd Champion points out, "the transformation of existence is not gained through the exercise of theoretical, practical or psychological reflection"⁴. The social realm into which Bonhoeffer sees the individual in his *Sanctorum Communio* is limited to the "phraseological," to use Bonhoeffer's later criticism of his early approach at the time of his two dissertations.⁵ In *Sanctorum Communio*, sociality is reduced to a conceptual realm. While in his later works, Bonhoeffer will be the first to

³ Cf. John W. De Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (London: Collins, 1963).

⁴ Maxwell Lloyd Champion, "Knowledge of God as the Transformation of Human Existence in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" (PhD. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1988), 520 and 524.

⁵ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 22, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 358.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

argue that there is no Christian sociality without action, in *Sanctorum Communio* the formation of these categories is happening at a theoretical level. The conflict between Bonhoeffer's purely conceptual approach and the nature of concrete existence also characterizes Bonhoeffer's second dissertation, *Act and Being*.

Seeing Bonhoeffer as a prophet, a saint, or an activist on *these* pages, would be a misrepresentation. The readers of *Sanctorum Communio* are reading from an author whose mind was occupied with an issue that was largely academic. The time in which Bonhoeffer wrote his first dissertation was known by many as the *terminus a quo* of the Enlightenment, when it was "Kant's original 'modern' dare to use one's own reason, rather than submitting to the authority of tradition," which seemed to be a rather radical call.⁶ Readers of the *Sanctorum Communio* meet a bright and ambitious scholar, desiring to establish his academic career as a university professor. When the distinctions between the early Bonhoeffer and the mature Bonhoeffer are realized, one can better appreciate the personal development and work of God's grace in Bonhoeffer's life.

The arid conceptuality of Bonhoeffer's first dissertation sets limits to the effectiveness of the relational nature of the project he pursues. The language he uses appears to be at odds with the personal nature of the subject matter.

1. B. The Experiential Basis of Describing Community

What was Bonhoeffer's basis for describing community at the time of writing *Sanctorum Communio*?

One difficulty in answering the question is the false assumption that Bonhoeffer was always a radical Christian adamant to find relevant expressions of the church and a new monasticism (to use the term from our own age, not Bonhoeffer's). The challenge for Bonhoeffer's reader is to transcend contemporary projections to the early Bonhoeffer. One needs to separate from his first dissertation the views that are based on the later Bonhoeffer

⁶ Wayne Whitson Floyd, "Encounter with an Other: Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*, ed. by Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 83.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

who taught classes on the book of Genesis, on Christology, discipleship, the Psalms, and who wrote his letters from prison, and other fragments.

During the two years between 1925 and 1927 when Bonhoeffer wrote his first dissertation, he did not go to church regularly. At the time of his writing about Church community, Bonhoeffer did not have any strong attachment to the church-community, except for a romantic sense of feeling drawn to the artistic expressions of the Church of Rome. Bonhoeffer also lived with a deep and unfulfilled desire to belong.⁷ Bonhoeffer's motivation in addressing the theme of the church was to rescue Christian values from mere theoretical abstractions and to find the motivation for him to move toward community.

In 1927 the community that had a strong positive role in Bonhoeffer's identity was that of the German nation. Marsh refers to the just war mentality of the early Bonhoeffer in a text that the later Bonhoeffer referred to as a "most unsettling passage"⁸. The text of *Sanctorum Communio* says: "Where a people, submitting in conscience to God's will, goes to war in order to fulfill its historical purpose and mission in the world – though entering fully into the ambiguity of human sinful action – it knows it has been called upon by God, that history is to be made; here war is no longer murder."⁹ Five year later Bonhoeffer felt very differently for then he wrote that "War today ... must be utterly rejected by the church"¹⁰. But regardless of his theology in 1927, being a German was a key aspect of his identity. After the defeat of Germany in World War I, Germans felt resentment toward the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, and many saw the idea of the German Reich as the goal of the Kingdom of God on earth. Regardless of the latent nationalism in Bonhoeffer's words, for Bonhoeffer the ideal community that he wrote about is the German nation. The Germans liked to liken one another to the Israelites as a people of God, as a "peculiar treasure" unto God "above all people" (Ex

⁷ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 58.

⁸ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 59.

⁹ *DBWE 1*, 119. (*DBW 1*, 74.)

¹⁰ Robertson, Edwin H., ed. *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, From the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1* (Translated by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden. London: Collins; New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 170. Bonhoeffer also writes: "For Christians, any military service, except in the ambulance corps, any preparation for war, is forbidden." ("6. Lecture. 'Christ and Peace'", *DBWE 12*, 260, *DBW 17*, 118).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

19:5), just as the Puritans saw their settlements of New England as the realization of the Promises of God on Earth.

In 1927, the year of submitting and defending his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer saw national identity as a God given gift and call to subdue other nations. Even though his dissertation focused on the church community, it was only his Christian terminology that made it appear to have a focus on formal Christian community.

Bonhoeffer's motivation in addressing the theme of the church was to rescue Christian values from mere theoretical abstractions and find a relational space that allowed for thinking afresh about community.

2. The Specific Contributions of *Sanctorum Communio* to Bonhoeffer's Christology

Sanctorum Communio offers a powerful contribution to our understanding of Bonhoeffer's view of Christ. Its role is foundational in the development of Bonhoeffer's theology, but it is also a work that creates confusion.

To start with the positive contribution *Sanctorum Communio* establishes Bonhoeffer's future theological work by developing a formulation that will guide him throughout his lifetime. As the dissertation will show, Bonhoeffer's theological emphases underwent significant refinement in the years following his first dissertation, but the conviction that he articulates in this first work of his, namely that the personhood of Christ is the *comprehensive framework* in which all the basic Christian and non-Christian concepts are to be interpreted never changed.¹¹ In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer also establishes convictions

¹¹ In his early work Clifford J. Green sees Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality as the organizing center of Bonhoeffer's thought. It was Green, the editor of *Sanctorum Communio* in the English edition and the author of several normative articles on Bonhoeffer, who coined the expression "theology of sociality" in his work, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, Revised Edition). In his later work, Green, however, modified his position, and added the emphasis on Bonhoeffer's this-worldliness as another center of Bonhoeffer's theology. This correction is both helpful and of significant importance (cf. Clifford J. Green, "Bonhoeffer's Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm," in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, eds. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.) 205-218. This researcher sees the personhood of Christ as the most central category of Bonhoeffer's thought, which will come into focus after 1932 when Bonhoeffer begins to stress that Christ makes himself concrete amid his followers. The subsequent chapters and sections of this study show that as time passes this

concerning Christ-formed community, which in subsequent years remain fundamental to him. Using the analogy of biological development, one could justifiably say that *Sanctorum Communio* is like an oocyte that includes all the genes of the adult individual from which everything develops to the full in the succeeding years. As time passes Bonhoeffer's view of community will require a more concrete representation of Christ. However, conceptually, the components are all here.

The scope of the current study is limited to the formation of Bonhoeffer's view of Christ, and, in the consideration of *Sanctorum Communio*, attention will be focused on the development of Bonhoeffer's Christology.

2. A. The Sociality of Christ as the Key Principle for Human Existence

In his introduction to *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer indicates that he came to see sociality as the center of theology as a whole: "The more this investigation has considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts."¹² This is a crucial statement that characterizes all of Bonhoeffer's writings. In his first dissertation, Bonhoeffer depicts the fundamentally social character of human existence by viewing it through the personhood of Christ. It is from the perspective of the personhood of Christ that Bonhoeffer concludes that relationality is the basic pattern of human existence. Thus, the centrality of the social category of existence rests on the sociality of Christ.

It is Christ who demonstrates what true humanity is and it is he who restores people to his social way of life. People are restored to who God meant them to be by becoming the presence of Christ together as a body. In *Sanctorum Communio* the key mark of community is summed up in the following paradigmatic expression: "Christ existing as church-

organizing center of Bonhoeffer's theology, the concrete Christ, becomes increasingly dominant in Bonhoeffer's theology.

¹² *DBWE I*, 21. (*DBW I*, 13.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

community.”¹³ It is with the purpose of restoring true humanity that “God establishes the church in Christ.”¹⁴

Since Bonhoeffer’s concern is the theological exploration of the entirety of human reality¹⁵, it is a misleading oversimplification to suggest that the primary concern of *Sanctorum Communio* is ecclesiology in and of itself.¹⁶ Christ is the source, the head, and the fulfillment of *every* community on earth. The central point Bonhoeffer makes is that the relationality of Christ is that which can be seen in human communities. Church is neither an end on its own, nor merely a means to an end. It is the theater of something greater, the act and being of Christ for humanity.

Bonhoeffer draws attention to three components that factor into the dynamics of this type of relating, which are three aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit as: “plurality of Spirit”, “community of Spirit”, and “unity of Spirit”.¹⁷ These three aspects of community life were highlighted by philosophy and sociology in Bonhoeffer’s day, and he attempted to redefine them in light of pneumatology. For the purposes of this review, the terms will be referenced under the terms used by Bonhoeffer himself: ‘singularity,’ ‘reciprocity,’ and ‘unity.’

¹³ *DBWE 1*, 189 & 190. (“Christus als Gemeinde existierend;” *DBW 1*, 126.)

¹⁴ *DBWE 1*, 279. (*DBW 1*, 190)

¹⁵ As Bonhoeffer puts it much later again: “all human life is in its essence vicarious representation” (*DBWE 6*, 258, *DBW 6*, 258).

¹⁶ Steven M. Bezner makes this a foundational presupposition for his PhD Dissertation entitled “Understanding the World Better Than It Understands Itself: The Theological Hermeneutics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (Baylor University, 2008).

¹⁷ *DBWE 1*, 161, 165, 192. (*DBW 1*, 103, 106, 128.)

2. B. Factors of Sociality

2. B. i. Singularity

Bonhoeffer sees humanity as a ‘closed’ entity, at least in a partial sense; as an existence with ‘boundaries.’¹⁸ For Bonhoeffer, the singularity of the individual is presupposed in meaningful human interaction but the boundaries of ‘the other’ also compels the self to acknowledge the distinctness of the other person and relate to him or her as to another.

Bonhoeffer argues that without the singularity of personal existence there would be no possibility to even think about the social character of life: “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*.”¹⁹

Singularity is crucial in all of one’s relationships with other persons, whether human or divine. Recognizing the barrier of the ‘the other’ leads a person toward the very same kind of movement, regardless of whether the other person is a human being or God. One simply cannot know the other person ‘from within’ and cannot even prove in one’s own experience that this person, who is wholly other than oneself, exists; unless one has a deep respect for the other, even prior to encountering the other. In other words, one needs *faith* to relate to the other in a meaningful way. In Bonhoeffer’s words “one person cannot know the other but can only acknowledge and ‘believe’ in the other.”²⁰

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer borrowed the terms ‘closed-ness’ and ‘boundaries’ (cf. *DBWE I*, 84., *DBW I*, 53.) from the sociology of his age but used them as only one of the aspects of human existence. His openness to learn from sociology was remarkable, in his day theologians were not used to seeing sociologists as allies. Borrowing concepts from sociology was quite unheard of, in contrast to the interdisciplinary spirit at work today. “Up to that time there had not been the slightest dialogue between theology and the sociology of religion, not to mention sociology in general...” (Sabine Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, An introduction to his Thought*, trans. Thomas Rice, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007, 68).

¹⁹ *DBWE I*, 50. (*DBW I*, 30.)

²⁰ *DBWE I*, 54. (*DBW I*, 32.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer implies that the singularity or individuality of the personal self is the raw material out of which community can grow. People can belong together, precisely, because they have boundaries that separate them from each other (even though these very same boundaries must be dealt with appropriately for people to be able to exist in any social form and not become isolated from each other). Individuality creates tensions, which can either be destructive for the life of the community or can creatively enhance the life of the community. Individuals exist in relations of subordination; but it is the sum total of the conflicts and the harmony of wills that end up forming particular communities.²¹

Bonhoeffer underlines that individuality is the result of the work of Christ, as the other two facets of sociality, namely reciprocity and unity are also the results of his work. Individuality is a mark of human existence ‘*in*’ Christ, for it is Christ who singles a person out as unique. Individuality is not a possession or a product of the human self in isolation from Christ. The “individual life is real only within the corporate life,”²² in that it exists in Christ. Human singularity is born by being elected by God and is cultivated through remaining in Christ. It is only by being constitutive components of sociality that persons are “unique and thus fundamentally separate and distinct from one another.”²³

This approach to individuality remains central in all of Bonhoeffer’s subsequent writings.²⁴ Genuine individuality or the existence of true boundaries is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and essential for people to live in healthy relationships.

²¹ “Sociology has shown in many contexts that in concrete instances there is no pure balance of power among the members of a social form.” (*DBWE 1*, 92., *DBW 1*, 60.)

²² *DBWE 1*, 198. (*DBW 1*, 132.)

²³ *DBWE 1*, 54. (*DBW 1*, 32.)

²⁴ Bonhoeffer distinguishes between genuine community, which is made up of other-oriented persons, and a romantic community, which is made up of ego-centric individuals. That is why he argues that it is “extremely dangerous to confuse community romanticism with the community of the saints. For the latter must always be acknowledged as something that is already established by God.” (*DBWE 1*, 278., *DBW 1*, 198.) This assertion stands in stark contrast with the occupation of either the idealism of Bonhoeffer’s age or the individualism of our own age.

2. B. ii. Reciprocity

Bonhoeffer asserts that genuine sociality also presupposes fundamental openness toward the other. This openness results in reciprocity, which is more than the sum of what every individual brings into the community, it functions as an entity of its own. Bonhoeffer sees openness as a factor that leads to reciprocity, which then is a dynamic relationship that transcends the total sum of the participants.²⁵

This is where Bonhoeffer's creative concept of the "collective person"²⁶ of Christ serves as a useful device. Through Christ the singularity of the one person can accommodate the plurality of many persons, thus, people can become open to each other. For Bonhoeffer, the concept of the collective person functions in the same way as the image of the human body functions for the Apostle Paul. The collective person does not exist apart from the individual human members of the community, but the collective person does not exist without its head, Christ, either.²⁷ Self-consciousness, which in the early twentieth century, when the science of modern psychology was born, was a subject often explored (and Bonhoeffer himself explores it further in his next dissertation, *Act and Being*) points to openness, because it indicates that others have the potential to impact the individual. The openness of the human spirit enables people to hear others and respond to them. Bonhoeffer argues that reciprocity is

²⁵ Bonhoeffer notes that it is precisely because the reciprocity of love derives from God that community keeps on existing, even when its members depart. It is the God-given nature of the reciprocity of love that makes temporal community eternal. Community has a God-given power that preserves and supports the life of the individual. As he describes: "the deepest significance of community is 'from God to God'. This is the basis for the holiness of human community life, whether we think of physical communities of blood and clan, historical communities such as a nation, or life-shaping communities such as marriage and friendship. This holiness reveals the fundamental indissolubility of all these life structures." (*DBWE 1*, 101. *DBW 1*, 65.) Thus, there is a God-given reciprocity that forms the essence of community which comes from God and is God himself.

²⁶ *DBWE 1*, 77. (*DBW 1*, 48.) According to Bonhoeffer people perceive community "as something real outside themselves a community that distances itself from them without their willing it, rising above them" (*DBWE 1*, 98-99., *DBW 1*, 62). He sees reciprocity as "a third entity, previously unknown, independent of being willed by the persons who are uniting" (*DBWE 1*, 98., *DBW 1*, 62). Bonhoeffer adopts the term 'objective spirit' from Hegel to describe an atmosphere or climate around the members, which could not exist apart from them, but is not produced by them either. (The terms atmosphere and climate are native to this researcher to interpret Bonhoeffer's concept.)

²⁷ The literal meaning of *Gesamtperson*, "the-whole-community-understood-as-a-person" reinforces the point that the "collective person" does not exist apart from the individual members of the community and acts responsibly through those who represent it. (*DBWE 1*, 79, editorial footnote 58).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

a work of the Spirit building on the created aspect of the structural openness of human beings.²⁸

In the age of the grandiose self, the concept of reciprocity is easy to be misused as a means for egocentricity, so it is important to clarify that for Bonhoeffer the only person who has a chance to find true reciprocity is the one focused exclusively on the other.²⁹ For Bonhoeffer, reciprocity is *not even* reciprocal; from the perspective of the self who realizes reciprocity, all that matters is the movement of the self toward the other. As Bonhoeffer describes, “I organize my relation to the other with a single end in mind, namely to fulfill God’s will by loving the other.”³⁰ Thus, from the viewpoint of the participant who enters Christian relationality, calling the Christian relationship to the other reciprocal is rather misleading, argues Bonhoeffer.³¹ The fundamental pre-condition for anyone to enter into this reciprocity is not to expect a give and take relationship but to turn to the other alone. The

²⁸ At this point it is worth noting that while the terminology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Emmanuel Levinas suggests a contrast between these two thinkers, the appearance is misleading. While for Bonhoeffer mutuality in both the human-human and the human-divine encounter is real, it impacts people retro-actively, as a God-given gift. It is in this sense that Bonhoeffer affirms the rewarding nature of community life (cf. *DBWE 1*, 100., *DBW 1*, 63-64). Levinas does not allow for mutuality, because it hides the face of the other. Yet the fundamental criterion for human behavior for both Bonhoeffer and Levinas is an undivided attention toward the other. For both the individual exists for the sake of the other and individuality left by itself *eliminates* true personality.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer makes it clear that love has no higher goal than love; it is pure only when its goal is love itself. “The Realm of the loving community [is] an end in itself.” (*DBWE 1*, 264., *DBW 1*, 183). Bonhoeffer had no contact with the great Jewish thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Leo Baeck. (Cf. Martin Remscheid, “The Formation of Bonhoeffer’s Theology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Grouchy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 51-70). In the *Sanctorum Communio* there is no reference to Buber’s classic *I and Thou* (published in 1923, just four years before the completion of Bonhoeffer’s dissertation, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970). However, both Bonhoeffer and Buber were parts of the schools of personalism that started with Georg Hamann, a friend of Immanuel Kant in Germany, and Søren Kierkegaard in Denmark in the later part of the nineteenth century. The difference between Bonhoeffer and Buber is that while they both refer to the same inter-personal dynamics, one sees these dynamics as a key factor in the constitution of the true ‘Thou,’ while the other sees the dynamics as a key factor in the becoming of the true ‘I.’ In terms of their intent, however, there is no conflict between them.

³⁰ *DBWE 1*, 262. (*DBW 1*, 181.) A focus on the other implies the surrendering of the self, for when love appears, the self does not dominate the scene. (Cf. *DBWE 1*, 262., *DBW 1*, 181.) “Christian community of love between human beings means unrestrictedly surrendering to the other out of obedience to God’s will.” (*DBWE 1*, 176., *DBW 1*, 115) “It is precisely in complete surrender (“those who lose their life”) that community of the Holy Spirit is found.” (*DBWE 1*, 262., *DBW 1*, 182.) And further: “love gives itself up to the other unrestrictedly, seeking nothing for itself”. (*DBWE 1*, 173., *DBW 1*, 113) “Community is constituted by the complete self-forgetfulness of love.” (*DBWE 1*, 190, *DBW 1*, 127.)

³¹ Cf. *DBWE 1*, 72. (*DBW 1*, 44-45.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

orientation fitting to a person who affirms reciprocity is, in a paradoxical way, a *focus solely on the other*.³²

In connection with the reinterpretation of both individuality and openness, it is interesting to note that although *Sanctorum Communio* is a highly abstract work, an issue this chapter will come back to, when Bonhoeffer writes about the reciprocity of love and its unidirectional emphasis on the other, he indicates that the dimension of ideas needs to be transcended. Other-focused love, through which “one person bears the other in active love”³³ necessarily turns one’s attention toward the concrete. This stance of Bonhoeffer is in sharp contrast with the approaches of Martin Heidegger and Immanuel Kant who believe that universal laws overrule specific action. Bonhoeffer directs his polemics against such idealism. In *Sanctorum Communio*, it is the conceptuality of the personhood of Christ that serves as an invitation for Bonhoeffer to concrete action, leading him towards transcending his own concept-centered framework. While Bonhoeffer will develop the role of concretion much further in the later phases of his life, asserting that “The action’s norm is not universal principle, but the concrete neighbor, as given to me by God ... in the concrete historical situation”³⁴, it is worth noting that the origins of the concept of concrete action are already present in his *Sanctorum Communio*.³⁵

³² Bonhoeffer critiques Friedrich Schleiermacher for suggesting that the church community is created “through the need of the individuals” (*DBWE 1*, 159., n. 18). Bonhoeffer states that church community can never be derived from individual wills, for it “is not merely a preparation for higher individual life, but *personal* life is possible only *within* the church community” (*DBWE 1*, 160-161., *DBW 1*, 102). Bonhoeffer also adds: “The act of coming to the church community is not based on utilitarian considerations, or a sense of duty, but is ‘organic...’” (*DBWE 1*, 227., *DBW 1*, 155). James M. Houston in his *Joyful Exiles, Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things* speaks about a similar dilemma in our own age, in the “postmodern society, where the self-making of one’s own identity prevails” (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP, 2006, 104).

³³ *DBWE 1*, 191. (*DBW 1*, 128.)

³⁴ *DBWE 6*, 221. (*DBW 6*, 220.)

³⁵ At this point Bonhoeffer is only anticipating the fatal results of the ethic of Heidegger, which culminated within a few years in the support toward the horrors of Nazism, when certain norms were seen as absolute. In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer writes, “In the sphere of Christian ethics it is not Ought that affects Is, but Is that affects Ought” (*DBWE 1*, 212., *DBW 1*, 113). He developed this line of thought more in his *Ethics*, but the origins of his emphasis on the actual are present here in *Sanctorum Communio*. In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer writes, “Christ does not teach an abstract ethic that must be carried out, cost what it may... Christ did not, like an ethicist, love a theory about the good; he loved real people. Christ was not interested, like a philosopher, in what is ‘generally valid,’ but in that which serves real concrete human beings... Thereby we are turned away from any abstract ethic and toward a concrete ethic.” (*DBWE 6*, 98-99., *DBW 6*, 86-87).

2. B. iii. Unity as Capacity for Inclusivity

Bonhoeffer sees unity as the third factor that the Holy Spirit makes manifest in community. The unity of community originates from the unity of Christ (cf. Eph 2:15), Christian unity “moves from above downwards”³⁶ and is defined by who Christ is.

From a theological treatment on the unity of Christian community one would expect a discussion on what the manifestation of that community would entail, yet to the reader’s surprise *Sanctorum Communio* does not offer that or even a positive description about what marks a kind of unity that springs from Christ. Bonhoeffer simply omits biblical references about the unitive work of the Holy Spirit. The rest of Bonhoeffer’s theological views in *Sanctorum Communio* are based on Scripture, as it will be generally true for most of what Bonhoeffer writes, here the contrast is strong. The Bible teaches much about the unity that God forms among his people (eg. Matt 19:6; Gen 2:3, 24; John 15:4-5, 17:1-26; Acts 2:11, 4:32; Rom 5:5, 8:14-17, 29, 15:5ff; Eph 1:5.10. 22-23, 4:13, 5: 25-32; 1Cor 6:15-17, 10:16; 2Cor 5:14-21; 1Jn 4:16) but Bonhoeffer does not touch on these passages, so the omission here is apparent. The one exception where Bonhoeffer cites the Bible is when discussing unity in Gal 3,28, but even at this occasion he stresses the opposite of Apostle Paul’s intent. Bonhoeffer states that unity never abolishes the distinctness of the persons who are involved in it. It never leads to sameness³⁷. It is a “fact,” says Bonhoeffer, “that personal being is fundamentally indissoluble.”³⁸

Bonhoeffer lists misconceptions and dangers to be avoided in relation to unity. If all that his reader believes about unity was based on Bonhoeffer’s texts, the reader would come away with significant fears. Bonhoeffer is building on negative stereotypes concerning the

³⁶ *DBWE 1*, 199. (*DBW 1*, 133).

³⁷ In order to highlight the value of the different persons not becoming the same, Bonhoeffer states that the contrasts between Jew and Greek, slave and free, man and woman do not go away. In fact, dissimilarity of persons remains: “they even become acute. The members of the community all are led to carry their individual viewpoints to the limit, to be really serious about it, keeping with the basic sociological laws of social vitality” (*DBWE 1*, 192., *DBW 1*, 129).

³⁸ *DBWE 1*, 203., *DBW 1*, 137.

unity of the Spirit. He refutes unity *as* universality but never elaborates on what Spirit-created unity might be. He stresses that unity remains hidden and becomes ‘visible’ only for faith.³⁹

Bonhoeffer builds on the assumption that Christian mystics see the ideal relationship with God as a fusion that melts the boundary between God and the human self. Based on this stereotype Bonhoeffer rejects mystical unity, without a single reference to identify any specific person or movement. Had Bonhoeffer done research on Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas á Kempis, or John Tauler, he might have produced subtler conclusions about the mystics’ views concerning unity. What is even more remarkable, none of the supervisors of his dissertation who granted him the highest academic honor, pointed out the lack of any resource in his work to support his blanket statements.⁴⁰

³⁹ *DBWE 1*, 203 & 206. (*DBW 1*, 137 & 139.)

⁴⁰ From the perspective of the history of doctrine, an irony of Bonhoeffer’s argument regarding the mystics is that while he relies on Luther, he ends up rejecting those whom Luther relied on, for instance, in interpreting the Apostle Paul. A thorough historical referencing about the formative forces of Luther’s theology is beyond the scope of this chapter, but there is clear historical continuity between Luther, the great medieval mystics and Apostle Paul, which Bonhoeffer misses. Bonhoeffer could not have Luther without the mystics from whom Luther learned the love of Christ. Similarly, Bonhoeffer’s theology would not exist without the legacy of the mystics, either. In his footnotes to the main text of *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer offers the following negative considerations about mystical unity. First, Bonhoeffer interprets “mystical unity” as an “obscurity [...] where the souls of individuals melt into a ‘cosmic soul.’” He writes, “For this reason, Christian mysticism seems to me at best to be useful as a historical concept, but not in theology” (*DBWE 1*, 56, *DBW 1*, 35). Secondly, he identifies “mystical fusion” as “the transgressing of the boundary of the I-You relation” (*DBWE 1*, 84., *DBW 1*, 53). Thirdly, he blames mysticism for identifying oneness with “an ultimate ‘being one’ in the sense of mystical fusion” (*DBWE 1*, 173., *DBW 1*, 113., cf. also *DBWE 1*, 287 & 288, *DBW 1*, 197 & 198). Fourthly, Bonhoeffer stresses that “[e]ven where in Christ all are one, we must not think that the personality intended by God is eliminated, but rather have to conceive of it as reaching its highest perfection at this very point” (*DBWE 1*, 203., *DBW 1*, 136). Fifthly, Bonhoeffer suggests that in the conceptuality of the mystics, the threat of elimination is near. He argues for “the dialectical relation between plurality and unity” over against “egalitarianism” (*DBWE 1*, 206-207., *DBW 1*, 138-140). His refusal of the Catholic mass reveals a similar perception, namely that unity is a violation of particularity. The kind of unity that he has in mind is a domineering state that violates singularity, when he states that: “the concept of the ‘mass’ is the sociological equivalent to the concept of a force in the physical sense” (*DBWE 1*, 239., *DBW 1*, 163). Sixthly, he identifies “mystical ideas such as final assimilation into God’s all-encompassing person, a fusion of our supposedly divine nature with that of God” (*DBWE 1*, 287., *DBW 1*, 197). Bonhoeffer lumps the idealist and mystical interpretations of unity together and criticizes them as if they were one. Even a perusal reading of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s *On Loving God* or *On the Song of Songs* could have quickly corrected Bonhoeffer’s mistake. (Cf. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s *On Loving God*, Translated by Robert Walton, OSB., Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Cistercian Fathers series, 1995.) Other works that offer reliable introductions to Christian mysticism include Luis Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery, From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism* (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede’s Publications, 1990); Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1982.); and Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). These studies help to correct some of the protestant stereotypes concerning the Christian mysticism that Bonhoeffer reacts against.

A little bit later Bonhoeffer cites Luther who spoke of Christ calling his disciples to share the burdens of the sins and adversities of others. It was Luther who said: “I am the head, I want to be the first to give myself to you, I want to share your suffering and adversity and bear them for you, so that you in turn will also do likewise

The concern that defines Bonhoeffer's approach to unity is the egocentricity of humanity, which seeks to dominate and exploit, thus leading to "individual isolation and corporate fragmentation" (as Green summarizes).⁴¹ Bonhoeffer sees the danger of affirming unity as a cover for such egocentricity, this is why he sees uninhibited unity standing in the way of the *Sanctorum Communio* that he is after. The problem of isolation caused by domination must be resolved in a community that stresses mutuality of persons. In Bonhoeffer's theology this is where the vicarious representative action of Christ, to which we now turn, is of utmost importance.

2. C. The Vicarious Representation of Christ

For Bonhoeffer, the action of God to eliminate isolation in human life took place by the "vicarious representative action" ("Stellvertretung") of Christ, and this, indeed, is "the life principle of the new humanity".⁴² As Bonhoeffer says, "And since the love of God, in Christ's vicarious representative action, restores the community between God and human beings, so the *community of human beings with each other has also become a reality in love once again.*"⁴³ This emphasis becomes central to Bonhoeffer's Christology all his life: Christ

for me and among each other, and share everything in me and with me" (Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament", 1519, Luther's works 35: 738ff, cited by Bonhoeffer, in *DBWE 1*, 182., *DBW 1*,120). This is a case in point in which Bonhoeffer is relying on the mystics, for Luther's view of intercession did not originate with Luther. He received it from the Augustinian order in the context of medieval *devotio moderna*. A citation from Thomas á Kempis, from whom Bonhoeffer took his own title, another Augustinian monk from eight decades before Luther illustrates this. Texts like the following from á Kempis were read in monasteries in Luther's day. So, Bonhoeffer's decision to accept Luther's view of Christo-centricity and intercession is inconsistent with his rejection of mediaeval mystics who, according to Bonhoeffer, do "not understand the power and the glory of love" (*DBWE 1*, 288., *DBW 1*,198). Years after completing his first dissertation, Bonhoeffer himself became an avid reader of á Kempis, so his ignorance of the mystics did not stay. But at the time of completing his first dissertation he clearly did not know the mystics whom he rejected.

⁴¹ Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 65.

⁴² *DBWE 1*, 146-147. (*DBW 1*, 92).

⁴³ *DBWE 1*, 157. (*DBW 1*, 100.) For a characteristic citation about how the vicarious representative action of Christ impacts the church and its members in their singularity, reciprocity, and unity according to Bonhoeffer, see his previous paragraph. "Thus, the church is established in and through Christ in the three basic sociological relationships known to us: his death isolates the *individuals* – all of them bear their culpability and have their own conscience; in the light of the resurrection the community of the cross is justified and sanctified in Christ as *one*. The new humanity is seen synoptically in *one* point, in Christ..." (*DBWE 1*, 157., *DBW 1*, 100).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

opened the way for human beings to become truly human, live in community with him, and thus also with each other⁴⁴ by reconciling us to God in his action in our place.

Bonhoeffer sees intercession itself as a form of participation in the vicarious action of Christ. Each member of the church-community represents Christ toward the others. Christ gives life to the members of his body through existing as a church-community also through praying for one another.⁴⁵ Intercession, then, is participation in Christ's self-giving to others. As Bonhoeffer says: "even the most personal prayer no longer belongs to the individual, but to the church that gave birth to this person and through which the individual lives."⁴⁶ The exercise of intercession then is also a catalyst for the transformation of the human being who is interceding in Christ. In intercession for others, one's self-assertion ends, and one is enabled to love the world.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "He [Christ] brought, established, and proclaimed the reality of the new humanity. The circle of disciples about him was not a church; but they simply sketched out the church's inner dialectic. This was not a new religion seeking adherents, which is a picture drawn by a later time. But God established the reality of the church, of humanity pardoned in Jesus Christ." (De Gruchy in his *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ, A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, London: Collins, 1963, 70, citing an earlier English version of the *Sanctorum Communio*). Bonhoeffer's primary concern is to underline that Christ restored humanity; *this* was the center of his mission, and every other result was marginal to it. Christ did not found a religious community, God founded the church through the Apostles and the first "Christ-ians". For Bonhoeffer, community exists as an expression and cultivation of the sociality of humanity, and the organized forms of human groups are communities only to the extent to which they make the participants more human. Thus, when Bonhoeffer develops this stress in relation to religionless Christianity in his prison letters, the idea is not new. The origins of his 'humanism' are present in *Sanctorum Communio*. It is in the section in *Sanctorum Communio*, cited above, where Bonhoeffer first argues that Jesus calls man not to a new religion but to a new life and the formation and organization of community must be subjected to this goal. One and a half decades later Bonhoeffer develops the same idea further: "Being a Christian does not mean being religious in a certain way, making oneself into something or other (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) according to some method or other, but the human being Christ creates in us" (Bonhoeffer's letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 480., *DBW* 8, 536).

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer asserts that community is "Christ existing as church-community" (*DBWE* 1, 189 & 190., *DBW* 1, 126-128).

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 1, 185. (*DBW* 1, 123). Bonhoeffer also says: "It is a mistaken individualism to rely exclusively on one's own prayer, as if God could not take an intercession as seriously as any other kind of prayer; this only demonstrates the perception of prayer as a pious work of the individual, and no understanding of the idea that the church-community leads to a *single* life in Christ ... To the extent we doubt the value of intercession, to that degree we are still filled with self-righteousness" (*DBWE* 1, 186., *DBW* 1, 124).

⁴⁷ To correct the "pious forms of individualism," which is nothing less than the *self-sufficiency* of the church, Bonhoeffer calls Christians to Christ and encourages them to draw from this strength by relying on the support of other Christians. "As Christians, we cannot boast about our solitary relationship with God. Our strength comes from the church-community, and we will never know how much our own prayer accomplished, and what we gained through the fervent intercession of people unknown to us" (*DBWE* 1, 187., *DBW* 1, 125). This is why Bonhoeffer is emphatic about restoring the principal place for corporate prayer in the life of every congregation (cf. *DBWE* 1, 188. *DBW* 1, 125-126). The same emphasis will be applied later in his leadership in theological

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer sees the same principle of expressing participation in Christ through substituting for the other and forgiving the sins of each other. It is on the basis of the representative action of Christ that Bonhoeffer calls the understanding of the forgiveness of sins the “deepest insight into the miracle of the church community”.⁴⁸ This is because while it is only God who can forgive sins, he calls the members of the Christian community to do the releasing of other Christians from their sins.⁴⁹ The Christian to whom the confession has been made forgives the sins of the other through identification with the other person; he or she becomes Christ for the other. In forgiving the sins of others one represents Christ by taking up someone else’s sins. The community together as the collective personhood of Christ bears the human guilt.⁵⁰ The member of the Christian community says: “I am afflicted by the other person’s sins and weaknesses”.⁵¹ Christ remains the primary agent of the action, but Christians are invited to participate in the fate of their neighbors, thereby sharing in Christ. Bonhoeffer says, “Nobody can forgive sins but the person who takes them upon himself, bears them, and wipes them out. Thus, only Christ can do it, which for us means his church as the *sanctorum communio* [...] The Christian takes sin from the others’ conscience and bears it; but clearly one can do that only by laying it in turn on Christ.”⁵²

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the representative action of Christ is the bridge that connects theology and the world.

training and pastoral work. Cf. also Maxwell Lloyd Champion, “Knowledge of God as the Transformation of Human Existence in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (PhD. diss), 518.

⁴⁸ *DBWE I*, 189. (*DBW I*, 126.)

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer argues that according to John 20: 23, it is the community of saints that can forgive each other’s sins with priestly authority. Cf. *DBWE I*, 189., *DBW I*, 126.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer connects community and reconciliation in a way that had not been previously done among Protestants. In fact, one of the unique contributions of Bonhoeffer to Protestant theologies lies and remains in approaching community from the starting point of reconciliation. (Bonhoeffer’s exploration of community was a continuation of his Professor’s, Reinhold Seeberg’s, but the fact that the vicarious representative action of Christ became a theological focus was the fruit of another of his professors, Karl Holl, for it was Holl, who took the emphasis on the wonderful exchange from the young Luther, who took it from Apostle Paul, and placed it at the center.)

⁵¹ *DBWE I*, 187. (*DBW I*, 124.)

⁵² *DBWE I*, 189. (*DBW I*, 126.) Bonhoeffer also writes: “The church-community is thus able to bear the sins that none of its members can bear alone” (Bonhoeffer, *DBWE I*, 190., *DBW I*, 127).

3. In the Big Picture: Being in the Process of Christ Becoming Concrete

It is noteworthy that when Bonhoeffer writes about the transformation that Christ achieves in our humanity through his vicarious representative action, his style of communication changes. The personal stance at the end of *Sanctorum Communio* foreshadows the direction in which Bonhoeffer will develop in his later writings. The concept of the vicarious representation of Christ seems to move Bonhoeffer's first academic study beyond itself. "Through the Christian principle of vicarious representative action, the new humanity is made whole and sustained."⁵³ God's call to love moves Bonhoeffer himself to focus his attention on the other.⁵⁴

At certain occasions in *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer unexpectedly switches from the third person to the first person and proposes a new self-identification with Christ. Leaving the kind of unity that guards the fixed boundaries of the self and the "separateness of persons"⁵⁵, Bonhoeffer allows for a new porosity of selfhood. He writes: "[the] Christian person achieves his or her essential nature when God does not enter the person as *You*, but 'enters into' the person as *I*."⁵⁶ At times like this Bonhoeffer transcends his own conceptuality and moves beyond understanding social relations as building on the uniqueness of the self and beyond suggesting that when persons cease to be radically distinct in who they are, they cease to be persons. Without trying to resolve his self-contradiction, Bonhoeffer envisions the boundary between the person and Christ to dissolve. It is as if Christ would enable the self to go beyond its own self-limitation and enable the self to become truly Christ for the other. On the last pages of *Sanctorum Communio*, when looking toward the eschaton, Bonhoeffer concludes: "Here we see love is completed, that is we only attain our 'self' when we no longer see our own person."⁵⁷ At the eschaton, human personhood will be fully taken

⁵³ *DBWE 1*, 156. (*DBW 1*, 99-100.)

⁵⁴ Cf. *DBWE 1*, 262., *DBW 1*, 181.

⁵⁵ *DBWE 1*, 55., *DBW 1*, 33.

⁵⁶ *DBWE 1*, 56. (*DBW 1*, 34.)

⁵⁷ *DBWE 1*, 288. (*DBW 1*, 197.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

up by the personhood of the One who is worshipped. Bonhoeffer is moving toward a union with Christ, which is real, even if he cannot fully conceptualize it.

In *Sanctorum Communio* the relative silence about conceptual affirmations concerning unity needs to be balanced by the experience of unity between Christ and human beings. Bonhoeffer hints at this level of experience at the end of his dissertation. In an analogous way the one-sidedly conceptual nature of the theme of sociality must be balanced by Bonhoeffer's insights about the vicarious representative work of Christ, which leads towards the transformation of humanity into Christ-shaped sociality.

The importance of viewing Bonhoeffer's early dissertation from within the perspective of his work in his twenties lies in avoiding an artificial continuity between the early and the late Bonhoeffer. At the same time, a suggestion for basic discontinuity between the early Bonhoeffer and the late Bonhoeffer would also be misleading.

By avoiding the superimposing of a non-realistic expectation upon his first work, while also acknowledging the potentials in *Sanctorum Communio*, one can see a portrait of the early Bonhoeffer in its own context and the grace of God at work. Clifford Green in his *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, states that Bonhoeffer's motto could be "not 'cogito, ergo sum,' but 'I relate ethically to others, ergo sum'"⁵⁸ but it is only towards the end of *Sanctorum Communio* that Bonhoeffer begins to move beyond the limitations set by his own conceptuality to approach actual relationality.

⁵⁸ Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 30.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Sanctorum Communio is like a system of coordinates by which a graph will be drawn at a future point of time; the parameters are defined, but the full graph is to be drawn later in Bonhoeffer's life.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Clifford Green overstates his case when speaking of "Bonhoeffer's Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm" in *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, eds. Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 205-218. I tend to identify more with a more modest view, which is represented by Green in an earlier article of his entitled "Human sociality and Christian community," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 113-133.

CHAPTER TWO: ACT AND BEING, A PHILOSOPHICAL QUEST FOR DIRECT PARTICIPATION

Act and Being, Bonhoeffer's second dissertation, reworks the category of human consciousness from the viewpoint of the social nature of God's revelation¹. In his second academic work Bonhoeffer gives a picture of the second stage of the development of his Christological concepts. He argues for direct participation but from a primarily theoretical viewpoint.

Introduction to Chapter Two

Act and Being was completed and accepted as Bonhoeffer's *Habilitationschrift*, a qualifying thesis for the postdoctoral degree in systematic theology at the University of Berlin, in 1930.² In this study Bonhoeffer continues to maintain the assertions he developed in *Sanctorum Communio* three years earlier concerning the social nature of reality; and he takes his argument a step further. He sets out to construct an epistemology in harmony with the principle of sociality. With his words, "In the Christian doctrine of being, all metaphysical ideas of eternity and time, being and becoming, life and dying, essence and appearance must be measured against the concepts of the being of sin and the being of grace or else must be developed anew in light of them."³

Chapter Two will attempt to identify the Christological assertions and assumptions that are present in *Act and Being*. The foregoing chapter will argue that Bonhoeffer's second dissertation failed in its attempt to articulate an epistemology that fits the relational and, by implication, suprarational realms of reality, while placing it within the abstract realm of philosophy. Respecting and receiving God's self-revelation in Christ presupposes one's

¹ Cf. *DBWE 2*, 151., *DBW 2*, 150.

² References to and citations from *Act and Being* in English are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 2 (DBWE 2), Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. Martin Rumscheidt. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996); references in German are based on form *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 2 (DBW 2), Akt und Sein. Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der systematischen Theologie*, ed. Hans-Richard Reuter (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988).

³ *DBWE 2*, 151., *DBW 2*, 150.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

readiness for transcending everything less than relational, so a project in which one attempts to articulate an epistemology through strictly adhering to conceptuality is deemed to fail. An epistemology of sociality without radical readiness to abandon rationalism is an oxymoron. Bonhoeffer, at the time of writing *Act and Being* did not fully recognize the self-contradiction of his project; but years later he saw that direct encounter with God entails an epistemology that transcends the limitations of the philosophical. At the time of writing *Act and Being*, he did not see that this change would come.

Before exploring the Christological input of Bonhoeffer's view of consciousness in his *Act and Being*, an overview of the philosophical and personal milieu in which it was written needs to be discussed.

1. Background for Understanding the Import of *Act and Being* to Bonhoeffer's Christology

1. A. The Philosophical Background for *Act and Being*: A Self Turned upon Itself

Act and Being is Bonhoeffer's attempt to formulate a methodology that fits God's revelation. In *Act and Being*, completed in 1930, Bonhoeffer continues to maintain the assertions he developed in *Sanctorum Communio* three years earlier concerning the social nature of reality. *Act and Being* is a reinterpretation of human consciousness from the viewpoint of the social nature of God's revelation.

In German Idealism reality was seen from the perspective of the self-constituted self. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Germany experienced a new rise in the views of the Enlightenment and reality was depicted from the perspective of the autonomous self. In Bonhoeffer's day at the theological faculty of Berlin consciousness was treated without reference to a divine self who is 'other' than the human self and many theologians considered consciousness primarily as interiority.

In 1928, just a year before beginning his postdoctoral studies in Berlin, Bonhoeffer, while serving for a year as a curate of a German speaking church in Barcelona, Spain, read Heidegger's study *Being and Time* ("Sein und Zeit") in a freshly published unfinished form.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

In this work, widely considered as the most significant of all his works, Heidegger argues for the concept of a human self that leaves out the possibility of the existence of the divine. In Heidegger's ontology "Dasein" is a closed-in existence with no room left for revelation.⁴ In 1929, after discovering the cultural backgrounds and social classes in Spain that he had not experienced as a member of German Aristocracy, and freshly discovering that meaning is found in the colorful particular and the relational in a new way (and not in the intellect alone), Bonhoeffer finds life in academia "infinitely banal and dull"⁵. He sets out to provide a counter-thesis to Heidegger's assertion in *Being and Time*.⁶ For Bonhoeffer, "Heidegger's concept of being [...] remains unsuitable for theology"⁷. *Act and Being* is Bonhoeffer's attempt to describe the nature of reality from the perspective of the self as social existence. In response to Heidegger's two concepts of being and time, Bonhoeffer uses two other categories: doing and being, hence his title, *Act and Being*.⁸

1. B. The Impact of the Early Years of Trying to Build the Career of a Theologian

Beyond the philosophical climate of the Enlightenment of the day, the factor crucial in understanding the development of the early Bonhoeffer's view of Christ is Bonhoeffer's ambition to rise on the ladder of the academic world at the University. Much of the concision and complexity of Bonhoeffer's study can be explained by taking into consideration that its author is a brilliant intellect who writes in a great hurry. When Bonhoeffer started his second

⁴ As Jens Zimmermann describes, Heidegger insists "on a ready-made definition of openness to Being that continues to reject the Christian God and theology as ontic entities." Jens Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, 117.

⁵ Bonhoeffer's letter to Detlef Albers (*DBWE 10*, 177, *DBW 10*, 138.)

⁶ Cf. *DBWE 2*, 116, editorial footnote 50.

⁷ *DBWE 2*, 73., *DBW 2*, 67.

⁸ Immediately following the completion of *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer, on three occasions, interpreted his densely argued *Habilitationschrift* for a variety of audiences. The first occasion was his inaugural lecture at Berlin on July 31, 1930; the second was a lecture in English at Union Seminary in 1931; and the third, also written in English in 1931, was his paper, "Concerning the Christian Idea of God." These are important sources that help one to understand Bonhoeffer's intent in his second dissertation, which is otherwise quite condensed. (Cf. also Wayne Whitson Floyd in "Encounter with an Other: Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*, ed. Peter Frick, *Religion in Philosophy and Theology* 29, 104.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

dissertation, he was not even sure of his research question, yet he completed his habilitation within a year. *Act and Being* is a product of a goal-driven project.

Bethge cites letters written later by Bonhoeffer in which he himself expresses that in the 1920s, his primary motivation for theological work had to do with a self-centered vantage point. For instance, six years after the completion of *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer looks back on these early years of academic writing and says:

I plunged into work in a very unchristian way. An [...] ambition that many noticed in me made my life difficult [...]

I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it – but I had not yet become a Christian [...]

I know that at that time I turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself [...] I pray to God that will never happen again.⁹

This biographical window sheds light on some of the dilemmas associated with the interpretation of *Act and Being*. Bonhoeffer's impatience to become an esteemed theoretician, "plunges" him into a theological work that made not only Bonhoeffer's own life difficult, but also the tasks of those who wanted to follow him in *Act and Being*. Bonhoeffer left several of his key arguments underdeveloped. Michael P. DeJonge is correct in saying that the reader of Bonhoeffer's postdoctoral dissertation is hindered from appreciating Bonhoeffer's intent, because: "In the whole of *Act and Being*, despite repeated references to the problem of *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer never precisely formulates its nature or succinctly indicates the criteria for solution."¹⁰

It may be worth reiterating that just as in the case of *Sanctorum Communio*, so in the case of *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer's personal life needs to be considered when assessing his

⁹ Eberhard Bethge, under the section "The Transition from Theologian to Christian" in his thorough biographical work entitled *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography* (Minneapolis, MN Fortress Press, Revised Edition, 2000), 204-205. (Bethge is citing from Bonhoeffer's letter of January 1936 to Elisabeth Zinn published in a different edition in *DWBE 14*, 134. *DBWE 14*, 112-113.)

¹⁰ Michael DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation, Berlin, Barth, & Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 15). I do not share DeJonge's apprehensive approach to Bonhoeffer, but DeJonge is certainly correct in his observation above.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

writing. In 1929-1930, when the young Bonhoeffer is working on his second dissertation, he is occupied with a philosophical framework. As Reuter indicates, at this time in Bonhoeffer's thinking Christ is not the true "center"¹¹, Bonhoeffer's turn "from phraseology to reality"¹² (to use Bonhoeffer's own terminology from his later years) had not happened yet. The primary force that motivated Bonhoeffer to develop a theological methodology at this time was to make the next step in his professional career. The sense in which Bonhoeffer took Christ was as a key idea. While Bonhoeffer connected his own personal longings with Christ, at the time of writing *Act and Being* his view of Christ was a purely ethereal being. He saw Christ mostly as a key idea for his project.¹³ Producing *Act and Being* also contributed to the author's success negatively, shaping a convoluted intellectual product. All these factors may be reasons why *Act and Being* became one of "the least known – and understood – of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's books."¹⁴

Upon these preliminary remarks, it is time to turn to key assertions of *Acts and Being* concerning the role of Christ.

2. The Contributions of *Act and Being* to Bonhoeffer's Early Christology: The Openness of the Self versus the Self-Contained Self

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer intends to explore theological methodology and to examine human consciousness, the part, which is suitable to it, in other words is open to God. In *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer views Christ primarily as the key agent in transforming consciousness. Here he agrees with Martin Luther, who sees the main problem with the human state as one that originates in the *cor corvum in se*, the heart turned in upon itself.¹⁵ In

¹¹ Reuter in the afterword to *DBWE* 2, 180.

¹² Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 203. (*DBWE* 8 translates it as "a turning from the phraseological to the real" in Bonhoeffer's letter of April 22, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 358., *DBWE* 8, 397.)

¹³ This is a case in point where I found Marsh's narrative approach to the development of Bonhoeffer's Christology particularly helpful (cf. Marsh, *Stange Glory*, 85).

¹⁴ Sabine Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, An Introduction to His Thought*, 74.

¹⁵ "In Luther's words," says Bonhoeffer, "this is *ratio in se ipsam incurve* [reason turned in upon itself]" (*DBWE* 2, 41., *DBW* 2, 73.). Cf. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster

Bonhoeffer's interpretation, "The offense against Christian thinking in any autonomous self-understanding is that it believes human beings to be capable of giving truth to themselves, of transposing themselves into the truth by themselves."¹⁶ Thus, the theological work in which Bonhoeffer finds himself takes him to establish a concept of the self with openness as constitutional to the self.

In *Act and Being*, the conceptuality that Bonhoeffer established in his *Sanctorum Communio* in 1927 concerning the sociality of Christ remains functional. In constructing a theological methodology to approach reality in a way that resembles God's relational existence, for Bonhoeffer, the option of the "non-participatory space of a neutral consciousness" (to use Zimmermann's words) does not exist.¹⁷ Since reality is relational, knowing it requires that one knows not only the world outside but also the self in relationship.

The main contribution of *Act and Being* to the early Bonhoeffer's Christology, therefore, lies in the close relationship between the nature of consciousness (including one's knowledge of the self) and the potential to discover what reality is. For Bonhoeffer, recognizing the close interconnection between the way the self approaches both the world and the self, and the way truth presents itself is crucial. The way one identifies the self, whether as a closed self or as an open self before God, will be essential in enabling one to know truth for what it really is.

2. A. The Gift of Being Placed in the Truth

For Bonhoeffer knowing truth requires a submissive posture to truth. Since the knowledge of God is never a "possession without context"¹⁸ and the context is established by God, theological knowledge "rests on revelation as the sole possibility for human beings

Press, 1961); and *Devotional Writings, Luther's Works, vol. 42.*, ed. Martin O. Dietrich, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1969).

¹⁶ *DBWE 2*, 79. (*DBW 2*, 73.)

¹⁷ Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 286.

¹⁸ *DBWE 2*, 79. Bonhoeffer cites this term from F. K. Schuman (*DBW 2*, 73).

‘being placed into the truth’¹⁹. People are given knowledge of God only when God addresses them and being addressed entails receptivity.²⁰ In contrast to the academic world that sees fittingness to concepts as the criteria for being in truth²¹, in *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer develops the argument that existence is an “encountered existence”²². Only a two-way relationship can lead to a genuine knowledge of God.²³ God defines this relationship, so “only those who have been placed into the truth can understand themselves in truth.”²⁴

2. B. Faith Directed to Christ

One of the concepts that helps Bonhoeffer to develop his thinking about theological methodology is Luther’s distinction between direct faith and indirect faith. Bonhoeffer reworks this concept in a creative way and argues that the faith that corresponds to being placed into truth is always “direct,” turned to Christ in an unmediated and unhindered way. In contrast to Kant²⁵ and Heidegger (who promoted a self that existed in reference to itself, a self

¹⁹ *DBWE 2*, 89. (*DBW 2*, 83). Bonhoeffer also writes: “But that is why any system of human beings, who *are* not eternally in the truth, is an untrue system, and must be shattered so that the true system may become possible” (*DBWE 2*, 89, *DBW 2*, 83).

²⁰ Bonhoeffer maintains that there is no human existence *outside* of either sin or grace. When people exist in their sin, then the reality of God remains outside of their reach, and when people exist in grace, God speaks to them. Consequently, Bonhoeffer argues that theological ‘ideas’ that exist *beyond* the realms of either sin or grace are self-deceptive, because the reality of God is outside of any system of human existence and can only be known in and through God’s self-revelation to humanity. (Cf. *DBWE 2*, 89., *DBW 2*, 83.)

²¹ To use Kant’s phrase, in the spirit of the Enlightenment truth was seen as truth “within the limits of reason alone.” (Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1960, 65.)

²² *DBWE 2*, 116. (*DBW 2*, 113.)

²³ Regarding the schemes of the devil in theological education Bonhoeffer cites Barth, who writes: “No theological idea can as such ever comprehend God; it remains ‘strictly speaking [...] a witness to the devil.’ God remains a free, nonobjective, pure act” (*DBWE 2*, 86-87., *DBW 2*, 81).

²⁴ *DBWE 2*, 81. (*DBW 2*, 75). Bonhoeffer also writes that, “knowledge in truth about oneself, as well as about God, is already ‘being in’ [...] ‘Adam’ or ‘Christ’” (*DBWE 2*, 79-80., *DBW 2*, 74). There are similarities between these assertions of Bonhoeffer and those of Søren Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), although there is no direct textual dependence of Bonhoeffer’s work on Kierkegaard’s.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant expressed his approach to the Christian faith in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

that was confined in itself²⁶), Bonhoeffer indicates that the God of the Bible encounters the I. It is God then who calls the real I into existence. For Bonhoeffer, a key condition of approaching the task of knowing reality as it is, must be readiness to give direct response to revelation.²⁷

Since the new self depends on being addressed by the word and being 'in' Christ, genuine self-understanding "is possible only where the living Christ approaches us, only in beholding him."²⁸ Bonhoeffer is unbending that only self-awareness with fundamental openness to the 'other' can lead to the knowledge of truth. Truth is always something 'other' than the self, and knowing it requires fundamental openness to the word. Bonhoeffer is skeptical about the renewed interest of his day in acquiring self-knowledge as a goal in itself. To be overly preoccupied with the matters of self-consciousness, conscience, and self-reflection, is a path to a false self-knowledge, which is one way of hindering the direct response of faith. People can be too easily misled in their own knowledge of themselves.²⁹

Bonhoeffer's insistence on avoiding self-reflection may sound harsh when it is treated outside the context of a concern for the role of revelation; but when it is understood from within the viewpoint of the primary need for revelation, it makes sense. Bonhoeffer's viewpoint is based on his Lutheran conviction: "Hence Luther's countlessly repeated admonition not to look upon one's own repentance, one's own faith, but precisely upon the Lord Christ".³⁰ Yet, Bonhoeffer is aware that the very act of believing can hide the object of believing, if the act of believing eclipses the Christ of faith, it defeats its purpose. As

²⁶ Cf. *DBWE 2*, 45 (*DBW 2*, 39) and Wayne Whitson Floyd in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*, 91.

²⁷ "But if it is an act of God that draws human beings into the occurrence of revelation, then it is not one among the possibilities of an autonomous philosophy of Dasein" (*DBWE 2*, 110., *DBW 2*, 106-107).

²⁸ *DBWE 2*, 142-144. (*DBW 2*, 141-142.) As Zimmermann explains, highlighting the contrast between Heidegger and Bonhoeffer succinctly, "Not as the Shepherd of Being [as Heidegger would suggest] but as being in the Shepherd, does human being stand open to the possibility of true self-understanding" (Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, 120). Bonhoeffer also says: "Sin is the inversion of the human will (of human existence) into itself" (*DBWE 2*, 144., *DBW 2*, 143).

²⁹ As Bonhoeffer writes: "People do not know their motives; they do not know fully their sin; they are unable to understand themselves on the basis of their own psychic experiences, for they are amenable to any arbitrary interpretation [...] This means they must know that their unity and that of their existence is founded alone in God's Word." (*DBWE 2*, 102; *DBW 2*, 98-99.)

³⁰ *DBWE 2*, 142. (*DBW 2*, 141.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer explains, “The representation of God in my consciousness is, in essence, not God as such. God is only in the act of believing. In ‘my’ believing the Holy Spirit attests itself.”³¹ One must be careful not to treat the representation of God through the act of believing in a false way. Bonhoeffer claims that:

It is certain that when we speak of God, this idea of God comes naturally to mind; but it is equally certain that God as such is not reached through it – inasmuch as we cannot speak of God as of something there for the finding. On the contrary, God alone can speak of God. To make God the content of my consciousness means to understand God as an entity.³²

For Bonhoeffer, faith is God-initiated and to stay like that it needs to be unidirectional. Faith does not hold God, God never becomes a possession, as a concept or an entity to have. Bonhoeffer wants to avoid the mistake of making the act of believing the essence of the Christian faith. Bonhoeffer cites Luther in saying: “Search for yourself only in Christ and not in yourself, and you shall find yourself for ever in him.”³³

³¹ *DBWE 2, 92. (DBW 2, 87.)*

³² *DBWE 2, 92. (DBW 2, 87.)* Here Bonhoeffer is fighting against the traces of natural theology. He is following Luther’s example who attacked the methods of scholasticism, which relied on the human potentials to get close to God. Bonhoeffer, like Luther, argues that there is no method by which human beings can attain the knowledge of God; this is not within their power. “There is, therefore, no method for the knowledge of God; human beings cannot place themselves into the existential [existentiell] situation from which they could speak of God, for they are not able to place themselves into the truth.” (*DBWE 2, 92., DBW 2, 87.*)

³³ *Luther’s Werke* 42: 99-115, translated by Bonhoeffer’s editor, cited in *DBWE 2* on page 139, in footnote 8. (*DBW 2, 149.*) The quote is from Luther’s “A Sermon on Preparing to Die” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, eds. Timothy F. Lull and Willian R. Russel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 638-654. Bonhoeffer also cites the following line from Luther: “God is closer to me than is my existence.” (*Luther Werke* 37: 58, *DBWE 2, 95., DBW 2, 92.*) It is interesting to note that Theresa of Avila, a contemporary of Luther, makes the same statement. And in the same way as Bonhoeffer cites Luther; three decades before Bonhoeffer Therese of Lisieux, the French Carmelite cites Teresa of Avila along the same lines. I do not see any textual dependence between Bonhoeffer and Theresa of Lisieux, but it is a fascinating indication about the sensitivities of the age that created such an interest in the interiority of humanity from such different backgrounds, echoing and articulating such similar conclusions based on the Gospel in both the sixteenth and at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2. C. Reliance on Christ as Community

Bonhoeffer's assertions of the need to be placed in the truth lead him to consider one's relationship to the Christian community. Bonhoeffer suggests that the church has the ability to direct the theologian from being a self-reliant individual toward a person with the knowledge of God, because with the words of *Act and Being*, "the church is the present Christ, 'Christ existing as community'".³⁴

Bonhoeffer points to the inadequacy of the knowledge of the isolated self in the following way: "There is no God who 'is there'; God 'is' in the relation of persons, and the being of God is God's being person."³⁵ Bonhoeffer is aware of the temptation that he as a theologian faces. He confesses: "The fact is that, as a theologian, I cannot resist the lure of intellectual works-righteousness except by locating my theology within the community of faith (which is the theologian's humility), allowing the community of faith to allocate its place and bestow meaning upon it".³⁶ Bonhoeffer is convinced that "[t]heological thinking and knowledge is possible only as ecclesial thinking and knowledge,"³⁷ because it "is only in the community of faith that all this [the spoken word of Christ] acquires its special meaning."³⁸ Acknowledging the finitude of the self leads the self to a realism that expresses itself in a

³⁴ *DBWE 2*, 111. ("[D]ie Kirche ist der gegenwärtige Christus, 'Christus als Gemeinde existierend'" *DBW 2*, 108.)

³⁵ *DBWE 2*, 115. (*DBW 2*, 112.)

³⁶ *DBWE 2*, 132. (*DBW 2*, 130.) As John D. Godsey's puts it, for Bonhoeffer, "Revelation [...] takes place in the Christian community, and it demands its own [community-based] sociology." John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 67.

³⁷ *DBWE 2*, 131. (*DBW 2*, 129, the Italics are Bonhoeffer's own.)

³⁸ *DBWE 2*, 131. (*DBW 2*, 129.) Bonhoeffer also states, "Here lie the limits of theology; they are known by the community of faith in which it is practiced" (*DBWE 2*, 132., *DBW 2*, 130). "In the personlike community of faith, but only there, the gospel can be truly proclaimed and believed. Hence, the revelation is somehow held fast here." (*DBWE 2*, 112., *DBW 2*, 109.) "Revelation should be thought of only in reference to the concept of church, where the church is understood to be constituted by the present proclamation of Christ's death and his resurrection – within, on the part of, and for the community of faith." (*DBWE 2*, 110., *DBW 2*, 107.)

hermeneutical humility, in making oneself reliant on the church. It is in this sense that, to use Bonhoeffer's words from *Act and Being*, "[t]heology is a function of the church."³⁹

3. Placing the Christology of *Act and Being* in Bonhoeffer's Narrative

3. A. The Problematic Nature of Bonhoeffer's Attempt to Formulate a Methodology Suitable for Theology

The reader of *Act and Being* finds himself in a dilemma, which derives from a self-contradiction present in Bonhoeffer's work between the intent Bonhoeffer states and the language he employs.

Act and Being pointed toward a quest for a theological methodology, an approach that is suitable to the subject matter of theology in general and by implication also of Christology. When one reads statements like the following: "Christ demands faith directed towards Christ without reflection"⁴⁰ one expects the development of suggestions that help one move toward direct faith. Since for Bonhoeffer the church, as a representation of the sociality of Christ in the world, is the place where Christology can be dealt with, one would expect paragraphs that help the reader to *participate* in church-community. Bonhoeffer's assertion that *fides directa* (that Bonhoeffer develops further in his *Discipleship*) centers on the aspects of faith that are inaccessible to self-reflexive thinking feeds such expectations. If direct faith is truly an immediate movement of the will, never wasting energy to ponder on the subject matter of

³⁹ *DBWE 2*, 130 & 175. (*DBW 2*, 128 & 177.) John D. Godsey writes rightly, "[w]hat differentiates theology from profane thinking is alone the fact that it is committed to the church." (John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, 72.)

⁴⁰ *DBWE 2*, 157. (*DBW 2*, 157.) It is worth noting that to polarize faith directed toward Christ and self-reflection can be quite misleading *outside* of the relational context that Bonhoeffer discussed above. The topic will be further explored in Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, where being directed toward Christ becomes the key identifying mark of the follower of Christ.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

faith, and if “God is not the God of our consciousness”⁴¹, as Barth describes, the theologian is to move toward a trustful submission.

It needs to be noted that Bonhoeffer’s line of argumentation regarding theological methodology is much less straightforward than the current presentation suggests. As it has been noted at the beginning of Chapter Two, *Act and Being* is enigmatic and even obscure at times. Nevertheless, the direction toward which Bonhoeffer is moving in calling the individual closer to truth cannot be mistaken. *Act and Being* lays down the *conceptual* foundations of one’s attitude to participating in the life of God through Christ. As Bonhoeffer writes, “the concept of revelation must [...] yield an epistemology of its own.”⁴² Even if the radical implications of the church embodying the culture of the word and serving as a counter-culture for the world are not yet developed in *Act and Being* (the fruition of these concepts will be seen five years later in Bonhoeffer’s leadership in the Finkenwalde community), the potential is there.

What is more problematic is that Bonhoeffer’s *Act and Being* is difficult to access not only because of the condensed and often undeveloped nature of its arguments, but also because of its self-contradicting suggestions. Bonhoeffer’s dissertation does not inspire the reader to move beyond thinking about the goal that it describes. Bonhoeffer tries to walk two different paths at the same time. In *Act and Being* he takes the dialectical nature of theology, which he learned from Karl Barth, but is also preoccupied by the desire to show the validity of revelation in the medium of the philosophical. Although in critiquing Heidegger, whose definition of the self implies that the self is closed to revelation, Bonhoeffer states that the “notion of the individual pure and simple is an unworkable abstraction”⁴³; in *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer does not get much further than an abstraction. Bonhoeffer’s habilitation is a study of relational consciousness conveyed in the language of the non-relational. Hans-Richard Reuter, the editor of the German edition of *Act and Being* (who is otherwise not intimidated by the philosophical language of dissertations in systematic theology) complains: “Is this the same author who is so capable in his later writings of communicating the terse reality of

⁴¹ Barth cited by Bonhoeffer in *DBWE* 2, 92., *DBW* 2, 87.

⁴² *DBWE* 2, 31. (*DBW* 2, 26.)

⁴³ *DBWE* 2, 120. (*DBW* 2, 117.)

contemporary Christian existence – which takes place and is borne in suffering – in an unpretentious, precise, authentic language saturated with experience?”⁴⁴ In *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer hinders his own goal by failing to give room for the interpersonal for which his project would call.

3. B. Toward the Consciousness of the Child

There is hardly a better way to identify Bonhoeffer’s positions about both the necessary relationship between Christian epistemology and human consciousness and the stage he is at in his life at the time of writing his *Act and Being* than by citing the few personal statements that reveal where Bonhoeffer’s heart is at the time.⁴⁵ When speaking of the community of faith that alone can ensure that revelation is “understood in its real, existence-affecting being”⁴⁶, Bonhoeffer refers to a knowledge that assumes personal experience:

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 whether it is here or elsewhere. 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 circle closes.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 2, 162. As Reuter comments in his afterword: “Bonhoeffer held firm to the belief that theology cannot leave behind general philosophical forms of thought. And, in so doing, he remained the heir to liberal theology that he had always seen himself to be” (*DBWE* 2, 163.)

⁴⁵ We know very little about how Bonhoeffer experienced his childhood. The volume about his youth (*DBWE* Volume 9, *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927*. eds. Paul D. Matheny, Clifford J. Green and Marshall D. Johnson, trans. Mary Nebelsick with the assistance of Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003) tells us only bits and pieces about his early years. The majority of those descriptions originates from others.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 2, 116. (*DBW* 2, 112.)

⁴⁷ *DBWE* 2, 121. (*DBW* 2, 118.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

The very first time when Bonhoeffer experienced church life occurred in his year spent in Barcelona just prior to writing his second dissertation (Bonhoeffer did not attend church on a regular basis before nor did he attend church during the writing of his *Act and Being*). His expressions would make little to no sense if the ‘I hear,’ ‘someone offers me the sacrament’ or ‘someone prays for me’ would not refer to actual experiences. One can also consider the following statement: “My sin is no longer sin, my death no longer death, because the community of faith is with me. It is temptation which will have me believe that sin takes me away from God’s community for good [...]”⁴⁸ When Bonhoeffer writes these, he clearly shifts his points of reference from philosophy to specific experience rooted in a particular community.

Behind the convictions central to *Act and Being* that “[e]ncountered existence is existence in social context, existence in reference to Christ”⁴⁹ there must be at least instances of personal experience, even if an academic work like *Act and Being* does not mention any of these. When Bonhoeffer writes about people considering their sin in light of their knowledge of Christ, he also refers to needs, which make sense only when one feels them.⁵⁰ These texts suggest that even at the time of writing *Act and Being*, there is a level of transformation going on in Bonhoeffer’s life that his dissertation is not exposing. There is a subtle progression in Bonhoeffer’s life towards Christ becoming concrete which remains largely hidden.

The place where Bonhoeffer points toward the needed corrections most clearly in his second dissertation is at the end (just as it was in his first dissertation). In the last pages of *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer depicts the sense in which consciousness is open before God in a way that is more personal than it was before: “In the contemplation of Christ, the tormented knowledge of the I’s torn-ness finds ‘joyful conscience,’ confidence, and courage.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *DBWE* 2, 123. (*DBW* 2, 120.)

⁴⁹ *DBWE* 2, 116. (*DBW* 2, 113.)

⁵⁰ “The knowledge of what sin is comes solely through the mediation of the word of God in Christ; and that knowledge overrules the dissenting conscience.” (*DBWE* 2, 145., *DBW* 2, 143.)

⁵¹ *DBWE* 2, 161. (*DBW* 2, 161.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

In an earlier letter to a friend Bonhoeffer identified the goal of his would-be study as a treatment of the “problem of the child in theology.”⁵² After reading his habilitation, one could say that Bonhoeffer did not achieve his goal, Bonhoeffer hardly refers to the motif of the child throughout his study. But on the last few pages Bonhoeffer turns to the image of the child as one who is a continual becoming, open to the future that is still unfolding. In Bonhoeffer’s words,

To-let-oneself-be-defined by means of the future is the eschatological possibility of the child. The child (full of anxiety and bliss) sees itself in the power of what ‘future things’ will bring, and for that reason alone, it can live in the present. However, they who are mature, who desire to be defined by the present, fall subject to the past, to themselves, death, and guilt. It is only out of the future that the present can be lived.⁵³

One must recognize that Bonhoeffer did indeed make steps toward articulating the identity of a child in his *Act and Being*. In his struggle against “the solipsistic claim of autonomy”, as Reuter calls it,⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer gave some indications concerning the future goal of the journey.⁵⁵ It is in the consciousness of the child, as the symbol of utmost openness, that Bonhoeffer sees the posture essential for theological methodology, because that is the goal. Thus, the point at which Bonhoeffer really begins to address theological methodology is when he lets his desires take him and transcends the limitations of his own philosophical grid at the time: “It is in being known by God that human beings know God. But to be known by God means to become a new person.”⁵⁶ The present way to know truth in the “act of being

⁵² Bonhoeffer’s letter to Helmuth Rösler written August 7, 1928, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, From the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Vol. 1., ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. E. H. Robertson and J. Bowden (London: Collins; New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 38-39.

⁵³ *DBWE* 2, 159. (*DBW* 2, 159.)

⁵⁴ Reuter in the afterword to *Act and Being*, *DBWE* 2, 183. (*DBW* 2, 185.)

⁵⁵ The trajectory that Bonhoeffer’s second dissertation gives for the future of Bonhoeffer’s life is reflected in Reuter’s closing line of his afterword to *Act and Being*. “[T]he dominance of the self-empowered subjectivity is broken in the ‘obedience’ of ‘discipleship;’ but the socially related, responsible self discovers its ‘strength’ – in ‘resistance’ up to the point of ‘surrender.’ The ‘I’ becomes a ‘child,’ the ‘child’ becomes the ‘disciple,’ and the ‘disciple’ experiences liberation into ‘maturity.’ That Bonhoeffer carried out this dialectic of modern self-consciousness not in a system but rather in life as a Christian and a contemporary – therein lays the compelling seriousness of his existential theology” (Reuter in *DBWE* 2, 183).

⁵⁶ *DBWE* 2, 134. (*DBW* 2, 133.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

encountered by God”⁵⁷ is the same as the present consciousness of the child, a theme Bonhoeffer barely touches on as his dissertation ends.

The closing lines of *Act and Being* reflect the mind of the early Bonhoeffer at its best indicating both the complexity and the vibrancy of his mind in his second academic work:

The one who became an adult in exile and misery becomes a child at home [Bonhoeffer is referring to the prodigal son here, who returned to his home]. Home is the community of Christ, always ‘future,’ present ‘in faith’ because we are children of the future – always act, because it is being; always being, because it is act.

This is the new creation of the new human being of the future, which here is an event already occurring in faith, and there perfected for view. It is the new creation of those who no longer look back upon themselves, but only away from themselves to God’s revelation, to Christ. It is the new creation of those born out of the world’s confines into the wideness of heaven, becoming what they were or never were, a creature of God, a child.⁵⁸

To summarize, in *Act and Being*, if one avoids the mistake of reading Bonhoeffer’s dissertation through the lenses of his later writings, one can discover the conceptual foundations of a Christ-centered theology⁵⁹ but without a radical centeredness on Christ. It is centered on Christ as on an idea but not as a person who calls us to obedience. It does not come as a surprise then that two years after writing *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer himself admitted that “I do not like this product anymore.”⁶⁰ Following the writing of *Act and Being*,

⁵⁷ *DBWE 2*, 96. (*DBW 2*, 91.)

⁵⁸ *DBWE 2*, 161. (*DBW 2*, 161.)

⁵⁹ As Sabine Dramm aptly says, “Revelation can be categorized only in relation to persons” (Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, An Introduction to His Thought*, 76).

⁶⁰ Cited by Christine Tietz-Steiding on the back cover of *DBWE 2*. The critical awareness concerning the limitations of liberal theology, which Hans Frei articulated toward the end of the twentieth century in his *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, diagnosed the trap, which Bonhoeffer exemplified and fell into in the following way: “The great reversal had taken place; interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story.” (Cited by Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 51.) The weakness (which is clearly present in Bonhoeffer’s methodology, despite his efforts to react against rationalism) is more apparent for the twenty-first century readers than it was and could have been for anyone in Bonhoeffer’s age. From the perspective of post-liberalism from the end of the twentieth century, the inadequacy of Bonhoeffer’s approach could be described in

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

its inherent methodological weakness was not only becoming increasingly apparent for Bonhoeffer, but he corrected it himself. *Act and Being* is a critical steppingstone toward constructing a methodology suitable to theology but the more robust formulation of Christology, which is so characteristic of the later Bonhoeffer, requires a relationality with Christ in his all-encompassing reality that is more radical than *Act and Being* allowed.

the following way. When a subject matter (in this case Christian self-awareness) is defined from a perspective other than the perspective of the community from which the subject matter arises (in this case the experience of the Christ-representing community), then, the assumptions of the community that are otherwise foreign to the original community will necessarily be superimposed on the subject matter itself (in this case human consciousness). The result is an interpretation that reflects a paradigm that is external and foreign to the subject matter. If human consciousness is fundamentally relational (which according to Bonhoeffer it is), it should be interpreted and conveyed relationally to reduce the loss that takes place in the processes of communication. Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being* is an illustration of the mistake that later post liberals urge to prevent.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

CHAPTER THREE: *CREATION AND FALL* AND *CHRISTOLOGY*, THE RADICAL MOVE TOWARD THE CONCRETE

Bonhoeffer's lectures *Creation and Fall* delivered from November to December of 1932 followed by his *Christology* lectures between May and July of 1933 introduce a new author. With the words of Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, the editors of the German edition of *Creation and Fall*, "Between the planning and the delivery of this course of lecture, Bonhoeffer's life took a turn"¹. An appropriate understanding of this turn is crucial for appreciating the development of Bonhoeffer's Christology, because the shift introduces a new focus that had not been present before and yet becomes definitive for the entirety of Bonhoeffer's life: the focus on the concrete.

Introduction to Chapter Three

Bonhoeffer publishes his *Creation and Fall* in 1933 as the first of his works that explores the dynamics that ensue when the God of the Bible meets human beings in a direct and specific way. During the lectures of his winter course at the University of Berlin that then formed the basis of this book Bonhoeffer portrays a God who summons people to respond to him, enlivens them and gives birth to a new concreteness of their creaturely existence.²

Bonhoeffer's *Christology* series that took place a few months later, during the summer semester of 1933, give further witness to his new view of Christ, although in this series Bonhoeffer does not focus on Christ's relation to the created world in the same way as he does in *Creation and Fall* but remains more on the theoretical side.³

¹ *DBWE* 3, 147. (*DBW* 3, 137.)

² Bonhoeffer had to change the original title "Creation and Sin" to *Creation and Fall* for the purpose of publication. References to and citations from *Creation and Fall* in English are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 3 (DBWE 3), Creation and Fall, A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997); references in German are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 3 (DBW 3), Schöpfung und Fall: Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1-3 (DBW 3)*, ed. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1989).

³ In his first *Christology* lecture Bonhoeffer says that he will explore the focal point of all scholarship: "Only scholarship that knows itself to be within the realm of the Christian church could agree here that Christology is

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer's interest in the *Christology* lectures shifts to the heresies associated with the identity of Christ. The fact that the *Christology* lectures were held right after Hitler had been elected as the Chancellor of Germany undoubtedly impacted Bonhoeffer's emphases on safeguarding the supremacy of Christ. It is mainly through the formulation of negative Christology that Bonhoeffer shows his students that the reign of Christ cannot be substituted by any other authority including theological thinking. Bonhoeffer turns to positive Christology only towards the end of his *Christology* lectures and then only briefly. It is in his *Creation and Fall* where the concreteness of the self-revelation of Christ in people's life materializes. Here Christ is depicted as a person who addresses people as their Lord in personal ways and shapes an existence in them that resembles Christ in his incarnation.

For these reasons in the present chapter Bonhoeffer's fresh approach to who Christ is will be surveyed mostly through discussing his *Creation and Fall*.

1. Background to the Turning Away from the Phraseological to the Real

The changes that took place in Bonhoeffer sometime before and during the time he delivered his *Creation and Fall* lectures on the first three chapters of Genesis is best identified by his own expression as "turning away from the phraseological to the real."⁴

To understand the nature of this shift of attention from a realm that is primarily philosophical to a realm that is primarily concrete and Bonhoeffer's new paradigm in which every genuine act of interpretation is meant to make Christ more and more present in actual life situations, one must look at the formative circumstances and factors that were influential for Bonhoeffer to become the person he was by 1933.

the center of the realm of scholarship itself. That means the Christology is the invisible, unrecognized, hidden center of scholarship of the *universitas litterarum* [Universe of scholarship]" (*DBWE 12*, 301., *DBW 12*, 281).

⁴ For helpful discussions on the topic see De Gruchy's introduction to *Creation and Fall*, *DBWE 3*, 8; and Hans Christoph von Hase's afterword, "'Turning Away from the Phraseological to the Real' A Personal Recollection", in *DBWE 10*, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931*, 591-604.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

1. A. The Nature of the Paradigm-Shift that Took Place in Bonhoeffer during 1932

As the previous two chapters of the present study have shown, Bonhoeffer in his academic work treated Christ primarily as a concept or an idea through which he was able to re-organize his thoughts and offer radical philosophical alternatives for interpreting life responses to the views of the great thinkers of German philosophy and liberal theology. Against the background of Bonhoeffer's primarily if not purely theoretical approaches, the following quotation indicates a different route. When one reads him, one needs to keep in mind that two or three years earlier the same person wrote about Christ as an idea, a symbol or mere doctrine. In his 1933 lectures on Christology Bonhoeffer says:

Liberal theology only wanted to see, in Jesus, the embodiment of a certain doctrine. Thus, the humanity of Jesus is basically not taken seriously, even though liberal theology has so much to say about Jesus as a human being. The idea of Jesus's humanity bypasses here the reality of Jesus as a human being, confuses the ideal of his humanity with its reality, in short, makes his humanity into a symbol.⁵

This emphasis on "the reality of Jesus as a human being," which should not be bypassed by mere ideas, is undoubtedly new in Bonhoeffer's work. Bonhoeffer always loved literature, art, music, theater, philosophy. He never questioned the value of culture, entertainment, tasty food, traveling or history. The new component in his thought is not the affirmation of humanity *per se*. What is different in Bonhoeffer's approach to the world around him is that he begins to view human experience through "the reality of Jesus as human being," not the other way around. In the text cited above Bonhoeffer identifies the representation of Jesus as an embodiment of a doctrine as the liberal perspective. The humanity of Jesus, which is both an actual humanity and is defined by who Jesus is, was not present in Bonhoeffer's writings before. Even if the significance of this change may not be obvious at first sight, it is a profound shift, which will prove to be powerful in the following years of Bonhoeffer's life. In

⁵ "Lectures on Christology" (*DBWE 12*, 337., *DBW 12*, 321).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

1931 and 1932 God in Christ becomes specific for Bonhoeffer and this has far-reaching implications not only for Bonhoeffer's Christology but for his life as a whole.⁶

The influences that stand behind the change can be identified best by association with three people and their friends with whom Bonhoeffer got acquainted during his year at Union Theological Seminary, New York, starting from September 1930, and his subsequent return to Germany.

1. B. Three Individuals of Great Impact

The first of the three disparate influences that reached Bonhoeffer during this time can be associated with the emblematic figure of Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Seminary. Bonhoeffer enrolled in the course *Philosophy of Religion: Religion and Ethics*, which was taught by Niebuhr. Most German theologians of Berlin did not speak English in Bonhoeffer's time and thus were not exposed to theologies beyond the German-speaking world. Bonhoeffer is given a head start before his German colleagues.⁷

Niebuhr, considered by many as the father of social ethics in America, often used the works of contemporary black authors to teach theology. Bonhoeffer was initially frustrated by the social gospel that he encountered in American Christianity (because of its pragmatist and anthropocentric outlook) but then he was also inspired by it (because of the care for social involvement, which was so much missing from the philosophical theologies of Germany). Niebuhr's example opened new perspectives for Bonhoeffer in social engagement.⁸

Niebuhr connected Bonhoeffer with the practical approach of American Protestantism to life, bringing the power of the Gospel closer to Bonhoeffer than ever before. Bonhoeffer criticized the superficiality, sloppiness, and often naïve know-it-all attitude to theology in the

⁶ The letters and texts we have from Bonhoeffer's academic, pastoral and ecumenic activities in 1931 and 1932 collected in *DBWE 11* provide valuable background information to the transition, but the present study remains focused on the changes that affected Bonhoeffer's Christology.

⁷ John S. Conway, *Bonhoeffer Conference 2006*, Regent College, Lecture 4 (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent Bookstore, Audio Recording, 2006).

⁸ See *DBWE 10*, 643., *DBW 10*, 643.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

US. Yet the “Christian realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr took humanity much more seriously than the abstraction of the German theoreticians. The Social Gospel movement of the 1930’s had its heyday in the US. Their stress on obedience to God as the test for truth seemed authentic to Bonhoeffer. The terrible state of racism in America prepared Bonhoeffer to see traces of his own German nationalism. Bonhoeffer never acknowledged his indebtedness to Niebuhr (because Bonhoeffer found Niebuhr’s conceptuality too shallow), yet the ideas of costly grace, social responsibility, and even pacifism found their entry points into Bonhoeffer’s life through Niebuhr from their first encounter in 1930.⁹

Secondly, while in New York, Bonhoeffer was invited by Frank Fisher, one of the few of his black fellow students at Union Seminary, to visit the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. This black church, at a time when black people in America were segregated from white, was another training ground for Bonhoeffer. In this church of seven thousand people, unlike anything he had experienced before, Bonhoeffer was confronted with a radically Gospel oriented church. While white people were accustomed to the local segregation of the black and applauded the spirituals that the black sang, they refused to give them equal rights.¹⁰ Bonhoeffer loved to sing these spirituals. He learned and recorded several of them, and years later in Finkenwalde, he taught them to his students, and they sang them together every day. Just a few years later, Bonhoeffer saw the role of this church in America in relation to black people as exemplary for his own context in Germany in relation to the Jews. Dr. Powell, the influential pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, a biblical and passionate preacher, was also involved in the social and political issues of the time. Powell encouraged people to be emotional in the expression of their faith. The relational and spontaneous nature of the black church differed from the primarily rationalistic, restrained, often cold and distanced German way of relating to others to which Bonhoeffer was accustomed. Years later, Bonhoeffer recalled his experience concerning the way in which he heard the ‘black Christ’

⁹ Charles Marsh’s research that provided the basis for his *Strange Glory* contributes much to the background of the formative year in the US in Bonhoeffer’s life (particularly in chapter 6., 1930-1931, “I Heard the Gospel Preached in the Negro Churches”, 101-135).

¹⁰ From a car trip to Washington, D. C. with a white person and two black students, Bonhoeffer writes about the segregation between black and white people: “The conditions are really rather unbelievable. Not just separate railway cars, tramways, and buses south of Washington, but also, for example, when I wanted to eat in a small restaurant with a Negro, I was refused service” (Bonhoeffer’s letter to his parents, December 1, 1930, *DBWE 10*, 258., *DBW 10*, 213).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

preached in New York: “nowhere else is revivalist preaching still so alive and widespread as it is for Negroes; here the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners, is truly preached and received with great welcome and visible emotion.”¹¹ In this church, Bonhoeffer came to see the world through the eyes of an ethnic group that differed from his own. It was the directness with which that black church applied the Gospel to the daily lives of people, along with its bold stance for social justice, that Bonhoeffer found most appealing. These experiences opened Bonhoeffer’s eyes to a new realism. When in 1931 he returned to Germany, he was not the Bonhoeffer who left a year before. At the age of twenty-six, his attention was drawn to the life changing potential of the Christian faith in the contemporary world. The prism through which Bonhoeffer began to see the world differed from what he was used to through his upbringing and studies in Germany.

Thirdly, upon his return from the U. S., Bonhoeffer met Karl Barth in person in Bonn for the first time. Bonhoeffer came away from Barth’s seminar in July of 1931 with the recognition that the biblical text can be read as the word of God in relation to the context of the contemporary reader. Both the 1918 publication of Barth’s *Romans*, which Bonhoeffer read, and the seminar Bonhoeffer attended in Bonn had a profound impact on Bonhoeffer that pointed him to a high view of the word of God. This appreciation for the Bible combined with Powell’s ‘spiritual exegesis’ merged into a fresh approach that led Bonhoeffer closer toward the concrete. Bonhoeffer began to approach the Bible with an attention that shifted from a realm that is primarily philosophical to a realm that is primarily personal. In fact, saying that *Creation and Fall* was “Bonhoeffer’s Old Testament equivalent to Barth’s exposition of the Epistle to the Romans”¹² is not an overstatement. What Barth did in approaching the Bible Bonhoeffer imitated doing in his *Creation and Fall*, Barth inspired Bonhoeffer to seek the relevance of Scriptures in one’s daily life and Bonhoeffer did just that in the biblical account of creation.

¹¹ “Essay about Protestantism in the United States of America, August 1939,” *DBWE 15*, 458. (*DBW 15*, 454.)

¹² James Burtness in *Internationales Bonhoeffer Forum*, Vol. 6, ed. Christian Gremmels, *Bonhoeffer und Luther: Zur Sozialgestalt des Luthertums in der Moderne* (Bonhoeffer and Luther: The social Form of Lutheranism in Modernity). München: Chr. Kaiser, 1983, 172., cited in *DBWE 3*, 151., *DBW 3*, 141.)

2. Bonhoeffer's New Realism as Represented in *Creation and Fall*

At the end of his year in New York, following the intense period of personal transformation, Bonhoeffer began his post as lecturer at the theological faculty of the University of Berlin on August 1, 1931 (he received his professorial appointment in the same year on November 11), and he gave the provocative subtitle to his Genesis lectures: “theological exegesis”¹³. In placing the term “theological” before the term “exegesis” he was indicating polemics.¹⁴ While Bonhoeffer did not attack historical criticism directly, he knew that the academia of German theology would not be sympathetic to his hermeneutical approach to the Bible. He wanted to provide a positive example of interpreting the biblical text.¹⁵

Bonhoeffer's new attitude to the words of the Bible can be best described *as a personal address* to its reader, which in turn makes Christ become concrete. People who knew Bonhoeffer after 1932 did not notice the shift in him immediately, but in time they did recognize it. As Bethge writes:

[T]hose who knew him well from earlier days were struck by the difference in him, as Paul Lehmann was, for instance, when he met him again in Berlin in 1933 [...] Bonhoeffer now regularly attended church, although in New York Lehman had been struck by how freely he behaved in this matter. He also practiced a meditative approach to the Bible that was obviously quite different from the exegetical or homiletical use of it. During their retreats in 1932 his students were surprised by this unusual practice, and did not fail to make ironic comments about it [...] He alluded increasingly to a communal life of obedience and prayer, which could perhaps renew

¹³ As one of his former students, Hans Hinrich Flöter put it “Bonhoeffer's [of his lecture course] was ... a fascinating provocation” (these words by Flöter are from the letter of May 27, 1987, written to Reinhart Staats, cited in footnote 19. of the afterword in *DBWE 3*, 152., *DBW 3*, 142.)

¹⁴ As Rüter and Tödt note it, “The students at Berlin were evidently aware of the provocative nature of the title Bonhoeffer gave to the lecture course when he announced it.” (Rüter and Tödt in the afterword to *Creation and Fall*, *DBWE 3*, 152., *DBW 3*, 142.)

¹⁵ In a letter written to one of his friends, Bonhoeffer expresses his insistence on developing a kind of interpretation that treats the word as a personal address in a responsible way. Bonhoeffer says, “It is simply not enough, and therefore false, to say that the principle of concretion can only be the Holy Ghost itself” (Philips cites the letter in his *The Form of Christ in the World*, 89).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

the credibility of the individually isolated and privileged ministry [...] More and more frequently he quoted the Sermon on the Mount as a statement to be acted upon, not merely as a mirror [...] One student later recalled a prayer meeting in 1932: “There, before the church struggle, he said to us [...] that we should not forget that every word of Holy Scripture was a love letter from God directed very personally to us [...]”¹⁶

For the author of *Creation and Fall*, God speaks to human beings and his address to them particularizes them. A few years later, looking back on his own transition Bonhoeffer describes this to a friend, Elizabeth Zinn, with the following words:

But then [following the completion of *Act and Being* in 1930] something different came, something that has changed and transformed my life to this very day. For the first time, I came to the Bible [...] Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly and so have other people around me. That was a great liberation.¹⁷

What lay at the center of this change was that while Bonhoeffer had never approached the Bible before as a source through which God may address the reader in a personal way and summon them to a personal response, at the time of his Genesis lectures, he is taken by the power by which revelation brings humanity into existence and keeps forming its existence.

One way to indicate the force of the changes occurring in Bonhoeffer at this season is to quote his own words from his letter written four years later to his then brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, looking back at his new attitude to the Bible as God’s word to him in the following way:

Only if we finally dare to come to the Bible assuming that the one speaking to us here really is the God who loves us and has no intention of abandoning us with our questions will we come to rejoice in the Bible [...]

I [...] ask with all my powers what is God trying to say to us here? [...] since having learned to read the Bible this way – and it has not been at all that long – it becomes

¹⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 203-204.

¹⁷ From Bonhoeffer’s letter from Finkenwalde to Elizabeth Zinn, Jan 27, 1936 (*DBWE 14*, 134. *DBW 14*, 113).

more miraculous to me each day [...] you cannot imagine what a joyous thing it is when one finds one's way back to these primitive things after losing one's way along the false paths of so many theologies.¹⁸

The newness of Bonhoeffer's Christology has to do with the concretizing impact of Christ on human life that emerges in the interaction between the Creator and the creature. For Bonhoeffer, in the concrete encounter with God place and time are invested with a new theological significance, ethical responsibility becomes a matter of relational authenticity, and the limitations of human existence become part of God's personal address.

In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer's version of 'Christian realism' (to use Niebuhr's term) is seen in how Bonhoeffer approaches the world, the Bible, and the church as spheres through which Christ speaks and at the same time to which Christ gives obligations. The consequences of the changes that took place in Bonhoeffer become apparent in his writing. De Gruchy describes the change as a shift "from an abstruse academic theologian whose context was solely the university to a theologian for preachers" whose interest is that Christians would be witnesses in the world.¹⁹ Kelly (referring to Bethge) notes that from this time on, Bonhoeffer distances himself "from his heady, footnote heavy Berlin dissertations."²⁰

The next section of Chapter Three will investigate three specific areas in which Bonhoeffer's shift towards the concrete becomes apparent in *Creation and Fall*.

2. A. Concreteness Expressed in Ethical Action

What kind of Christological input can one get when one opens a book of the Old Testament? For Bonhoeffer, the main agent of creation, the One who is named Yahweh is the same One who becomes flesh in Christ and is testified about in the New Testament. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer uses the two persons of the Trinity interchangeably. When

¹⁸ DBWE 14, 167-169. (DBW 14, 145-147.)

¹⁹ John W. de Gruchy in his introduction to the English edition of *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3, 8.

²⁰ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership, The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 53. The authors refer to Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 134.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

reference is made to God, Christ is also implied, and vice versa. In a manner characteristic of his Christ-centered interpretation of the creation account in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer writes: “It is the Gospel, it is Christ, it is the resurrected one, who is being spoken of here.”²¹

First, one of the areas where God in Christ calls human beings to express their loyalty and reverence to him is in loving other people. Human beings are indebted to God. Bonhoeffer understands the opening expression of the Genesis account, “In the beginning God created,” referring to the dependence of the created world on God. Furthermore, for Bonhoeffer, the term ‘beginning’ serves not only as a temporal concept but also signifies a point of reference for everything that exists. In Bonhoeffer’s words “[W]hat the Bible knows is just this, that in the created world nothing runs ‘on its own’ [...] [and] law and life are upheld only by the free word of God”²². Thus, concrete action is a human expression of the acknowledgment of dependence upon Christ as the Creator.

Secondly, human beings are commanded to love others. The discipline that focuses on human beings dealing with each other is often called ethics and is discussed as ethical obligation, but according to Bonhoeffer, ethics is not so much an obligation, as it is a possibility offered by God to and through people. God gave Adam, Eve, and human beings the privilege to receive and pass on his love. Ethics understood in the light of love can be an outflow of relationality.²³ Thus, concrete action is also an expression of obedience.

Ethical action then becomes a form of letting God address human beings and giving their response to him. *Creation and Fall* asserts that God created Adam and Eve as beings who are to live between their ‘beginning’ and their ‘end.’ For human beings, life ‘in the middle’ means a continuous relationship with God lived out in unceasing obedience. Human

²¹ *DBWE 3*, 36. (*DBW 3*, 34.)

²² *DBWE 3*, 58 & 59. (*DBW 3*, 54.)

²³ Moral obligation towards the other, crucial for Bonhoeffer, is not based on some metaphysically based necessity, like in Kant, but on relationship. Bonhoeffer’s criticism of customary ‘ethical’ speech points out that theologians tend to center Christian ethics on issues of weighing good and bad, which leads them to focus on principles and absolutes. Bonhoeffer suggests that attention given to what is good and bad is misguided because it makes people self-occupied. Christian ethics is relational in that it is intended to turn people toward the benefit of the other. For Bonhoeffer, the main task of Christian ethics is to form direct relationships to God and to one’s neighbor. The God of the Bible restores people to be people of love at the core of their beings. The God-intended outcome of the word is that people live their lives by turning constantly toward God and their neighbor for the sake of God and the neighbor.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

beings are invited to live in an intimate relationship with God. People can only eat from the tree of life if they stay at the ‘place’ between their beginning and end, which means that they acknowledge God as their Creator and the guarantor of their future fulfillment in Christ.

Concerning the question of necessity and freedom, Bonhoeffer is adamant that just as the image of God in humanity is not just a capacity that enables human beings to potentially be or do something; but an innate force that compels them to be and do something for the other, so is obedience to God. Loving God and people is something that God compels us to. “There is no ‘being-free-from’ without a ‘being-free-for’”, Bonhoeffer writes, “Without God, without their brother and sisters, human beings lose the earth”²⁴. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer also writes, that human beings “are there for others and are dependent upon others.”²⁵ Loving God and loving people can really be an outflow, then.

In Bonhoeffer’s words,

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.²⁶

To sum it up, in *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer shifts his attention to the self radically toward Christ. The essence of the new self in Christ lies in its selflessness relative to the other. This undivided mindfulness of the other is present in both *Act and Being* and *Creation and Fall*; but in the latter it comes to focus more than before. From the year of 1932 onwards, Bonhoeffer sees participation in the God-given destiny of human beings (which then leads to

²⁴ *DBWE* 3, 67. (*DBW* 3, 63.)

²⁵ *DBWE* 3, 79. (*DBW* 3, 74.)

²⁶ *DBWE* 3, 62-63. (*DBW* 3, 58-59.) About freedom in Bonhoeffer from the perspective of sociology see Andras Csepregi’s study “Two Ways to Freedom, Christianity, and Democracy in the Thought of István Bibó and Dietrich Bonhoeffer”, Budapest: *Acta Theologica Lutherana Budapestinensia II.*, University of Lutheran Theology (Evangélikus Hittudományi Egyetem), 2003.

their humanization²⁷) and presupposes that they respond to God's address by caring for others. "The creatureliness of human beings [...] can be defined in simply no other way than in terms of the existence of human beings over-against-one-another, with-one-another, and independence-upon-one-another."²⁸

2. B. The Interpretation of the Bible as a Response to God Addressing the Self

In *Creation and Fall*, while reflecting on creation Bonhoeffer is committed to adhering to the personally addressing nature of the biblical text to such an extent that he is even willing to bypass issues that could otherwise be examined philosophically and scientifically. Bonhoeffer seeks to give room for the encounter to happen between God's word and the reader, and for that purpose, leaves several other issues on the side. In order that the existence-affecting impact of the text could be brought forth, during the interpretation of the Genesis account, Bonhoeffer often bypasses the quest of his contemporaries for the 'original meaning' of the text. Placing Bonhoeffer's method beside the historical-critical method, Bonhoeffer's method of biblical interpretation is post-critical.

For example, in his commentary on Genesis 2: 8-17 Bonhoeffer writes at length about the power of temptation and the seductive nature of evil, which looked and felt good to Adam and Eve, then, all of a sudden, he says: "This describes *us*; it is we who have eaten from the tree of knowledge, not Adam [...] Whoever grasps at life must die; "those who want to save their life will lose it."²⁹ The sudden shift to the first person plural reflects Bonhoeffer's intent; he seeks to be a catalyst in the encounter between the word and the hearer of the word.

In a different section Bonhoeffer argues that the Genesis account is a description of a myth-like ancient world, and a means by which God confronts people in the here and now. For him, the task of biblical interpretation lies in giving a translation to the old pictures and

²⁷ Cf. Jens Zimmermann's description of "Christological humanism" in his "Being Human, Becoming Human, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Humanism," eds. Jens Zimmermann and Brian Gregor, *Being Human, Becoming Human, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Oregon, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010.) 25-48.

²⁸ *DBWE* 3, 64. (*DBW* 3, 60.)

²⁹ *DBWE* 3, 89. (*DBW* 3, 83-84.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

stories for the contemporary reader while being as faithful to the original message as one can be. In his words from *Creation and Fall*:

This [the exposition that follows] must translate the old picture language of the magical world into the picture language of the technical world. This must always be done, however, on the presupposition that, whether in one language or the other, *we* are the ones intended to be addressed. We must be open and prepared to be addressed by what was said at that time about human beings in that magical picture of the world.³⁰

John A. Philips' statement concerning Bonhoeffer's method of interpreting Genesis is correct: "As opposed to a history-of-religions approach which would seek out the resources of the material and engage in a comparative study to determine its meaning, or of a psychology-of-religions approach which would demonstrate the validity of the material in terms of its outside, *a priori* psychological truths, Bonhoeffer proposed to interpret the texts 'from the church's point of view' [...] This involved the *a priori* assumption that Genesis speaks of one God and One God speaks through the Genesis texts."³¹

Bonhoeffer is aware that if "God is speaking to us in the Bible"³² at times one needs to accept it even when one's mind is not ready to comprehend it, and this may mean that one must pay an intellectual price. At one instance, when facing a passage in Scripture that Bonhoeffer did not understand, he confesses his lack of understanding. Yet, "with the certainty that one day this passage will indeed be revealed as God's own word"³³, he continues to press on and interpret the text from a Christological viewpoint. Bonhoeffer knows that this approach does not sound scholarly to his contemporaries.³⁴ He sees that sacrificing the intellect can be a necessary price to pay. "I am more willing to engage in a

³⁰ *DBWE 3*, 83. (*DBW 3*, 77.)

³¹ Philips, *The Form of Christ in the World, A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*, 86.

³² Bonhoeffer's letter to Rüdiger Schleicher, April 8, 1936, in *DBWE 14*, 167. (*DBW 14*, 145).

³³ Bonhoeffer's letter to Rüdiger Schleicher cited above continued (April 8, 1936, *DBWE 14*; 169, *DBW 14*, 147.)

³⁴ Huntemann notes that some of Bonhoeffer's theological colleagues accused Bonhoeffer of being "unscholarly" (Huntemann, *The Other Bonhoeffer*, 131).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

sacrificium intellectus – precisely in these things, and only in these things, that is, in view of the true God! [...] And anyway, who does not engage in such *sacrificium intellectus* at one point or another?”³⁵

As to Bonhoeffer’s attitude to the critical approaches of science to which his contemporaries tended to adhere, Rüter and Tödt rightly point out that “Bonhoeffer was not interested at all in the rejection of scientific knowledge [...] All that mattered to him was to witness to the revelation of the one God.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer respects science. For example, when commenting on the skies and the dry land, which God separated on the second day, Bonhoeffer notes: “Heaven and the sea were in any event not formed in the way the author says, and there is no way we could escape having a very bad conscience if we let ourselves be tied to assertions of that kind.”³⁷

Bonhoeffer’s intent in interpreting the Bible, then, is to keep the relational space for the encounter with God open and nurtured. As Sembritzki, one of his students, reported decades later, at this time in Berlin Bonhoeffer used to tell them, “When you read the Bible, you must think that here and now God is speaking with me.”³⁸

2. C. The Church as the Collective Manifestation of Christ

A third form Bonhoeffer sees as the presence of Christ that becomes concrete is the church. At the time of Bonhoeffer’s 1933 lectures on creation, the earlier definition that Bonhoeffer used for the church (as embodiment of the concept of sociality) is no longer

³⁵ Also, from Bonhoeffer’s letter to Rüdiger Schleicher cited above, April 8, 1936, *DBWE 14*, 169. (*DBW 14*, 147.)

³⁶ Rüter and Tödt in the afterword to *Creation and Fall*, *DBWE 3*, 161. (*DBW 14*, 151.)

³⁷ *DBWE 3*, 50-51. (*DBW 3*, 47.)

³⁸ Martin Doblmeier, *Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*, DVD (Journey Films, South Carolina ETV, 2003), at minute 29.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

satisfactory for him. Bonhoeffer is beginning to see the church-community as a representation of the person of Christ, crucified and glorified.

It is in this sense that in his lectures on Genesis Bonhoeffer says: “Theological exposition takes the Bible as the book of the church and interprets it as such. This [...] presupposition constitutes its method; its method is a continual returning from the text [...] to this presupposition.”³⁹ Bonhoeffer’s assertion is best interpreted by another lecture he gave a few months earlier in Berlin entitled “The Nature of the Church”, where he refers to the church as an “empirical church” (which is the presupposition for theology).⁴⁰ In this new phase the ‘church’ is defined by the personally encountered presence of the Christ, who calls people and challenges them to respond. It is this understanding of the church that makes Bonhoeffer say that the Bible itself belongs to her.

For Bonhoeffer, the church must be a particular community to qualify to be a church. She must read the story of creation “in a way that begins with Christ,” or otherwise it is not ‘church.’ The assertion that the Bible cannot be interpreted appropriately outside of the church presupposes that ‘church’ is focused on the proclamation of the death and the resurrection of Christ. “In the church [...] the story of creation must be read in a way that begins with Christ.”⁴¹ “The church of Christ ... lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end,”⁴² that is from the perspective of the Lordship of Christ. The authentication of a community that can see itself as church depends on whether it is controlled by the living Christ, who address human beings.⁴³

³⁹ *DBWE 3, 22 (DBW 3, 22)*. Bonhoeffer also writes: “It [the church] views the creation from Christ [as] the beginning and the end [...] The church [...] reads the whole of Holy Scripture as the book of the end, of the new, of Christ.” (*DBWE 3, 22., DBW 3, 22.*)

⁴⁰ From “The Nature of the Church” lecture course. *DBWE 11, 290. (DBW 11, 260.)*

⁴¹ *DBWE 3, 22. (DBW 3, 21.)*

⁴² *DBWE 3, 21. (DBW 3, 21.)* A good illustration of how Christ serves as key to understand the Book of Genesis is the following statement of Bonhoeffer: “By his resurrection we know about the creation” (*DBWE 3, 35., DBW 3, 34.*)

⁴³ The two longest sections of *Creation and Fall* (longer than fourteen pages) both underline the same point, that God in Christ is the first in everything and there is nothing prior to or independent of him. These sections are about “the beginning” and the freedom of God, and the message that is common in both is the defining centrality

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Putting it negatively, when Bonhoeffer argues for the role of the church it is not the hierarchically, institutionally, or even doctrinally defined entity that he has in mind. It is the community of faith defined by the proclamation of the word and the sacraments that Christ instituted that is in his view. Bonhoeffer's presupposition that the Bible is the book of the church rests on the church-community being the actual presence of Christ. The church is seen as a matchmaker between God in Christ and the human person engaging with God in humble obedience. Bonhoeffer maintains that the church derives its existence from the existence of Christ and as such she must be shaped and reshaped by who Christ is. It is in this sense then that the church is to be the manifestation of Christ and only then, in a derived sense also a safety net in identifying what a biblical text may mean.

The last paragraph of the Christology lectures makes Bonhoeffer's position in 1933 unmistakable: the church must "receive the will of God every day anew from Christ."⁴⁴

3. The 1932-1933 Phase of Bonhoeffer's Views of Christ Placed in the Overall Development of his Christology

3. A. Content: Existence in and with God Becomes Concrete

Chapter Three depicted the new Christian realism of Bonhoeffer, in which he comes to see Christ as the center of reality on whom everything depends. In the season being discussed in this chapter (1932 and 1933), and from this time onwards, Bonhoeffer identifies Christ as a person who reveals himself in direct encounter. God initiates and wants reciprocal relationships with human beings, and he makes these relationships come about through addressing people in concrete ways with the word.

of God in Christ. These sections are entitled as "The Beginning" (Gen. 1:1-2), *DBWE* 3, 25-39, *DBW* 3, 25-37.) and the "Center of the Earth" (Gen. 2:8-17), *DBWE* 3, 80-93. (*DBW* 3, 75-87).

⁴⁴ "Lectures on Christology," *DBWE* 12, 360. (*DBW* 12, 348.)

Chapter Three has highlighted three domains where concrete encounter with God takes place:

- (i) Ethical actions, whereby people express that they obey God.
- (ii) The interpretation of the Bible whereby people express that they hear the word.
- (iii) In participation in the church, whereby people share in Christ himself.

All three of these areas can exist as means through which or surfaces on which God communicates himself to human beings and in response human beings have certain obligations to fulfill. What is common in all of them is that regardless of the given area of encounter, human beings can only know when he God addresses them by name.

3. B. Bonhoeffer's View of a Christ Who is Becoming Concrete Echoed in His Christology Lectures

Bonhoeffer's summer course on Christology in 1933, which started the same academic year as his *Creation and Fall* series, presses the same point further. In these lectures, Bonhoeffer places his main emphasis on the supreme, all-inclusive Lordship of Christ and he approaches Christ in an even more existential way than before. Bonhoeffer's theological intent, echoing that which the Genesis lectures expressed, is to make his audience ready to be addressed by God and then give adequate response to God. At the beginning of his Christology lectures Bonhoeffer says:

This is the question asked by horrified, dethroned human reason, and the question of faith: Who are you? Are you God's very self? This is the question with which Christology alone is concerned. Every possibility of clarification must fall short because the existence of this Logos means the end of my logos.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ "Lectures on Christology," *DBWE 12*, 302. (*DBW, 12*, 282.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer stresses that Christ is not just an idea of God that would be directly accessible to any person at any time; Christ makes himself known as the word of God, “as speaking and response, responsibility.”⁴⁶ He writes:

Christ as Word of God in the sense of word spoken to us does not mean Christ as timeless truth, but rather as truth breaking into a concrete moment, as God’s speaking to us. Thus, Christ is not timelessly and universally accessible as an idea; instead, he is heard as Word only there where he allows himself to be heard. That means it is entirely within his freedom to reveal himself to me or hide himself from me.⁴⁷

Resultant upon the paradigm shift Bonhoeffer goes under in 1932, Bonhoeffer sees any understanding of the Christ-reality inauthentic that leaves his call to human beings out of the picture. He begins to emphasize that God in Christ addresses people concretely and people need to give concrete responses to God. Bonhoeffer rejects any state of existence that lacks concreteness, because he is convinced that trying to assess reality without concreteness transports people to a self-construed world of unreality, which is none other than an attempt to avoid Christ. From this time onwards, hindering or substituting the encounter between the word and a human being is the greatest risk possible in Bonhoeffer’s eyes. That is why, he finds it vital to stress that people need to move toward the concrete world of revelation through concrete actions, interpreting the word of God existentially and in the church, as fulfilling the essential prerequisites to Christology.

⁴⁶ *DBWE 12*, 316. (*DBW 12*, 298.)

⁴⁷ *DBWE 12*, 317. (*DBW 12*, 298.)

CHAPTER FOUR: *DISCIPLESHIP*, CONNECTING WITH THE GOD-REALITY BY FOLLOWING CHRIST, AS THE INCARNATE GOD

Discipleship, published in 1937, is the longest and most influential of Bonhoeffer's books that were published during his lifetime. In *Discipleship*, which is an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and some teachings of the Apostle Paul, Bonhoeffer focuses on the way God manifests himself in the incarnate Christ. Thus, in this work Bonhoeffer's Christology becomes more focused than in any of his previous works.¹ The following line indicates Bonhoeffer's concentration and summarizes the goal of this book succinctly: "We surely intend our preaching to be Christ alone."²

Introduction to Chapter Four

After serving a German speaking church in London, England, for more than a year, Bonhoeffer was invited to direct the Preachers' Seminary of the Confessing Church in Zingst, Germany, by the Baltic Sea. He had also been invited by Mahatma Gandhi to spend a season in India. Following a brief period of consideration, Bonhoeffer accepted the invitation to Zingst. Upon his return to Germany in April 1935, the seminary for preachers had to be relocated to an abandoned schoolhouse in Finkenwalde. It was at this place, where Bonhoeffer lectured two or three times every week in 1935 and 1936. From here, he traveled to the

¹ Based on Bonhoeffer's lectures delivered at Finkenwalde Seminary between 1935 and 1937 and at the University of Berlin between 1935 and 1936 *Discipleship* was first published in German as *Nachfolge* in 1937 and then in English as *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1948. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's former student, friend and then biographer, Eberhard Bethge must be mentioned in the history of *Discipleship*. When the first German edition was published in 1937, Bonhoeffer gave a copy of this book to Bethge, just a few weeks after the seminary was closed by the Gestapo (the abbreviation for Geheime Staatspolizei). Bonhoeffer wrote a line in it to Bethge to acknowledge their companionship for two years in Finkenwalde. The first English translation appeared in 1948 with Bethge's Preface; and the thoroughly revised critical English translation was published in 2001, just a year following Bethge death.

In this dissertation the English title *Discipleship* will be used when referring to this work of Bonhoeffer, except when the literal meaning of the German title *Nachfolge*, i.e., 'following after' sheds more light on what is being delineated. References to and citations from *Discipleship* in English are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4, (DBWE 4), Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000); references in German are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 4 (DBW 4), Nachfolge*, ed. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1989; 2nd. ed. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994).

² *DBWE 4, 37. (DBW 4, 21.)*

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

University of Berlin once a week to give an hour-long class on the same topic: discipleship. When the Reich Ministry of Education revoked his teaching permit on August 5, 1936, he had to discontinue his work. When in mid-October of 1937 the Gestapo closed the Finkenwalde Seminary as well, *Discipleship* was already on the desk of a publishing house and was published within a few weeks in 1937.

The present Chapter argues that Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* conveys a two-fold message. First, it stresses that Christ is the center of reality. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that reliance on the work of Christ makes the disciple and urges his readers to put their trust in God in Christ. However, Bonhoeffer also stresses that anything less than whole-hearted dedication is inadequate in following Christ. Bonhoeffer's readers, therefore, experience a certain conflict within themselves about where to direct their attention – towards Christ or towards themselves. *Discipleship* represents these two conflicting yet mutually complementing messages about Christ: Christ provides all that his disciple would ever need, and Christ offers life only for those who are unconditionally committed to his Lordship.

1. Background

For Bonhoeffer, discipleship is not only a matter of certain actions. In Bonhoeffer's words, discipleship is “a complete bond with Jesus.”³ It is fundamentally a personal relationship, which is only responded to and expressed when people follow him.

To appreciate Bonhoeffer's own intent in his *Discipleship*, regarding the person of Christ, one must consider the context in which the text was born. Therefore, two factors will be highlighted that shaped Bonhoeffer's heart and mind at the time of his lectures in Finkenwalde and Berlin and then went into the formation of his book: the first being the force that derived from Bonhoeffer's personal experience of liberation, the second being

³ *DBWE 4,125. (DBW 4, 126.)*

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer's sense of urgency⁴ for his fellow believers in Germany to make up their minds to follow Christ unwaveringly amid the growing tyranny of Nazism.⁵

1. A. Personal Liberation

Understanding the turn in Bonhoeffer's own personal formation, which began during the academic year of 1931/1932 that Bonhoeffer spent at Union Seminary in New York, is crucial for recognizing the close relationship that existed in Bonhoeffer's mind between the need to follow Jesus and one's experience of freedom. Years later in a letter written about this period, Bonhoeffer remembers his liberation in the following words:

The Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this [i.e., turning Jesus' teachings into something of personal advantage at a time when, in Bonhoeffer's words, he was his own master]. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly and so have other people around me. That was a great liberation.⁶

Charles Marsh in his gracious but revealing way refers to a domineering tendency in Bonhoeffer's personality that helps the reader understand both the depth of the changes to which Bonhoeffer was referring, and the reason these changes were so freeing for Bonhoeffer. Marsh describes how Bonhoeffer from his earliest years exhibited signs of egotism and even arrogance being known as an overconfident boy.⁷ During his youth, Bonhoeffer regarded his intellect as superior to others and he often expressed noticeable confidence. When he acted on behalf of others, his motivations often stemmed from a sense of inner responsibility rather

⁴ Bonhoeffer calls it a certain "haste" (*DBWE 4*, 191. *DBW 4*, 202.)

⁵ Bonhoeffer focuses on the current need to garner loyalty to Jesus: "Time is short. Eternity is long. It is the time of decision. Those who remain faithful to the word and the confession here will find that Jesus Christ will stand by them in the hour of judgment." (*DBWE 4*, 197. (*DBW 4*, 209.) The title of the film *Hanged on a Twisted Cross* (by T. N. Mohan, written by Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge and Christian Gremmels, DVD, Lathika International Film and Entertainment Inc., 1996) captures the relationship between the spiritual power of Christ on the cross Bonhoeffer calls people to be faithful to and the twisted worldly power of Adolf Hitler's Nazi symbol swastika.

⁶ Bonhoeffer's letter to Elizabeth Zinn, January 27, 1936, *DBWE 14*, 134. (*DBW 14*, 113.)

⁷ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 257.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

than genuine love for them.⁸ In part this self-assuredness was an “aristocratic confidence”⁹, in part this was a personality trait that made him distinct even in his family. Considering his strong sense of self-will, how strong some of the eruptions of his anger, how opinionated and harsh his judgments occasionally were;¹⁰ when Bonhoeffer encounters Christ as someone who, as his editors put it, “frees the disciple to be a genuine person of faith, liberated from the bondage of self-will,”¹¹ he experienced a sense of relief.

Starting in 1931 and 1932, Bonhoeffer discovered the freedom from his self-centeredness while God encountered him through his word. This propelled Bonhoeffer toward a radical representation of following Christ to others as well.¹² In his *Discipleship*, he writes:

When holy scripture speaks of following Jesus, it proclaims that people are free from all human rules, from everything which pressures, burdens, or causes worry and torment of conscience. In following Jesus, people are released from the hard yoke of

⁸ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 11.

⁹ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 74.

¹⁰ Marsh refers to letters Bonhoeffer wrote to his mother from Barcelona about his superior Pastor Fritz Olbricht in rather harsh and unforgiving manner in 1928 (Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 74). One also reads about several similar instances in the later years of Bonhoeffer’s life. In 1936, when Bonhoeffer planned a trip with Bethge at the end of the summer, Bonhoeffer wanted to have the space and time to be exclusively with his friend, while Bethge invited his cousin to the trip. When Bonhoeffer protested, Bethge indicated that Bonhoeffer was becoming a “demanding friend” (Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 252, Cf. De Gruchy’s *Trusting Spirit*, 30) Years later there were also signs of dependency in Bonhoeffer’s relationship to Bethge, which was becoming a burden for Bethge. Bonhoeffer was pleading for a close connection that Bethge did not want. (Bonhoeffer’s letter to Bethge, February 4, 1940; *DBWE*, 16, 138-139., *DBW*, 16, 128-130). On other occasions, Bonhoeffer himself acknowledged that his personality often appeared demanding. During the first year of his imprisonment, he wrote about his struggles concerning Maria, his fiancée, who was not yet in agreement with Bonhoeffer in the areas of literature to the extent he desired. He reflects on this personal struggle and writes the following to Bethge: “Or does this also belong in some way to my ‘tyrannical’ nature that you know so intimately? Then you must tell me so!” (*DBWE* 8, 203; *DBW* 8, 214). In another letter written within less than two months, Bonhoeffer compared himself to Bethge and added: “I don’t know a single person who can’t stand you, whereas I know quite a few who can’t stand me. ... I’m reserved and more demanding” (*DBWE* 8, 262; *DBW* 8, 284). The next chapter of this dissertation will mention examples of Bonhoeffer’s domineering behavior from the Finkenwalde period.

¹¹ Kelly and Godsey in their introduction to *Discipleship*, *DBWE* 4, 20.

¹² This positive motivation seems to be under-presented in the English introduction. The popular English title, the *Cost of Discipleship*, suggests that the emphasis is on the human cost and not on the liberating power for the Christian to live in true freedom. This emphasis is well presented in the Afterword of the German edition of 1989 and also indicated (though with much less emphasis) in the Introduction to the English Edition of 2001, as follows: “Passages abound, particularly in the second part of *Discipleship*, in which Bonhoeffer’s words represent not a struggle against the negativity of a self-willed person, but the positive confidence of becoming renewed in the community of Christ through accepting and living according to Jesus’ words” (*DBWE* 4, 23).

their own laws to be under the gentle yoke of Jesus Christ [...] Jesus demands nothing from us without giving us the strength to comply. Jesus' commandment never wishes to destroy life, but rather to preserve, strengthen, and heal life.¹³

Placing Bonhoeffer's radical teaching on the Sermon on the Mount within the context of the discovery of his own freedom helps the reader to see how significant it might have been for Bonhoeffer to be occupied with his own world, both externally and internally. As he surrendered himself to Christ, Bonhoeffer experienced profound freedom. No wonder that for Bonhoeffer, from this time onwards, taking up the yoke of Jesus and sharing in the liberating power of being free from the burdens of the self, belong together.

1. B. When Darkness and Light Meet: Decisions Become Inevitable

The changes that took place following the election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933 impacted the daily lives of German citizens and the church like an avalanche. In 1934, as national socialism started to place every single element of society under its control, including the church, the later famous Barmen Declaration was accepted. In October 1934 at the Second Confessional Synod in Dahlem any intervention of the state into the order of the church was rejected. Bonhoeffer belonged to the minority who remained loyal to this position. On July 16, 1935, the Reich Ministry for Church Affairs was established and by December 2, the legal status of every independent church was instantly eliminated. The number of pastors and theologians affected by this restriction was about seven hundred. The Nazi regime tried to gain control over these Christians by putting pressure on them, so that they would choose to obtain legal status. It was in January of 1936 that the first theological student of Bonhoeffer took this step gaining security by "becoming legal".¹⁴ In February 1937, a new law was implemented which ensured that the highest authority for questions concerning internal church government now belonged to the state. People who opposed the new law were arrested.

¹³ *DBWE 4*, 39-40. (*DBW 4*, 23.)

¹⁴ *DBWE 4*, 298. (*DBW, 4*, 316.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

The Confessing Church had to adopt a new strategy of separation, the polarization of the Confessing Church and the German government became inevitable.

Bonhoeffer did not mention it in the book itself but during the weeks he wrote *Life Together* the majority of his Finkenwalde students were imprisoned. Bonhoeffer knew that the opportunity that his readers had in coming together was a privilege, which his seminarians did not enjoy anymore. As Bonhoeffer wrote,

It is easily forgotten that the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the kingdom of God, a gift that can be taken from us any day – that the time still separating us from the most profound loneliness maybe grief indeed. [...] [I]t is grace, nothing but grace that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today”¹⁵

For Bonhoeffer, as Pastors related to Finkenwalde got arrested as well,¹⁶ the separation of the world and the people of the word become a necessity. During the years between 1933 and 1937, with the rise of Nazism, the birth of the Confessing Church, and its separation from the *Volkskirche*, followed by the internal polarization within the Confessing Church, wave upon wave of segregation was introduced into Bonhoeffer’s life. First, his nation left the path of love and went off toward hatred and insanity. Then the church gave up on following a suffering Messiah. Finally, Bonhoeffer had to witness his closest brothers and sisters finding the price too high to be paid. Bonhoeffer was left with a small number of faithful friends, who wanted to follow Christ in the way Bonhoeffer understood Christ calling his disciples to follow him. On October 24, 1933, Bonhoeffer wrote to Barth: “I felt that I was in radical opposition to all my friends – an incomprehensible situation. And so I thought that the time had come to spend a period in the wilderness.”¹⁷ What gave Bonhoeffer perspective and direction to remain steadfast in this isolation was the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount, who

¹⁵ *DBWE* 5, 30. (*DBW*, 5, 18.) As Haddon Willmer puts it: “Bonhoeffer evidently valued the experience of genuine Christian community as something that might only be given once a lifetime.” (Haddon Willmer “Costly Discipleship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 182.)

¹⁶ For a helpful survey of the key historical events surrounding Bonhoeffer’s work on the *Discipleship* see Kuske and Tödt in *DBWE* 4, 294-6., *DBW*, 4, 312-314.

¹⁷ Cited in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Life in Pictures*, eds. Renate Bethge and Christian Gremmels, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 72.

Bonhoeffer clung to, and a few interpreters like Luther and Kierkegaard, who reminded him of a hope of a different nature.¹⁸

The new climate, of not only the German society but also the Christian community, even in the Confessing Church, intensified the call for urgent decisions. Thus, it was not only Bonhoeffer's personal sense of liberation, and his conviction that when Christians follow Christ, he frees them for choosing the other over against their own self-interest, but also the social pressures of the society and the Christian community that forced Bonhoeffer to hasten people into making decisions. Much was at stake, and there was no place for neutrality.

2. The Nature of Following Christ from within the Perspective of *Discipleship*

As Bonhoeffer's choice of the German title *Nachfolge* suggests, Bonhoeffer intends for his readers to notice a correlation between his own work and the fifteenth century classic of Christian spirituality: Thomas á Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* (translated into German as *Nachfolge Christi*).¹⁹ The German term, *Nachfolge*, literally means, "following after," and it points to the act by which one binds oneself to Christ by imitating him persistently, and thus commits oneself to the process in which one becomes like him. Bonhoeffer contends that discipleship is the life of Jesus flowing in and out of the one who follows him; discipleship is participation in Christ's being.

Suggesting that discipleship is a set of external actions: a particular behavior, principles, morality, or even pacifism would be misleading, despite of the fact, that such misunderstanding is common and to some extent it is left open in Bonhoeffer's work itself.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer found a powerful ally in the Danish Kierkegaard, who saw the dialectic of faith and obedience in Luther's theology just as Bonhoeffer did. Kierkegaard was the fourth key influence on Bonhoeffer beside the Sermon of the Mount itself and the impact of á Kempis and Luther, Bonhoeffer used Kierkegaard's study of Luther, *Der Einzelne und die Kirche: Über Luther und den Protestantismus* (trans. by W. Kütemmeyer, Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag/Der Neue Geist Verlag, 1934). Cf. Kelly and Godsey in their introduction to *Discipleship*, *DBWE 4*, 11. and Kelly, "The influence of Kirkegaard on Bonhoeffer's Concept of Discipleship," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1974): 148-151.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer was deeply impacted by the classic of Thomas á Kempis. Kuske and Tödt in their afterword to *Discipleship* tell us that in preparation for his *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer marked the reference to á Kempis' book in his copy of Erich Przywara's book *Religionsphilosophie Katholischer Theologie* (München: Oldenbourg, 1927) which might be a reason behind Bonhoeffer's choice of the title '*Nachfolge*' (*DBWE 4*, 303, *DBW*, 4, 321).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

(We will come back to this ambiguity, which is a part of *Discipleship*, in the Conclusion of Chapter Four).²⁰ The definitive emphasis in Bonhoeffer's view of discipleship is that Christ is the primary actor on the stage of the disciple's life. Yes, being a disciple of Christ is costly; it is characterized by action, but what makes the call of Jesus unique before all these marks is that it binds the disciple to Christ and makes the disciple a participant in the life of God. Bonhoeffer's key concern is to show that discipleship is inseparable from seeing Christ as Lord of Heaven and Earth, and obedience is a necessary part of this participation, not the other way around. Bonhoeffer sees Christian discipleship as a form of existence that is linked with the existence of Christ. It is so associated with that of Christ, that it could be called a co-existence of the disciple with Christ, his Master. In *Discipleship*, the specific personality traits of Christ and their concrete imitation in his followers cannot be separated from each other.

In the following section, three aspects of Bonhoeffer's understanding of this participation will be summarized as he introduced them in his *Discipleship*: (A) one's theology of and approach to grace, (B) one's willingness to endure suffering, bear rejection and accept even death, and (C) one's readiness to focus on immediate action.

2. A. Grace as the Active Presence of God

Bonhoeffer is convinced that the power of discipleship lies in Christ. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, "Jesus is the only content [of discipleship]. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it."²¹ The disciples are pure in heart, because as they look only to Jesus and press ahead, they receive purity as the gift of Christ. Disciples renounce violence and even their own dignity; they renounce their rights and even their righteousness because their righteousness is an overflow of the righteousness of Christ. The disciples are merciful as

²⁰ This is why the addition of the phrase "cost of" into the English title (*The Cost of Discipleship* that made Bonhoeffer's book first known in the English-speaking world in 1948) is unfortunate. It directs the expectation of the reader to a certain human experience (the cost that people must pay) rather than the active agency of Christ in the life which one is to live. Bonhoeffer consistently insists on the relational identification of the disciple over against any primarily moral or confessional identification.

²¹ *DBWE 4, 59. (DBW 4, 47.)*

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Christ is merciful, because they express the life of Christ.²² Discipleship is participation in the life of Christ:

In calling his disciples, Jesus granted the participation in himself; he gave them community with him; he let them participate in his own righteousness [...] Everything which will be said next should be understood in light of this doing of the righteousness of Christ by the disciples.²³

It is Bonhoeffer's view of Christ that defines Bonhoeffer's view of grace because grace is an outflow of Christ being God's self-communication for humanity. Grace must be subjected to participation in Christ.²⁴

What Bonhoeffer perceived to be the ultimate root of the deterioration of both the society and the church of Germany was the self-imprisonment of the individual sinner. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer explored the bondage of the self that made the self unable to relate to the world; in his *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer goes further and asserts that self-focus is also concealed by a pious disguise suggesting that grace liberates the self from following Jesus. Bonhoeffer claims that this "grace" is the "bitterest enemy,"²⁵ this is what he calls cheap grace:

²² Cf. *DBWE 4*, 106., *DBW*, 4, 105-106.

²³ *DBWE 4*, 120. (*DBW 4*, 121.)

²⁴ Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ and soteriology relies on the great fathers of the Church more than on Luther. Jens Zimmermann is right to point out an apparent lack in many Bonhoeffer studies, namely the failure to acknowledge how crucial it is for the understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology to identify his rootedness in the great second century theologian Irenaeus for instance. (Cf. Jens Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, specifically in the Conclusion of the section Part I. "Bonhoeffer's Theological Anthropology and the Greater Tradition, Christology and Recapitulation", 37-77.)

Zimmermann highlights a strong resemblance between patristic recapitulation and Bonhoeffer's concept of *Stellvertretung*. In March of 2018, a year prior to the publication of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism*, I had an important opportunity to discuss these ideas with Jens Zimmermann. During our conversation, Zimmermann supported my assertion regarding this connection. He agreed that despite the absence of direct evidence indicating Bonhoeffer's study of Irenaeus, Bonhoeffer's convictions remarkably echoed Irenaeus' approach to recapitulation.

²⁵ *DBWE 4*, 51. (*DBW 4*, 37.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace [...] Cheap grace [...] is grace without a price.²⁶

[...] The word of cheap grace has ruined more Christians than any commandment about works.²⁷

Bonhoeffer's contemporaries used Martin Luther's name as a banner under which the triumphalism and nationalism of Nazi Germany was verified, and the church referred to grace as a form of validating the self to remain indifferent to God's call. For Bonhoeffer, the criterion according to which one can define grace is participation in Christ. German Protestantism retooled the focus of 'faith alone' to justify indifference and rebellion against God; the Christian definition of grace must be subjected to the reality of remaining in Christ. In Bonhoeffer's analysis, grace was made "cheap" when it was turned into a "principle" that had nothing to do with the person of Christ.

Cheap grace [...] as a doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God. Those who affirm it already have their sins forgiven. [That is, they think they are already forgiven just because they affirmed a principle.] The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace upon itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover up for its sins, for which it shows no remorse and from which it even has less desire to be set free.²⁸

According to Bonhoeffer, grace as a mechanic presupposition is self-deception because it is a principle, and not an aspect of a personal relationship.²⁹ While cheap grace

²⁶ *DBWE 4*, 43. (*DBW 4*, 29.)

²⁷ *DBWE 4*, 55. (*DBW 4*, 42.)

²⁸ *DBWE 4*, 43. (*DBW 4*, 29.) As Bonhoeffer writes, "The doctrine of pure grace experienced an unprecedented deification" (*DBWE 4*, 53., *DBW*, 4, 40.)

²⁹ For Bonhoeffer cheap grace is self-bestowed mercy on oneself mistakenly called 'justification'. It is Kierkegaard who first suggests that the modern problem around the interpretation of grace began when Luther's followers turned Luther's insight concerning the source of the righteousness that God attributed to the sinner into a 'principle.' Bonhoeffer owes this insight to Kierkegaard. One does not need to realize a principle, as Kelly and Godsey put it, "simply holding it and defending it against the counter principle of good works was sufficient." For Kierkegaard, the tragedy lay (in the words of Kelly and Godsey again), in "the reduction of faith to a doctrine, the directness of the gift of faith to the theological reflection on faith" (*DBWE 4*, 11). Cf. Kierkegaard's

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

hinders reliance on the living God (unbelief “clings to disobedience”),³⁰ true grace liberates people from their egocentric sins because it connects them with Christ. As Bonhoeffer puts it:

Blessed are they who by simply following Jesus Christ are overcome by this grace, so that with humble spirit they may praise the grace of Christ which alone is effective [...] Blessed are they for whom following Jesus Christ means nothing other than living from grace and for whom grace means following Christ.”³¹

Christian life is sustained by pure grace, which implies the self-denial of Jesus Christ. It is a costly grace. When one reads Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* about grace, one is confronted with a portrait of Christ, who is unconditionally loving and out of whom grace flows. At the same time, he is also self-denying and suffering; requiring total self-abandonment from those who follow him. The task of uniting these two portraits into one remains the task of the reader. Christ comes to people to bless them and asks them to pay the high price of submitting themselves to him.

2. B. Willingness to Endure Suffering

Secondly, associating oneself with Christ includes suffering with Christ. Bonhoeffer insists that since Christ bears the suffering of the world, the disciple is called to share in the same. This is another area where Bonhoeffer’s *Nachfolge* carries a certain sense of self-contradiction. There are occasions in life when one works against suffering, yet there are times when one is to endure suffering. In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer’s pacifism, the voluntary choice of the human self to take up suffering rather than going against its rule, is beginning to take shape:

Those who do not want to take up their cross, who do not want to take their lives in suffering and being rejected by people, lose their community with Christ. They are not

study of Luther, *Der Einzelne und die Kirche: Über Luther und den Protestantismus*, trans. W. Kütemmeyer (Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag/Der Neue Geist Verlag, 1934, NL7 A40).

³⁰ *DBWE 4*, 68. (*DBW 4*, 57.)

³¹ *DBWE 4*, 55-56. (*DBW 4*, 42-43.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

disciples. But those who lose their lives in discipleship, in bearing the cross, will find life again in following in the community of the cross with Christ. The opposite of discipleship is being ashamed of Christ, being ashamed of the cross, being scandalized by the cross.³²

Jesus suffered and was rejected; so those who follow him have reason to expect that they will experience the same. Discipleship in Bonhoeffer's eyes is sharing in the life of Jesus, so it includes not only suffering, but also being rejected.³³ Following Christ and suffering cannot be separated, "suffering becomes the identifying mark of a follower of Christ."³⁴ The suffering of the disciple is a part of Christ's suffering, and this is why it must be born in humility. *Discipleship* puts it in these words: "The cross is neither misfortune nor harsh fate. Instead, it is that suffering which comes from our allegiance to Jesus Christ alone."³⁵ And again: "The cross [that is suffering with Christ] is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death."³⁶ For Bonhoeffer, the value of suffering lies only in its impact to connect the disciple to the life of Jesus.

Suffering, when received in communion with Christ, may translate hardships into a sense of privilege: "Jesus' messengers can receive no greater consolation in all this than the certainty that in their suffering they will be like their Lord." Christ calls his disciples "into communion with his passion"³⁷. Discipleship grants the disciple freedom from the self and freedom for true love. So "Discipleship is joy."³⁸ In the words of *Discipleship*: "Christian

³² *DBWE 4*, 89. (*DBW 4*, 82.)

³³ "Just as Christ is only Christ as one who suffers and is rejected, so a disciple is a disciple only in suffering and being rejected, thereby participating in crucifixion. Discipleship as allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ places the follower under the law of Christ, that is, under the cross" (*DBWE 4*, 85, *DBW*, 4, 78).

³⁴ *DBWE 4*, 89. (*DBW 4*, 82.)

³⁵ *DBWE 4*, 86. (*DBW 4*, 79.)

³⁶ *DBWE 4*, 87. (*DBW 4*, 81.)

³⁷ Cf. *DBWE 4*, 136. (*DBW 4*, 139.) "It is a life in the image and likeness of Christ's death (Phil 3:10; Rom 6:4f). It is a crucified life (Gal 2:19)." (*DBWE 4*, 285. *DBW*, 4, 301).

³⁸ *DBWE 4*, 40. (*DBW 4*, 24.)

suffering is not disconcerting. Instead, it is nothing but grace and joy. [...] In the moment of the most terrible torment that the disciples bore for their Lord's sake, they experienced the greatest joy and blessedness of his community."³⁹ As *Discipleship* makes clear, "It is he himself whom disciples find when they take up their cross."⁴⁰

In Bonhoeffer's eyes, "the gospel can make us completely free and completely joyous. Jesus is not speaking of what people should do but cannot do. Rather, he is speaking of what God has granted us and continues to promise us."⁴¹ Joy is a fruit of the communion with Christ. With the words of *Discipleship*, the disciples "should become grateful and joyous that they are permitted to remain in service to their Lord."⁴² Both suffering and joy characterize the disciple's communion with Christ, because Christ is familiar with both and experiences them both.⁴³

2. C. Obedience as Orientation toward the Present Moment

Thirdly, *Discipleship* is characterized by a sense of urgency for action, the entire book expresses a sense of immediacy. *Discipleship* embodies a sense of impatience; just as Mark, the evangelist represents a desire for immediate action. In this work Bonhoeffer constantly calls to attention the need to make decisions and act now.

Bonhoeffer develops a theological support for this attitude as well. His view is that action is authentic only when it is born from direct response.⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer stresses that paying

³⁹ *DBWE* 4, 89. (*DBW* 4, 82-83.)

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 4, 91. (*DBW* 4, 84.)

⁴¹ *DBWE* 4, 168. (*DBW* 4, 174.)

⁴² *DBWE* 4, 161. (*DBW* 4, 166.)

⁴³ James M. Houston helps to interpret the dual experience of suffering and joy in his *Joyful Exiles, Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ In his *Discipleship*, the seamy side of Bonhoeffer's stress on direct action, which is the consequences of ignoring the need for discernment is not identified. This is a one-sidedness that makes Bonhoeffer's position weaker. But for the present purpose to introduce Bonhoeffer's own line of reasoning, the observation of this weakness is best left aside.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

attention to Christ is not enough without direct response. Bonhoeffer sees all attempts outside of simple obedience as evasions of obedience. In his words, the “step of obedience must be done first, before there can be a faith.”⁴⁵

Bonhoeffer illustrates how exegetes and theologians can deal with the ‘possible’ meanings of biblical texts at the expense of direct obedience in the following way:

Thus, Jesus would call: come out! – but we would understand that he actually meant: stay in! – of course, as one who has inwardly come out. Or Jesus would say, do not worry, but we would understand: of course, we should worry and work for our families and ourselves. Anything else would be irresponsible. But inwardly we should be free of such worry. ... Jesus would say: strive first for the kingdom of God. We would understand: of course, we should first strive for all sorts of other things. How else should we survive? What he really meant was that we should have a final inner willingness to invest everything for the kingdom of God. Everywhere it is the same – the deliberate avoidance of simple, literal obedience.⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer’s concern is that such ‘pseudo-theology’ (to use Bonhoeffer’s term) is not subjected to obedience to Jesus.⁴⁷ In *Discipleship* the radicalness of Jesus’s call is represented as leaving no room for speculation or even reflection when Jesus calls the disciples to interpret his word:

From the human point of view there are countless possibilities for understanding and interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows only one possibility: simply go and obey. Do not interpret or apply but do it and obey. That is the only way Jesus’

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 4, 66., *DBW*, 4, 55.

⁴⁶ *DBWE* 4, 79. (*DBW* 4, 71.) Bonhoeffer continues, “How is such reversal possible? [...] Anywhere else in the world where commands are given the situation is clear. A father says to his child: go to bed! The child knows exactly what to do. But a child drilled in pseudo theology would have to argue thus: Father says go to bed. He means you are tired; he does not want me to be tired. But I can also overcome my tiredness by going to play. So, although father says go to bed, what he really means is go to play. With this kind of argumentation, a child with its father or a citizen with the authorities would run into an unmistakable response, namely, punishment. The situation is supposed to be different only with respect to Jesus’ command. In that case simple obedience is supposed to be wrong, or even constitute disobedience. How is this possible?” (*DBWE* 4, 79-80., *DBW*, 4, 71-71).

⁴⁷ *DBWE*, 4, 79., *DBW*, 4, 72.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

word is really heard. But again, doing something is not to be understood as an ideal possibility; instead, we are simply to begin acting.⁴⁸

For Bonhoeffer, another way to prevent (or postpone) simple obedience is to develop a sophisticated interest in moral issues, which creates distance between thinking and doing. Bonhoeffer interprets attempts to clarify the ethical consequences of a given decision as attempts to retain one's autonomy.⁴⁹

People are torn away from the clear commandment and from simple childlike obedience by ethical doubt, by asserting that the commandment still needs interpretation and explanation [...] To invoke ethical conflict is to terminate obedience. It is a retreat from God's reality to human possibility, from faith to doubt.⁵⁰

Bonhoeffer argues that 'ethical conflicts' can easily obscure the real issue, which is unwillingness to obey. In his explanation of why ethical discourses are so popular, Bonhoeffer compares the reasons for which some people like asking ethical questions to the reasons of the snake in the Garden:

Only the devil has a solution to offer to ethical conflicts. It is this: keep asking questions, so that you are free from having to obey [...] When ethical conflict is taken so seriously that it tortures and subjugates people because it hinders their doing the liberating act of obedience, then it is revealed in its full god-lessness as complete disobedience in all its insincerity.⁵¹

The third tactic to evade simple obedience, and thus participation in Christ, that Bonhoeffer identifies is the diversion of the disciple's attention from simple obedience to self-consciousness. When the self becomes the focus, not Christ, one's allegiance to Christ is

⁴⁸ *DBWE 4*, 181. (*DBW 4*, 191.)

⁴⁹ Cf. *DBWE 4*, 72., *DBW*, 4, 63.

⁵⁰ *DBWE 4*, 71. (*DBW 4*, 61-62.) Bonhoeffer also represents what goes on in a person in a so-called 'ethical conflict' in the following way: "I want to be obedient, but God will not let me [...] God's commandment is ambiguous; it leaves me in perpetual conflict" (*DBWE 4*, 75., *DBW*, 4, 67).

⁵¹ *DBWE 4*, 72. (*DBW 4*, 62-63.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

broken.⁵² In contrast, when the self is focused on the other, it is unaware of itself and unaware even of its good works. It is only in an awareness dominated by the object of one's love that obedience is possible. In Bonhoeffer's words, "The goodness of Christ, the goodness of discipleship takes place without awareness. The genuine deed of love is always a deed hidden from myself. Pay heed that you do not know it."⁵³

In *Discipleship*, unidirectional orientation toward the other becomes a recurring theme. Only the self that is free from itself can turn to and rely on Christ:

Self-denial means knowing only Christ, no longer knowing oneself. It means no longer seeing oneself, only him who is going ahead, no longer seeing the way which is too difficult for us. Self-denial says only: he is going ahead; hold fast to him.

[...] Only when we have really forgotten ourselves completely, when we really no longer know ourselves, only then are we ready to take up the cross for his sake. When we know only him, then we also no longer know the pain of our own cross. Then we see only him.⁵⁴

To sum it up, *Discipleship* describes obedience as direct action. In Bonhoeffer's words: "I can only learn what obedience is by obeying, not by asking questions. I can recognize truth only by obeying."⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer sees no other way for following Christ but by looking only at Christ. The "disciples are in the light only as long as they look simply to Christ and not this or that; their hearts must simply be focused on Christ alone."⁵⁶ As

⁵² In *Act and Being* and *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer also contends that even when self-occupation seems spiritual (as in self-denial or self-protection) it still can hinder one's obedience to Christ.

⁵³ *DBWE 4*, 151. (*DBW 4*, 155.)

⁵⁴ *DBWE 4*, 86. (*DBW 4*, 79). Bonhoeffer also writes about the "saints" (in the biblical sense of the term) as people who "unaware of their goodness, they will ask for the forgiveness of their sins" (*DBWE 4*, 268., *DBW 4*, 285). And again: "Our good work is thus completely hidden from our eyes [...] God alone knows our good works, while we know only God's good work and listen to God's command. We journey under God's grace, we walk in God's commandments, and we sin. There is indeed no denying the fact that the new righteousness, the sanctification, the light which we ought to shine remains completely hidden from us." (*DBWE 4*, 279., *DBW 4*, 286). References to these words of Jesus in Matt 5:16 and 6:2 are one of the most often recurring themes in the *Discipleship*.

⁵⁵ *DBWE 4*, 76. (*DBW 4*, 67.)

⁵⁶ *DBWE 4*, 161. (*DBW 4*, 167). It is worth noting that the interpretation of unhesitating obedience as a cure for the self-imprisoned self, which Bonhoeffer represents, is a central theme in the traditions of the Desert Fathers

Bonhoeffer describes, “God will not ask someday whether our confession was evangelical, but whether we did God’s will. God will ask that of everyone, including us.”⁵⁷ While challenging people to action, Bonhoeffer wants to direct their primary attention on Jesus. Bonhoeffer insists that:

Only because he himself already lives his true life in us can we ‘walk just as he walked’ (1John 2:6), ‘act as he acted’ (John 13:15), ‘love as he loved’ (Eph 5:2, John 13:34; 15:12), ‘forgive as he forgave’ (Col 3:13), ‘have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2:5), ‘follow the example that he left for us’ (1Peter 2:21), and lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake (1 John 3:16). Only because he was as we are, can we be as he was.⁵⁸

3. The Christology of Discipleship Placed in the Bonhoeffer’s Narrative as a Whole

Chapter Four has indicated that the portrait of Christ that Bonhoeffer depicts in his Discipleship has two faces: one is generous and the other one is demanding. The suggestion of the present chapter is that the challenge that lies at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s work in his Finkenwalde years originates as much in the cost that the following of Christ entails as in the self-conflicting nature of Bonhoeffer’s own approach.

and then also in Benedictine spirituality. Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by this monastic tradition in the monasteries of England, where the monks represented the ancient wisdom of the Desert Fathers. This researcher finds it surprising that in the leading representatives of Bonhoeffer scholars, there have been no studies about the apparent similarity between *Discipleship* and *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. Here is just one example from the beginning of the *Rule*. “To you, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you may be, who are renouncing your own will to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King, and are taking up the strong, bright weapons of obedience” (Prologue 3). This will be explored more in Chapter Five, in relation to Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*; at this point it is only the parallel between the emphases of the *Discipleship* and the *Rule of Saint Benedict* that is being highlighted.

⁵⁷ DBWE 4, 179. (DBW 4, 187-8.)

⁵⁸ DBWE 4, 287. (DBW 4, 303-304.)

3. A. Bonhoeffer's Focus on the Here and Now

The context concerning Bonhoeffer's sense of urgency mentioned at the beginning of the present chapter needs to be highlighted once again. At the time of preparing for his Finkenwalde lectures, Bonhoeffer is concerned with avoiding explorations of the future that help people to evade the challenges of the present. In *Discipleship*, he focuses on the current need to garner loyalty to Jesus.⁵⁹ The Gestapo could show up at the doorstep of the preachers' seminary at any time and imprison them immediately. The sense of 'haste,' as Bonhoeffer calls it, is justifiable.⁶⁰ "Time is short. Eternity is long. It is the time of decision. Those who remain faithful to the word and the confession here will find that Jesus Christ will stand by them in the hour of judgment."⁶¹

Seven years after the publication of *Nachfolge*, Bonhoeffer looking back at this period sees his earlier stress on the obedience in the present moment being rooted primarily in the critical shortage of time as inadequate and one-sided. Bonhoeffer in his later years comes to see the necessity of taking physical reality and current circumstances seriously primarily because of the incarnation. In a letter to Bethge on July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer notes that he did not develop the perspective of this-worldliness far enough in his *Discipleship*. In retrospect, Bonhoeffer regrets having understated this-worldliness in the Finkenwalde period.⁶²

⁵⁹ The topic of eschatology in *Discipleship* remains in the background; it is the present implications of the future dimensions of the Gospel that are placed in the forefront of Bonhoeffer's attention. It is the present proximity of Christ to the disciples spurring them on toward present obedience that matters. One finds some eschatological reflections in the concluding chapter of *Discipleship*, entitled "The Image of Christ," but these were never presented orally in Finkenwalde; they were added only to the written form.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer calls it a certain "haste" (*DBWE 4*, 191, *DBW*, 4, 202., cf. also *DBWE*, 4,181., *DBW*, 4, 190-191.)

⁶¹ *DBWE 4*, 197. (*DBW 4*, 209.)

⁶² "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 learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. (*DBWE 8*, 486., *DBW*, 8, 542.)

3. B. A Tension Waiting to Be Resolved

For Bonhoeffer, Christ being at the center suggests that people should rely on God's work through Christ. In Bonhoeffer's words: "the actions of a follower of Jesus do not depend on the other person's identity, but only on him whom the disciple follows in obedience."⁶³

At the same time Bonhoeffer emphasizes that anything less than whole-hearted dedication is inadequate in following Christ. Bonhoeffer states: "The only required reflection for disciples is to be completely oblivious, completely unreflective in obedience, in discipleship, in love."⁶⁴

Thus, readers of his *Discipleship* experience an internal conflict about where to direct their attention – towards Christ or towards themselves – and the ambiguity has the potential of creating inner tension.

On the one hand, Bonhoeffer's view of Christ, as presented in his *Discipleship*, reflects a confrontation that derives from the intent of Christ: "No one is able to recover the lost image of God unless they come to participate in the image of the incarnate and crucified Jesus Christ."⁶⁵

On the other hand, when Bonhoeffer equates trust in Christ with obedience, and describes the only thing left for the disciple as following Jesus, Bonhoeffer puts an expectation on the disciple, that some may find burdensome, and this can originate from Bonhoeffer himself. When Bonhoeffer portrays Christ as an uncompromising and unwavering Master, selflessly giving himself to restore people to their true identity, the impression that some get is of a person who is excessively demanding and overly focused on human capabilities. The question is to what extent these expectations reflect Bonhoeffer's personality rather than those of Christ. An emphasis on the compassionate Christ is left open in his *Discipleship* and is yet to become a central feature in Bonhoeffer's Christology.

⁶³ DBWE 4, 122. (DBW 4, 123.)

⁶⁴ DBWE 4, 150. DBW 4, 155.)

⁶⁵ DBWE 4, 284. (DBW 4, 300.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

CHAPTER FIVE: *LIFE TOGETHER*, COMMUNITY AS THE EMBODIMENT OF CHRIST

In 1938, when the Preachers' Seminary in Finkenwalde was finally closed, Bonhoeffer felt the need to share the lessons they had learned through their communal life. The book in English published in 1954 as *Life Together* became more influential than any of his other books during Bonhoeffer's lifetime¹. Since that time, it has been reprinted more than any of his other works. Subsequent generations still find it inspiring, and many treat it as a classic of Christian spirituality.

Geffrey B. Kelly, the English editor of *Gemeinsames Leben* is correct, when he writes: "In an ironic way, we are indebted to the Gestapo (the secret police in Nazi Germany) for this remarkable book".² In response to the need Bonhoeffer felt to describe the monastic shape of community life, in late September of 1938, Bonhoeffer withdrew with Bethge to Bonhoeffer's sister's empty house and dedicated four full weeks to writing up their experiences and learning in the Finkenwalde community. What sets apart Bonhoeffer's fifth book, *Life Together*, in its contribution to Bonhoeffer's Christology is its practical approach to Christian community that sees its origin and governing center in Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* offers practical guidance to groups of Christians who wish to live by the guidelines described for the followers of Christ in *Discipleship*. Thus, *Life Together* can be viewed as a companion volume to *Discipleship*.³

¹ The first English translation was published as *Life Together*, translated by J. W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).

² Kelly, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5 (DBWE 5, Life Together [and] Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 3. All references to and citations from *Life Together* in English are based on this edition. References to the German are based on *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, Bd. 5 (DBW 5), Gemeinsames Leben. Das Gebetbuch der Bibel*, ed. by Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1987).

³ Cf. Jon Walker's *In Visible Fellowship, A Contemporary View of Bonhoeffer's Classic Work Life Together* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2011), 13.

Introduction to Chapter Five

Concerning its Christological emphases, *Life Together* portrays Christ as a divine presence who extends his presence to the Christian community, as a head that governs the community and as his self-manifestation in and through the community. This chapter will indicate that *Life Together* is the radical proposal for a community to live as the manifestation of Christ. At the same time, the proposal of *Life Together* for the actual outworking of such community lacks the delineation of the role and the necessary attitude of the human leader of the community. This, combined with Bonhoeffer's domineering personality, contributes to a vulnerability of the enterprise.

The chapter will commence with an overview of the background of the Finkenwalde experiment, followed by a description of the Christological implications arising from the practices of the Finkenwalde community. It will conclude by placing Bonhoeffer's view of Christ in *Life Together* within the broader context of his overall narrative.

1. Background

1. A. The Felt Need to Correct the Individualism of Academic Training

Bonhoeffer's convictions about the character-forming role of community started to be shaped long before his arrival at Finkenwalde. In his earlier years in Berlin, Bonhoeffer already built on group dynamics as a method for theological training. In his initial lectures in Berlin, he displayed a fascination with the transformative potential of community for students. In 1932, Bonhoeffer took his Berlin students to the countryside for structured spiritual retreats, and these retreats laid the groundwork for the community life that later materialized at Finkenwalde.⁴ Upon his return from trips to the United States, Spain, and England, Bonhoeffer became increasingly disillusioned with the effectiveness of church and university training and grew interested in quasi-monastic community alternatives.

⁴ Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 150-160.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

In 1934, while serving in London and before being first approached to lead a would-be seminary for the Confessing Church at Zingst, Bonhoeffer was entertaining the idea of studying at the Ashram of the holy Hindu, Gandhi. Bonhoeffer hoped to learn about “community life as well as methods of training” (to use the words of his friend, Bishop’s Bell) from Gandhi’s community.⁵ While still serving as a pastor in London, Bonhoeffer confided in his Swiss pastor friend, Erwin Sutz, expressing in a letter that seminaries failed to prepare students for wholehearted discipleship of Christ. In this letter Bonhoeffer was already indicating that he wanted to see the ongoing transformation of his students through the word, and that it would require a monastic type of community living. Bonhoeffer wrote in 1934:

I no longer believe in the university; in fact, I never really have believed in it – to your chagrin! The next generation of pastors, these days, ought to be trained entirely in church-monastic schools, where the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship are taken seriously—which for all three of these things is simply not the case at the university and under the present circumstances is impossible.⁶

It was with these aspirations that Bonhoeffer, between December 1934 and March 1935, embarked on a tour in England, visiting Anglican monasteries and adding Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Methodist seminaries to his list. The field study exposed him to new examples and insights about community life. With his quick and sharp intellect, he was able to learn several current ideas and examples, even though he did not have the space and the time to deeply process and integrate these before their implementation. Interestingly, when Bonhoeffer started these monastic practices in the Finkenwalde community, he presented his arguments for them as if they would originate directly from the Old and New Testaments, even though he learned them during his trip to the monastic communities in England. By the time Bonhoeffer started to explore the quasi-monastic setting as an educational environment for pastors in Finkenwalde, he believed not only that both the church and university lacked the communal dynamic necessary for personal formation among ministers; he was also ready

⁵ Bishop Bell in his letter of recommendation to Gandhi, wrote. “He [Bonhoeffer] wants to study community life as well as methods of training. It would be a very great kindness if you could let him come to you.” (George Bell to Mahatma Gandhi, October 22, 1934, *DBWE 13*, 225., *DBW 13*, 210.)

⁶ *DBWE 13*, 217. (*DBW 13*, 204.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

to embark into an alternative way of living, a form of community that existed to train pastors in a lifestyle that embodied the word.

In a letter dated September 19, 1936, after already being involved in the leadership of the new seminary for more than a year, Bonhoeffer articulated his convictions regarding seminary education to Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer emphasized the need for a different kind of training for young theologians, including communal seminary experiences. Bonhoeffer argued that a genuine pastoral community could only emerge through regular reflection on the word and fixed times of prayer. He wrote that the pressing questions young theologians posed were: “How can I learn to pray? How can I learn to read Scripture?” Bonhoeffer believed that if these questions were not addressed, the students would not be adequately supported. He wanted serious theological, exegetical, and dogmatic work to be accompanied by a spiritual aspect to maintain balance and prevent undue emphasis on one aspect.⁷ This was the educational environment then, in which Bonhoeffer developed the rules and rhythms of community life for seminarians.

When the Finkenwalde Seminary had to be closed in 1938, Bonhoeffer’s convictions regarding the need for monastic communities did not weaken. In fact, they intensified. During a time when not only the Volk Church was seriously compromising its witness to Christ but also the Confessing Church was struggling to maintain its representation of the faith, the only way to boldly represent the Gospel, Bonhoeffer argued, was a community that consistently lived by the word as a core value. Bonhoeffer believed that supporting an uncompromised Christian witness of the Gospel necessitated that pastors in training would live in spiritual brotherhood.

In 1938, writing *Life Together* became a wake-up call to that end.⁸

⁷ Letter to Karl Barth, Finkenwalde, September 19, 1936 (*DBWE 14*, 253-254., *DBW 14*, 236-238.)

⁸ In a letter to a young pastor friend in Germany, in which Bonhoeffer expressed regret regarding the ineffectiveness of the German church, he wrote: “Invisibility is ruining us” (Letter to Helmut Rössler, October 18, 1931, *DBWE 11*, 55., *DBW 11*, 33). Bonhoeffer by this time (in contrast with his two dissertations) often stressed that ‘etherizing’ the church into empty external actions is a great error.

1. B. The Theology Behind Seeing Community as an Extension of the Existence of Christ

In *Life Together* the Christological basis for building up and leading a Christian community that represents Christ is not explored explicitly, at least not in detail, but is presupposed all through. Bonhoeffer's guidance for the practices of the Finkenwalde community is based on the theological understanding he developed before 1938. For Bonhoeffer, participation in Christian community is participation in the personhood of Christ. Putting it differently, ecclesiology is based on Christology.

Recalling some of Bonhoeffer's key emphases reviewed in the present dissertation from Bonhoeffer's earlier works will suffice to illustrate this. In his *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer discussed the concept of "Christ existing as a community" (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*) and also Christ's vicarious sacrifice that enabled human beings to participate in the life of God in Christ.⁹ In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer stated that "There is no God who 'is there'; God 'is' in the relation of persons, and the being of God is God's being a person."¹⁰ In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer argued that the church must see the world from the perspective of Christ to qualify to be a church.¹¹ The Christology that lies behind the practices of the Finkenwalde community and is built on in *Life Together*, presupposes all these earlier theological concepts, in mostly implicit forms.

One of the special emphases to community-building that *Life Together* represents lies in Bonhoeffer's desire to consistently avoid the pitfall of self-referential community. He calls attention to the danger of confusing the Christ-defined nature of Christian community with wishful thinking about what a community might be or how it could fulfill human desires. Bonhoeffer stresses that when natural desires and human ideals are made central to the work of building Christian community, they become counterproductive. Christian community originates in more than human desire; when desires become demands and become established as laws, people and even God will be judged autonomously and accused accordingly. When

⁹ *DBWE 1*, 189 & 190. (*DBW 1*, 126.)

¹⁰ *DBWE 2*, 115., (*DBW 2*, 112.)

¹¹ *DBWE 3*, 22., (*DBW 3*, 22.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

the goal of a community shifts from humanity in Christ to humanity in itself; it begins to move toward reduced humanity. Bonhoeffer writes:

Those who want more than what Christ has established between us do not want Christian community. They are looking for some extraordinary experiences of community that were denied them elsewhere. Such people are bringing confused and tainted desires into the Christian community. Precisely at this point Christian community is most often threatened from the very outset by the greatest danger, the danger of internal poisoning, and the danger of confusing Christian community with some wishful image of pious community, the danger of blending the devout heart's natural desire for community with the spiritual reality of Christian community. It is essential for Christian community that two things become clear right from the beginning. *First, Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; second, Christian community is a spiritual and not a psychic reality.*¹²

Bonhoeffer argues that Christ is not only the past origin but also the essence and the present definition of Christian community. God's grace frustrates dreams and shatters images about what communal life should be, and only then can the Christian community grasp the promise that is given to it. The disappointment with one's expectations regarding what a community might be becomes a gift. In Bonhoeffer's words, "The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting."¹³ It is Christ himself, whom Christ gives to people in community, this is the basis of community.

Consequently, it is faith alone that can receive Christ. This why faith is so crucial to Christian community.

¹² *DBWE* 5, 34-35., *DBW* 5, 22-23. For a deeper analysis on Bonhoeffer's attitude to psychology, see also Clifford J. Green's article on Bonhoeffer's view on psychology and psychotherapy considering the work of Bonhoeffer's father. "Two Bonhoeffers on Psychoanalysis" in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) 58-75.

¹³ *DBWE* 5, 37. (*DBW* 5, 25).

As Bonhoeffer puts it:

It is not the experience of Christian community, but firm and certain faith within Christian community that holds us together. We hold fast in faith to God's greatest gift, that God has acted for us all and wants to act for us all. [...] We are bound together by faith, not by experience.¹⁴

Since Christ wills spiritual community into existence, the cultivation of community must keep Christ at the center. The daily life of the community with its needs is best seen with Christ at the center. Bonhoeffer contends that one must seek Christ first and rely on what he provides, not the other way around. The response fitting to God's abundance in Christ, lavished so richly on humanity, is instead of complaining and demanding simply accepting what he gives.

2. Spiritual Disciplines as Ways of Participation in Christ as Community

In *Life Together*, the practices that Bonhoeffer identifies are designed to help the members of the community seek Christ and thus participate in the community, which is in Christ himself. The practices are meant to draw people to be involved in the life of Christ intellectually and personally. Bonhoeffer adopts the concept and practice of 'spiritual exercises' into his Protestant mentality from Thomas á Kempis, who impacted Bonhoeffer deeply. According to á Kempis, spiritual exercises are actions of the inmost self.¹⁵ Actions that both express and strengthen postures of the heart suitable to God's intent, are actions that

¹⁴ *DBWE* 5, 47. (*DBW* 5, 34).

¹⁵ As Bonhoeffer wrote in his earlier book, *Discipleship*: "a disciple's life requires strict external discipline" (*DBWE* 4, 159., *DBW* 4, 164). It is worth repeating here that Bonhoeffer does not acknowledge the significance of his reliance on Thomas á Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, without which we could hardly have *Discipleship* as we have it today. Contemporary Bonhoeffer researchers rarely make reference to this connection today. (For a modern edition, see Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999). For an exception cf. Peter Frick's study on "The Imitatio Christi of Thomas á Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, Religion in Philosophy and Theology, 29, 2008.) 31-52.

must happen. In Bonhoeffer's eyes, the practices of the Christian life matter because it is through these practices that participation in Christ takes place.¹⁶

Furthermore, for Bonhoeffer the orientation of spiritual exercises is external. In his words in 1935: "The goal [of spiritual exercises] is not cloistered isolation, but the most intense concentration for ministry outside the seminary," which for Bonhoeffer's students are meant "to preach the Word of God toward the goal of commitment and discernment of spirits."¹⁷

The following sections will briefly review three of these practices that defined the life of the Finkenwalde community: (A) meditation, (B) the Finkenwalde rule and (C) forgiving sins and receiving forgiveness.

2. A. Meditation

For Bonhoeffer, all spiritual exercises are meant to keep the living word central in the lives of the members of the Christian community. They are destined to serve one goal and that goal is that the word could infiltrate every soul in the community. The approach to the text of the Bible that Bonhoeffer asks for, then, is to bring the self under the word.

Bonhoeffer explains the value of daily meditation, which for him was "one of the first and foremost tasks of the theologian,"¹⁸ in the following way:

We expose ourselves to the particular sentence and word [in the Bible] until we personally are affected by it. When we do that, we are doing nothing but what the

¹⁶ A contemporary attempt to reintroduce the monastic way of life is Paul Dekar: *Community of the Transfiguration, The Journey of a New Monastic Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

¹⁷ Cited by Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr in the Editor's Afterword to the German edition (*DBWE 5*, 120., *DBW 5*, 134.; the reference is to *Gesammelte Schriften 2*, 449). The editor of *DBWE 4* also adds: "In his Luther Bible, Bonhoeffer has underlined the term 'discipline' in verses such as Prov. 4: 13: 'Keep hold of discipline; do not let go of it; guard it, for it is your life'" (*DBWE 4*, 314). Concerning the dangers of striving for work-based righteousness Bonhoeffer writes: "The objection that Christians should take refuge in faith and scripture and forsake asceticism is without any merit" (*DBWE 4*, 160., *DBW 4*, 165).

¹⁸ Hans-Werner Jensen in *I Knew Bonhoeffer*, 153.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

simplest, most unlearned Christian does every day. We are reading the Word of God as God's Word for us. Therefore, we do not ask what this text has to say to other people. [...] It is true that to do this we must first have understood the content of the text. But in this situation, we are neither doing an exegesis of the text, nor preparing a sermon or conducting a Bible study of any kind; we are rather waiting for God's Word to us.¹⁹

For Bonhoeffer, meditation always entails silence. Attentiveness (which for Bonhoeffer is always an attentive silence, for it is a silence before the word) is best expressed by staying quiet. As Thomas á Kempis wrote: "In silence and quietness of heart a devout soul profits much and learns the hidden meaning of Scripture."²⁰ Bonhoeffer attempted to integrate the monastic practices of silence that he witnessed in the monastic communities of England, his own desires, and his understanding of Thomas á Kempis into the day-to-day life of the Finkenwalde seminary.²¹

Bonhoeffer arranged regular times that had to be spent alone in silence every day. Everyone had to keep these times: before the first worship of the day (Andacht), during a time of meditation after breakfast, and at the end of the day, after day end worship. For each of these occasions, silence was destined to give the time and space for the heart to interiorize the word.²²

¹⁹ *DBWE 5, 87. (DBW 5, 70).*

²⁰ Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1, 20. One may also recall the opening words of Bonhoeffer in his lectures on Christology: "To speak of Christ is to be silent, and to be silent about Christ is to speak. That is obedient affirmation of God's revelation, which takes place through the Word." (*DBWE 12, 300., DBW 12, 280.*)

²¹ Michael Casey's *Sacred Reading, The Art of Lectio Divina* gives a helpful background to the monastic approach to prayerful reading which provides the background to Bonhoeffer practices of meditation (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1996). Elmer Dick offers an Evangelical understanding of lectio divina in his *The Act of Bible Reading* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.) One of the sources where the medieval authors go back to is Guigo II. *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations* (London: Mowbray, 1938; Garden City: Doubleday, 1978, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, CS 48, 1981). Merold Westphal approaches the value of communal reading from a postmodern perspective arriving to conclusions that are similar to those of medieval monasticism. (Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.)

²² This is why the transition from the silence of the night rest to the wakefulness of the day has been treated with such attention in the monastic traditions and in the Finkenwalde community. In Bonhoeffer's own words, "After the silence of the night and early morning, hymns and the word of God will be heard more clearly." (*DBWE 5, 51., DBW 5, 37.*) As Bonhoeffer says: "There are three things for which the Christian needs a regular time alone

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

It is important to note that the repetitive and meditative reading of the Bible took place as part of the daily rhythm that provided interactions with the Bible exegetically and hermeneutically in its large canonical context as well. For Bonhoeffer exegeting and preaching the biblical text was central, as it was placing the text within the wide biblical web of meanings. The role of the meditative reading of the Scripture must be seen in the context of analytical exegesis and in the context placing texts together and interpreting them within the whole canon of the Bible. Meditation is best seen as part of a larger task: of treating the word as God's personal address. "Discerning the word of God within the words of Scripture" (to cite de Gruchy) is what meditation was about.²³

When Bonhoeffer first asked the preachers to practice such daily meditation, the discipline felt like a burden to several of them. While they understood that Psalm 65 stated: "The praise of silence befits you, O God, in Zion"²⁴ (a verse that Bonhoeffer quoted), it was not easy. During the hours of exegetical and doctrinal discussions their minds functioned in an analytical mode, and during their homiletic classes they were seeking ways to be effective in passing the message on to others; in meditation, however, they approached the word as a personal address. They were not used to this. In recalling their common experience, one of Bonhoeffer's students, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, indicates struggles that characterized their meditation:

All of us had been too much bent on exegesis and application of the text. We had not known what it meant that the word preaches itself. Only through long times of waiting and quiet did we learn that the text 'may be our master.' Half an hour concentration: it is amazing what comes into your head during that time. The mind moves around, memories arise, dreams awaken. Sudden anger flares up. When we told Bonhoeffer of

during the day: *meditation on the Scripture, prayer, and intercession*. All three should find a place in the daily period of meditation." (DBWE 5, 86., DBW 5, 69.)

²³ John W. de Gruchy uses this expression for Bonhoeffer's approach to theological interpretation, but the same words equally describe Bonhoeffer's purpose in meditation. (John W. de Gruchy "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005, 93).

²⁴ DBWE 5, 81. This is the second verse of Psalm 65, but it is not certain which Bible translation, if not his own, Bonhoeffer is using here. ("Dir wird Schweigen als Lobpreis, Gott, in Zion" DBW 5, 65.) The point, however, is clear in the different translations: by being silent one keeps one's mind and soul free for acknowledging God who reigns.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

this, he said that was all right; things must come into the open; but they must also be tamed in and through prayer. Everything that is suddenly there must be worked out in prayer.²⁵

They did keep the practice that Bonhoeffer asked for out of respect for Bonhoeffer, but it was difficult. These times had to be kept in silence as consistently as possible and with as minimal distraction as possible. Most of them slept in halls, not individual rooms; and in their churches they were not used to being in silence either. They accepted the practice of silence with some puzzlement and even resistance. They made jokes about it, mocked the ‘cult,’ and resisted it.²⁶

Bonhoeffer’s goal in asking the members of the community to meditate on the Scriptures was that the word would bear fruit in them and make the presence of Christ real to and through them as a community to others as well. For Bonhoeffer this was so crucial that measuring success did not seem to be as important as keeping the goal in the focus.

2. B. The Finkenwalde Rule

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer challenged the seminarians to honor Christ in not only the word but also their brothers. Bonhoeffer introduced a rule of confidentiality: he did not allow people to talk behind the back of anyone who was absent. As Albrecht Schönherr reports, the Finkenwalde rule was “Never speak about a brother who is absent”²⁷. By avoiding the spreading of complaints about each other and practicing confidentiality Bonhoeffer sought to hold the dignity of the brothers in high esteem and honor Christ and his work in them.

This was a strict rule for everyone to keep. In Bonhoeffer’s words:

²⁵ Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 108.

²⁶ Kelly in his introduction of *Life Together* reminds the readers that some “voiced their resentment over being ‘the butt of jokes from other preachers’ seminaries about their ‘unevangelical monasticism’” (*DBWE* 5, 14).

²⁷ Albrecht Schönherr, *I Knew, Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 127.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Thus, it must be a decisive rule of all Christian community life that each individual is prohibited from talking about another Christian in secret.²⁸

As Bethge comments, this “Finkenwalde Rule,” as the seminarians called it, gave almost as much to the candidates as sermons and exegesis did.²⁹

2. C. Forgiving Sins and Receiving Forgiveness

Another practice that *Life Together* delineates is the confession and forgiveness of sins. Bonhoeffer argues that what destroys community is the wrong way of dealing with sin, which finds expression by either verbalizing evil thoughts about one another or tying sins to people. Bonhoeffer wanted the seminarians of Finkenwalde to live freely from their sins while remaining realistic about them, in other words to live in Christ.

The practice that Bonhoeffer introduced into the Finkenwalde community was meant to nurture spiritual love. Bonhoeffer writes that people in sin are only capable of natural love that forces the other “into one’s own sphere of power and influence.”³⁰ Natural love is motivated by self-interest, even when it is serving; and it is the forgiveness of sins that transforms it into spiritual love.

Bonhoeffer underlines that forgiveness is humbling because in confession, one is left without anything, alone before Christ, just as the woman who was caught in adultery. Confession deals a blow to pride. But if, as Bonhoeffer adds,

²⁸ *DBWE* 5, 94. (*DBW* 5, 78.)

²⁹ Bethge 349-50, cited by Kelly in *DBWE* 5, 94, editorial footnote 3.

³⁰ *DBWE* 5, 41. (*DBW* 5, 28.) “Self-centered love loves the other for the sake of itself; spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ. ... [Self-centered love loves people], not as free persons, but as those whom it binds to itself. It wants to do everything it can to win and conquer; it puts pressure on the other person. It desires to be irresistible, to dominate.” (*DBWE* 5, 42., *DBW* 5, 29.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Christians seriously deal on a daily basis with the cross of Christ [where Jesus dealt with their sins], they will lose the spirit of human judgmentalism.³¹

Thus, confession and the forgiveness of sins is also freeing; forgiveness enables one to receive and pass on true love. Bonhoeffer shows that when one experiences forgiveness, a transition from self-centered love to other-centered love takes place.³²

In a way already familiar from *Discipleship, Life Together* emphasizes that Christ grants his forgiveness in every human relationship by stepping in between the You and the I.³³ As one follows Christ, Christ takes one's sins and imputes his righteousness on the person, thus the self will be enabled to receive Christ and turn away from self-imprisonment toward Christ. With Bonhoeffer's words: "Confession is a conversion. [...] As the first disciples left everything behind and followed Jesus' call, so in confession the Christian gives up everything and follows."³⁴ At a later part of *Life Together* Bonhoeffer repeats:

In another Christian's presence I am permitted to be the sinner that I am, for there alone in all the world the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ rule. Christ became our brother in order to help us; through Christ other Christians have become Christ for us in the power and authority of Christ's commandment. Other Christians stand before us as the sign of God's truth and grace.³⁵

³¹ *DBWE 5*, 116. (*DBW 5*, 100.)

³² Cf. *DBWE 5*, 42., *DBW 5*, 29.)

³³ In Bonhoeffer's words, "The contrast between spiritual and emotional, self-centered reality can be made most clear in the following observation. Within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, an 'immediate' relationship to one another." (*DBWE 5*, 40-41., *DBW 5*, 28.) The same idea was presented in his *Discipleship* before in this way: "He [Christ, the Mediator] stands in the center between the other person and me. He separates, but he also unites. He cuts off every direct path to someone else, but he guides everyone following him to the new and sole true way to the other person via the mediator" (*DBWE 4*, 98., *DBW 5*, 94).

³⁴ *DBWE 5*, 112. (*DBW 5*, 96.)

³⁵ *DBWE 5*, 109., *DBW 5*, 95.) A little earlier Bonhoeffer also maintains that "As Christ bore with us and accepted us as sinners, so we in his community may bear with sinners and accept them into the community of Jesus Christ through the forgiveness of sins" (*DBWE 5*, 102. *DBW 5*, 86-87). In one of his 1936 lectures Bonhoeffer also said: "When I go to confession, I am going to God; the brother in God's stead, keeps the secret as God's secret. It is said to God" ("Expansion of the Lecture on Pastoral Care" in *DBWE 14*, 592., *DBW 5*, 589).

Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* then, portrays Christ as revealing himself through a community that submits to the word. Bonhoeffer emphasizes specific practices such as meditation, refraining from speaking ill of others behind their backs, and regular confession of sins. These practices enable individuals to encounter Christ within the community and allow the community itself to become a form of Christ's self-revelation. In this way, Christ manifests himself to the world in a special manner through the collective life of the believers.

3. The Theological Prospects and the Practical Limitations of the Finkenwalde Community

As one places Bonhoeffer's portrait of Christ in *Life Together* within Bonhoeffer's overall narrative, a characteristic analogy for Christ that stands out from it is that of the monastery. Bonhoeffer argues that when the community functions as a monastery it is the presence of Christ:

There is a way of living in conformity with this world while being in it, but there is also a way of creating for oneself the spiritual 'world' of the monastery. [...] the community is called to be ever increasingly transformed into this form. It is, in fact, the form of Christ himself.³⁶

Without Christ, individuals would be blocked by their own self-centeredness; but in Christ people are lifted beyond their own ego to meet the other person and are enabled to be in community.

Considering the often impatient and judging traits in Bonhoeffer's personality and knowing about his conflicts with Bethge, it is hard to not assume that at this point Bonhoeffer may have some of his own personal struggles and experiences in mind. When Bonhoeffer speaks of natural love as one that seeks complete fusion of the self and the other, the reader may wonder if that applies to his conflicts with Bethge. At the end of the summer of 1936 Bethge indicated that to him Bonhoeffer was becoming a "demanding friend" (cf. Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 252, referring to De Gruchy's *Daring, Trusting Spirit*, 30). Marsh writes about a dependency in Bonhoeffer's relationship to Bethge, which was difficult for both. Bonhoeffer wanted a more heightened intimacy between the two of them, but Bethge was not willing to accept Bonhoeffer's pleading for such close connection (Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 309). In light of Bonhoeffer's struggle between having or not having full rights to have Bethge as his friend, the conflict that Bonhoeffer describes between natural love and spiritual love makes even more sense.

³⁶ *DBWE* 4, 247. (*DBW* 4, 263.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

It is important to put Bonhoeffer's idealism concerning the effectiveness of the monastic life into proper perspective: Bonhoeffer is starting a way of training and living together of which he has no personal experience. He visited more than a half dozen peace centers and monastic types of communities in England for just a half year before he put together his specific plans for the Finkenwalde community and started to implement its leadership, but Bonhoeffer had never lived as either a hermit or as a member of a monastic community. He never studied the traditions of monasticism which is much wider and deeper than the few protestant versions of monastic life that he visited, so he was not aware of the traps of legalism and the possible ways of misusing power which are commonplace in the monastic traditions. It is with such idealism that he set out his work and started to lead it in 1935. His enthusiasm is apparent from his letter of January 14, 1935, written to his eldest brother, Karl Friedrich, a physicist by profession and a socialist by political persuasion. The apparent distance between the scientific and the theological outlook may explain the almost apologetic way Bonhoeffer writes. Yet Bonhoeffer's idea is clear. For setting the background of his Christology that originates from Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde period, it is worth citing Bonhoeffer here at length:

Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical and mad about a number of things. I myself am sometimes afraid of that. But I know that the day I 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 only worry about being so afraid of what other people will think as to get bogged down instead of going forward. I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus sky-high—like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt-out shells behind. 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

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people together and do this.³⁷

Bonhoeffer's enthusiasm realized in the Finkenwalde Seminary and reported in his *Life Together* resulted in a twofold contribution to his Christology. As Chapter Five showed, the theological contribution of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* in his Finkenwalde period and the following years (1935-1938) is profound. When one views the dynamics of community through the lens of Christ's self-revelation, one finds a pattern by which human relationships can be shaped in a way that reflects Christ-governed community, thus community can become the very presence of Christ. The best way to summarize Bonhoeffer's Christological emphasis in his Finkenwalde period is to use Bonhoeffer's own words:

Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.³⁸

All aspects community life, such as attitudes, daily actions, and communication can have a revelatory role concerning Christ. *Life Together* (like *Discipleship*, originating in the same period) challenges people to strive toward radical obedience to Christ in community.

At the same time, Bonhoeffer's Christology, creative and radical as it may be, does not match Bonhoeffer's practice in every respect. The people who lived close to Bonhoeffer and respected him highly often felt that Bonhoeffer had too elevated expectations and felt judged by him. As Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, one of Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde students after describing the daily rhythms of the Finkenwalde community puts it, "From the beginning we revolted against such a 'methodism.' There were too much 'must' for us."³⁹ One of Bonhoeffer's biographers, Charles Marsh notes that there was a tendency toward unforgiving

³⁷ Bonhoeffer's letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, January 14, 1935, *DBWE 13*, 284-285. (*DBW 13*, 272-273)

³⁸ *DBWE 5*, 31., *DBW 5*, 18.)

³⁹ Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, *I Knew Bonhoeffer*, 107.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

perfectionism, and he adds “The will to make oneself an exemplar of faith could become too easily a recipe for a tortured soul.”⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer was convinced that he knew what he was doing. In a letter to Barth, Bonhoeffer refers to the perception of some who view Bonhoeffer’s guidance in Finkenwalde as legalistic and Bonhoeffer’s response to them is not wavering:

The reproach that it is somehow legal does not really concern me. What is legalistic if a Christian should learn what it means to pray and spend a good portion of his time learning to do so?⁴¹

In his response, Barth expressed a certain suspicion concerning Bonhoeffer’s approach, Barth was bothered by “the smell ... of monastic eros and pathos”⁴² in Bonhoeffer’s writing. Barth was worried that Bonhoeffer might end up with a direction that is human centered. In retrospect, Barth in his later review of *Discipleship* (written in 1955, thus a decade after Bonhoeffer’s death and almost two decades after Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde years), expressed similar concerns about certain “perfectionist notes” in Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship*.⁴³

A comparison of Bonhoeffer’s approach to the transformation of self-centeredness with Benedict of Nursia’s approach to the same goal in the sixth century may shed further light in assessing Bonhoeffer’s project.⁴⁴ Benedict’s Rule emphasizes that the abbot of the community must be a caring father figure, a representative of Christ, he exercises spiritual

⁴⁰ Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 244. The definitive tone of voice that characterized Bonhoeffer all his life is expressed in his Finkenwalde years in his much-disputed thesis in the following way: “He who deliberately separates himself from the Confessing Church, separates himself from salvation.” (Cited by Bonhoeffer’s acquaintance, Helmut Gollwitzer, in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 141.) This perspective contrasts with Bonhoeffer’s later perspective in prison, where Bonhoeffer portrays a cosmic Christ, who does not require a confessional declaration. There, in his prison writings Bonhoeffer depicts a portrait of Christ, who offers himself as bread for all who stand with him in his suffering, regardless of their religious affiliation. However, this later perspective appears only in his prison writings, in 1944. In 1939 Bonhoeffer is adamant about the elevation of the Confessional Church in a way that makes Helmut Gollwitzer afraid of a sectarian climate in such a view.

⁴¹ Letter to Karl Barth, Finkenwalde, September 19, 1936 (*DBWE 14*, 254. *DBW 14*, 237)

⁴² *DBW 14*, 268. (*DBW 14*, 253.)

⁴³ See Kuske and Tödt in their afterword to *Discipleship* (*DBWE 4*, 300, 306, 310., *DBW 4*, 318, 324, 328).

⁴⁴ Saint Benedict of Nursia. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd., 2012.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

discernment in decision-making and must always be considerate for the weak and the ill. In contrast, Bonhoeffer's style of leadership is one-sidedly hierarchical, stresses quick decision-making, and judges all forms of hesitation. If Bonhoeffer had incorporated some of the Benedictine principles into the Finkenwalde community life (which would have been a natural thing to do because Bonhoeffer models his community in many ways after the example of Benedict, even if he never acknowledges it), Bonhoeffer might have created an atmosphere that would have been much more conducive for spiritual formation in Christ. With more intentionality to learn from the Benedictine tradition, Bonhoeffer's project might have been more successful.

In *Life Together*, the curious phenomenon is that while Bonhoeffer portrays Christ as the Savior on whom all the members of the community members should fully rely, Bonhoeffer, as the human leader of the community creates an atmosphere that some find coming from a domineering human being. Because of this, the subsequent generations of readers of *Life Together* are left with the puzzling experience of this ambiguity.

CHAPTER SIX: *ETHICS*, CHRIST AS RESPONSIBLE ACTION

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is a synthesis of the theological tenets that Bonhoeffer stood for in his theological journey up until 1940. On April 5, 1943, two and a half years into his work, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Tegel interrogation prison; his manuscripts were left unfinished on his desk. *Ethics*, published posthumously, is a sort of *magnum opus*; in which Bonhoeffer's theological work is construed from the angle of the action of Christ who leads the world towards similarly responsible action. In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer's Christology is best summed up by Bonhoeffer's own statements: Christ is "the very embodiment of the person who lives responsibly"¹, Christ is "the responsible human being par excellence."²

Introduction to Chapter Six

In September 1940, Bonhoeffer began to reformulate his theological thinking around the center of responsible action. The interpretation of the manuscripts is made difficult by the fragmentary nature of the work, as it is comprised of sections that are well-developed, while others are only partially written, and yet others are entirely missing.³ But it is clear, regardless of the precise sequence in which these documents were intended to be read, that the collection focuses on how Christ is present for and through those who represent him when they act responsibly.

The main assertion of Chapter Six is that Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* depicts Christ specifically as the Jesus of the Gospels, who demands direct and concrete obedience from all who follow him. *Ethics*, points towards a Christ whose rule applies to all who feel and act toward others responsibly. Thus, in *Ethics*, the image of Christ is consistent with that of

¹ *DBWE* 6, 231. (*DBW* 6, 230.)

² *DBWE* 6, 258-259. (*DBW* 6, 258.)

³ From the many fragments that Bonhoeffer left behind thorough scholarly attempts have been made to reconstruct his intent concerning the flow of the argumentations based on content, dating, style, and the types of paper Bonhoeffer wrote on, but still there remains no full consensus. The structure of *Ethics* that *DBWE* 6 represents is a probable option.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Discipleship and Life Together. At the same time, Chapter Six asserts that the main challenge that the reader of *Ethics* faces is one that leads toward proper action, not one that leads toward a commitment to a particular faith-confession. In *Ethics*, Christ is portrayed by his caring involvement with the entirety of reality, not as a Savior primarily if not exclusively for the confessing Christians. Christ is described primarily from a viewpoint of his deep sense of responsibility for others, which is more inclusive towards the ‘world’ than before, Christ’s self-identification is broader here than in Bonhoeffer’s previous works.

In the following pages, the key factors that influenced Bonhoeffer between 1940 and 1943 in writing his *Ethics* will be reviewed, followed by an examination of the main emphases found in *Ethics* regarding Christology. The chapter will conclude by appreciating these traits within the larger framework of Bonhoeffer's theological work.

1. Factors Impacting the Formation of Bonhoeffer’s Christology While Working on his *Ethics*

From the mid 1930’s, Bonhoeffer had to adjust to significant changes that took place in Germany at large and in his life. During these years the Gestapo gradually limited Bonhoeffer in terms of his speaking, writing and then even traveling. Bonhoeffer was forbidden to be involved in not only the University and the Confessing Church but also in any church event, public speaking, or publishing. Bonhoeffer could experience less and less of the reality of Christian community and the sphere of his public and legal influence on others was severely tightened.⁴

⁴ To briefly summarize the rapid increase of the arrogance of the German regime during this time, in June 1941 Germany invades the Soviet Union. In September a decree is issued requiring that Jews wear the yellow star of David and use Jewish first names. On October 16 the first nighttime mass deportation of Jews takes place from Berlin. In December Japan becomes active in the war, the Imperial Japanese Navy attacks the US naval base at Pearl Harbor on both air and sea, which lead the United States and Great Britain to declare war on Japan. The next day Germany and Italy declare war on the United States. On January 20, 1942, at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin the National Socialists agree on what they called the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”.

The legal restrictions on Bonhoeffer’s daily life can be summarized in the following way: Soon after Bonhoeffer’s authorization for academic teaching was withdrawn (in 1936), the Finkenwalde Seminary itself was dissolved in 1937. In 1938 a prohibition was issued against Bonhoeffer from visiting Berlin. In March 1940 the liquidation of the ‘collective pastorates’ was decreed, which meant that Bonhoeffer was no longer allowed to continue to follow up on the lives of his previous students in any formal or organized way. In September 1940 Bonhoeffer was also prohibited from speaking publicly anywhere in the German Reich and was ordered to register regularly with the police in Schlawe in Pomerania. On March 19, 1941, Bonhoeffer received a letter from Reich Writers’ Guild (Reichschrifttumskammer) prohibiting Bonhoeffer from “every activity as a writer”

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer's new life as a double agent, starting from 1940 onward, also added to his sense of isolation. He had Christian friends who shared his spiritual desires to be in God's will, and other friends who understood his role in the planned plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, but nobody knew him fully. But what was surely the hardest was his relationship to the Confessing Church. It is a process that is worth reviewing.

1. A. Disillusionment in the Confessing Church, but not in Christ

The history of the Confessing Church in the 1930s and its attempts to find the way to respond to the Nazification of the church has thoroughly been documented elsewhere. Here it suffices to refer to its impact on Bonhoeffer. The relationship of Bonhoeffer to the Confessing Church is a story too often idealized, for it was marked by deep disappointments in both Bonhoeffer and other representatives of the Confessing Church.⁵

In the first version of the Barmen declaration Bonhoeffer's desire to incorporate a clear statement about 'the Jewish question' into the document failed. Initially, he was optimistic that this could change later. But what he found was that the people he relied on in the Confessing Church, were not there to rely on anymore. Some gave up their earlier

(*DBWE 16*, 181-182., *DBW 16*, 170-171.) including printing and publishing any of his writings. In April Bonhoeffer composes a protest against the publication prohibition, but this attempt is without success. On April 9, 1942, Bonhoeffer sends a note to his friend Bethge, and he indicates the kind of danger he feels he is in with these words: "Just in case, you should know that it is my wish for you someday to receive my books, musical instruments, and pictures." (*DBWE 16*, 266., *DBW 16*, 255.)

⁵ In 1934, when a significant group of German Christians came together to articulate a corporate response to the growing ambition of national socialism to render every element of society under its control, including the church, their aim was to take a stand that was in harmony with the Gospel. With Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as leading figures in the meeting, the later famous Barmen Declaration was accepted. The newly formed Confessing Church met again half a year later in Dahlem, insisting on the Lordship of Christ and rejecting any control from the Nazi regime, during this second meeting the statements, which became so formative and directive for Bonhoeffer's later action, were worded. Thus, in October 1934 at the Second Confessional Synod in Dahlem any intervention of the state into the order of the church was rejected. In February 1937, following the resignation of the respected Superintendent of the by then state-controlled and united Protestant Church, Wilhelm Zoellner, a new law was implemented which ensured that the highest authority for questions concerning internal church government now belonged to the state. People who opposed the new law were arrested. Terror started against those who stood up for the independence of the church. The Confessing Church had to adopt a new strategy of separation. A minority to which Bonhoeffer belonged saw that the polarization of the Confessing Church and the German government became inevitable. Others chose the ways of compromise. In 1942 Bonhoeffer, who spoke earlier about "pure doctrine" (*DBWE 13*, 217., *DBW 13*, 204.) as about the criterion of Christian authenticity, sees his own insistence on the importance of holding to pure doctrine during the Finkenwalde years, as judgmental.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

insistence on radical discipleship, others were imprisoned and even killed, yet others just remained quiet. Bonhoeffer was disappointed that even the Confessing Church was not faithful to its commitment to the Gospel in a way that Bonhoeffer had hoped. While Bonhoeffer did not and could not separate theology and politics; and he disagreed with those who thought that it was possible to be faithful theologically and remain silent regarding the discriminative tendencies of the Church deriving from Nazi leadership, most pastors wanted to avoid direct confrontation with the Nazi authorities. Bonhoeffer, unlike Barth, was not content with subordinating ethics to systematic theology, for him it was the other way around; dogmatics had to be subsumed under the category of theological ethics.

Bonhoeffer's disappointment, as many of the pastors of the Confessing Church avoided active resistance to the German authorities, turned into an aversion against anything that was connected to the power structures of institutional Christianity. In Bonhoeffer even a certain disgust began to develop concerning all the external structures that had to do with religion.

To respect the current stage of the development in Bonhoeffer's theology, it is important to note that during the writing of his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer's thinking about 'religionless Christianity' and the history of God's work 'coming of age' was *not* yet developed.⁶ Between 1940-1943 Bonhoeffer's representation of the Christian faith was focused on responsible action (and the present chapter will explore more of this emphasis). At this time Bonhoeffer does not yet have the next volume of Barth's Church Dogmatics (which he read after being arrested). At the time of writing his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer's sense that his lifetime was on a new phase of history in which reality is to be approached in new ways was not fully ripe. Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is an exploration of a new understanding characterized by frustration and a sense that a new understanding is emerging. It was a time of criticism and Bonhoeffer had a desire to articulate a theological affirmation of worldly existence.

During the shock that the crashing of Bonhoeffer's old world caused, his trust in a God, who was still engaged with people even at times of injustice was not shaken. Bonhoeffer's conviction that God, who became flesh to save humanity in Christ, was

⁶ These concepts will be used in Bonhoeffer's prison writing from 1944 onwards.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

crucified and raised, remained actively involved in people's lives did not waver. Bonhoeffer believed that God was active even amidst the terrible crimes of war.

These factors led Bonhoeffer to lower his expectations of the Christian community concerning its potential to represent Christ to the world, and the increase of a new expectation that Christ manifests himself in some other yet not a clearly articulated way. A letter written to Bethge during his work on *Ethics* in 1942, testifies to this:

I sense how an opposition to all that is 'religious' is growing in me. Often into an instinctive revulsion – which is not good either. I am not religious by nature. But I must constantly think of God, of Christ; authenticity, life, freedom, and mercy mean a great deal to me. It is only that the religious clothes they wear make me so uncomfortable. Do you understand?⁷

In place of his earlier expectations of how a confession-defined community can represent Christ, a new understanding of who Christ is for Bonhoeffer's generation started to unfold. It took years for Bonhoeffer to articulate it, but he saw that a change was ahead. In the letter already cited, Bonhoeffer adds:

I believe that I am on the verge of some kind of breakthrough, I am letting things take their own course and do not resist.⁸

As Bonhoeffer is about to become increasingly intentional in seeking a Christian faith without the "religious clothes," he echoes Friedrich Schleiermacher, Adolf von Harnack, his Professor from Berlin, and Rudolf Bultmann. He also differs from them by holding on to the concrete Christ as the 'essence' of the Christian faith.

⁷ Bonhoeffer's letter of June 25, 1942, to Bethge, *DBWE 16*, 329. (*DBW 16*, 325.)

⁸ Bonhoeffer's letter of June 25, 1942, to Bethge, *DBWE 16*, 329. (*DBW 16*, 325.)

1. B. Experiencing the Affirmations of Humanity from the ‘Unconscious’ Remnant

From the time when Bonhoeffer decided to join the *Abwehr* (the Military Intelligence Office, or more precisely, the resistance group within it) in Munich in October 1940,⁹ he found himself in a close relationship with people who did not trust in Christ. Bonhoeffer’s task was to make known the ongoing conspiratorial efforts of the resistance group to trustworthy persons in foreign countries. His task did not include any direct participation in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Yet because of the common goal and secrecy that it entailed Bonhoeffer was in a mutually dependent relationship with these new friends. In these people (one of whom was his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi) Bonhoeffer experienced an intent to seek the good of others, even at the expense of risking their own lives. This was the type of commitment that Bonhoeffer was looking for in vain among the members of the Confessing Church who sought to avoid direct conflict with the leaders of the National Church.

In Bonhoeffer, an appreciation of what Christ does through these people started to grow. For Bonhoeffer, they followed Christ, even without knowing Christ by name. Bonhoeffer began to acknowledge that the people who represented Christ came not only from the church, but also from family, culture, and government, regardless of their confessional state. Bonhoeffer articulated this recognition in his *Ethics* in this way:

Only in their being with-one-another, for-one-another, and over-against-one-another do the divine mandates of the church, marriage and family, culture, and government communicate the commandment of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.¹⁰

Thus, Bonhoeffer’s visual field widened regarding the group of people who may represent Christ. In *Ethics*, the Christ-like relationality of the world represents the living Christ as much, if not more, outside the church as within the church. At one point Bonhoeffer envisions a time when the persecuted, who at a certain occasion, for the first time in their lives

⁹ Two visual representations about the inner struggles of people who resisted Hitler’s Nazism include Hava Kohav Beller, *The Restless Conscience, Resistance to Hitler in Nazi Germany*, DVD (Docurama Films, 1992) and Eric Till, *Bonhoeffer, Agent of Grace*, DVD, (Gateway Films, Vision Video, Worcester, 2000). A similar new movie by Angel Studios is scheduled to come out by November of 2024 under the title *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Story of Courage and Faith*.

¹⁰ *DBWE* 6, 393. *DBW* 6, 397. (Cf. also *Creation and Fall*, 64.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

and even to their own surprise, call upon Christ and confess themselves to be Christians. In Bonhoeffer's words, at that moment "an awareness of belonging to Christ dawns on them."¹¹ Bonhoeffer suggests that these people recognize something that had been true before, but they did not know it. Their new identity, therefore, is not something which came to existence at that time, their newly found identity in Christ is a result of an awakening.

Bonhoeffer envisions a Christ, who frees his people to look at their atheist neighbor as a pre-Christian. Christians belong to Christ by virtue of his action on their behalf and the reality of the crucified Christ for them is not accessible because of human effort. The knowledge of Christ the crucified comes as a "saving light," as a gift for all.¹²

It is in this context that Bonhoeffer speaks of an unconscious remnant.¹³ They are people in the process of becoming Christians, who should be claimed for Jesus Christ:

It may often seem more serious to address such people simply as non-Christians and urge them to confess their unbelief. But it would be more Christian to claim as Christians precisely such persons who no longer dare to call themselves Christians, and to help them with much patience to move toward confessing Christ.¹⁴

Bonhoeffer, due to these factors both before and during writing his *Ethics*, continues to see Christ at the center of existence but identifies Christ as one who claims individuals who act responsibly as people belonging to him, regardless of whether they are already Christians. Between 1940 and 1943 Bonhoeffer felt a need to formulate a new theological synthesis that gave room for his negative experiences with the confessing Christians. He also felt his own

¹¹ *DBWE 6*, 347., *DBW 6*, 349.

¹² With the words of *Ethics*: "In this saving light, people recognize God in their neighbors for the first time. The labyrinth of their previous lives collapses. They become free for God and for one another. They realize that there is a God who loves and accepts them, that alongside them stand others whom God loves equally, and that there is a future with the triune God and God's church-community. Each believes, loves, hopes. [...] The whole of the past is embraced by the word 'forgiveness,' the whole of the future is preserved in the faithfulness of God." (*DBWE 6*, 146-147., *DBW 6*, 137-138.)

¹³ *DBWE 6*, 169. (*DBW 6*, 162.)

¹⁴ *DBWE 6*, 169-170. (*DBW 6*, 162.)

desire to keep trusting the ongoing work of God in Christ, considering Bonhoeffer's positive experiences with 'unconscious' Christians.

2. Bonhoeffer's New Integration Around the Christ, who Defines the World in its Entirety

The innovative approach for conceptualizing God's relationship with the world in Christ resulted from viewing this relationship through the prism of the vicarious representation of Christ. The radical openness toward the world, which *Ethics* proposes, is rooted in Bonhoeffer's faith in the reconciliation of Christ.¹⁵

The recognition that Bonhoeffer was referring to in his letter to Bethge cited above can very well be the breakthrough that had to do with the harmony between God and the world that the reconciliation of God brought to the world.¹⁶ The kind of mentality that was emerging in Bonhoeffer in 1942 is rooted in the understanding of the Apostle Paul who wrote:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.¹⁷

The desire to represent God's reconciliation with the world and that Christians would become the righteousness of God is the theological center of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer sees the world as a reality reconciled with God and together with the Apostle Paul implores people to live a life that is in harmony with the life of Christ.

¹⁵ Clifford J. Green, the editor of the English edition, argues that reconciliation is the methodological starting point for *Ethics*. (Cf. *DBWE* 6, 7.)

¹⁶ Cf. *DBWE* 16, 329. (*DBW* 16, 325.)

¹⁷ 2Cor 5: 18-21. *NIV*

In Bonhoeffer's mind, when God reconciled the world to himself, God opened a radically new door for human beings to relate to everyone and everything in the created world in a way that affirms their present existence. Bonhoeffer argues that reconciliation permeated all spheres of existence, so the 'world' (to use the technical theological term that sums up the characteristically creaturely nature of existence) became a suitable platform to reveal Christ. Bonhoeffer describes three aspects of this 'worldly' life – the natural, the penultimate, and the human – as areas of life that can be viewed as expressions of God's very presence. In the following sections these three areas of existence and the impact of the reconciliation of Christ on these three areas will be reviewed.

2. A. Nature as a Representation of God's Ongoing Activity

In Ethics, Bonhoeffer argues that since the divine and the human were brought together in perfect harmony in Jesus, without either the divine eclipsing the human nor the human eclipsing the divine; the incarnation of Christ restored the existence of the natural world to the existence of God.¹⁸ The incarnation of Christ, which does not tolerate divisions between heaven and earth, establishes Bonhoeffer's view concerning the world as a special stage for the work of God. The Pauline understanding that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" gave Bonhoeffer the theological mandate to bring the power of reconciliation to bear on every possible area of worldly existence affecting, among other things, the relationship between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural.'

Bonhoeffer argues that the theological division between the natural and the supernatural, the world and God, is unnecessary, and undesirable. Bonhoeffer states that

¹⁸ *Irenaeus'* view concerning the incarnation of the word is *undoubtedly at the background of Bonhoeffer's approach to the created world*. For Irenaeus, the power of redemption lies in the incarnation of Christ, in whom the divine and the human were made to dwell in full union. In his *Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies)* in about 180 AD, Irenaeus describes that God created humanity immature, intending human beings to grow into the divine likeness. At the fall Adam and Eve desired to grow up prematurely and have immediacy with God before their time. By virtue of Christ's incarnation, the qualities of Christ are being transferred to people and through people's obedience to the whole created world. (Jens Zimmerman points to the significance of this connection in his *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, 31. and in his later book *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, 37-77.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

when “cultural Protestantism”¹⁹ in the nineteenth century was preoccupied with the realm of reason and the laws of nature, and when medieval monasticism focused on the transcendent on its own, both contributed to the same conflict from a distinct perspective. They both accepted the existence of a gap between the natural and the supernatural. Bonhoeffer sees this customary Protestant position that maintains a deep divide between the realms of the natural and the supernatural as highly problematic. In Bonhoeffer’s interpretation it is a mistake to see God as an existence separate from the natural. In the words from his *Ethics*,

It is a denial of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ to wish to be ‘Christian’ without being ‘worldly’ or wish to be worldly without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ. Hence there are not two realms, but only *the one realm of the Christ-reality* [*Christuswirklichkeit*], in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united. Because this is so, the theme of two realms, which has dominated the history of the church repeatedly, is foreign to the New Testament. [...] Rather, the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ. History moves only from this center and toward this center.²⁰

For Bonhoeffer, the identity of Jesus Christ leads to an ultimate affirmation of both the material and the spiritual existence. In Bonhoeffer’s theology, natural existence is an organic part of God’s plan, and the reconciliation of Christ expresses and fulfills this, and enables human beings to see the natural and the supernatural in harmony with one another.

From the perspective of Christology, when a false dichotomy is allowed to exist between the so called natural and supernatural, then the personhood of Christ will be represented in a false way, distorting its impact on Christian life. Bonhoeffer points out that both the focus on ethereal, spiritual, and transcendent realities, and the focus on what is earthly, material, and imminent represent different forms of the same dualism; and both have incurable weaknesses. The idealists, who highlight the infinite and absolute dimensions of reality, tend to affirm authority at the expense of the historical and material aspects of

¹⁹ *DBWE* 6, 60. (*DBW* 6, 46.)

²⁰ *DBWE* 6, 58. (*DBW* 6, 43-44.)

everyday life, devalue the created world. Bonhoeffer laments the fact that the “concept of the natural has fallen into disrepute in Protestant ethics”²¹.

On the other hand, as Bonhoeffer argues, the ‘cultural Protestants’ of his day stress the earthly dimensions of life at the expense of the heavenly realities; thus, ignore the freedom of God. This view honors nature and culture on the surface but cuts nature’s head off and makes nature aimless and lost. Bonhoeffer points out that in this way natural life is left without revelation-based orientation, which is certainly not a responsible theological position.²²

Bonhoeffer’s position is that “Christ is Christ only in the midst of the world.”²³

2. B. The Transient World as a Work of Christ in Progress

In his *Ethics*, the second way in which Bonhoeffer sees the lordship of Christ over the world demonstrated is through the impact Christ has on bringing the incomplete aspects of material existence to completion. Bonhoeffer refers to this aspect of the world, as ‘penultimate.’ For Bonhoeffer, the penultimate, the created world, represents existence from below and it is defined from the perspective of the ultimate. Bonhoeffer argues that when, through the reconciliation of Christ, the penultimate submits to the ultimate, it receives its essence. The penultimate cannot exist in and of itself without also eliminating itself; when the penultimate lives with a claim of self-sufficiency and insists on being autonomous, the encounter with the ultimate becomes a judgment. However, when the ultimate touches the

²¹ *DBWE 6*, 171., *DBW 6*, 163.

²² Bonhoeffer rejects the two realms mentality of many of his Lutheran contemporaries, which in his mind, is an outcome of a misguided interpretation of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms. Bonhoeffer argues that the dichotomy between the worldly rule and the church does not originate in Luther, rather in his interpreters. Bonhoeffer holds that any view that suggests or allows for an existence apart from Christ (like the one that treats a worldly realm existing as a realm on its own) is not Christian. He insists that the dichotomy originating from subordinating the world of nature to the realm of grace is counter-productive because undervaluing natural life suggests that it exists in separation from the life of grace and gives the natural world a position of autonomy against the law of Christ. When this happens, Protestant theology, even if unwillingly, allows for natural life to exist outside the reality of Christ. The division between sacred and profane fossilizes the profane, claims Bonhoeffer. This positive identification of nature in Bonhoeffer’s theological work is without precedence in the early twentieth century Protestant theology; around the year of 1940 in Germany not much theological talk could be heard about nature. (Cf. *DBWE 6*, 56., *DBW 6*, 41.)

²³ *DBWE 6*, 67. (*DBW 6*, 53.)

penultimate, creation becomes perfected. The ultimate, Christ, by God's free will and love breaks in from above.

Bonhoeffer argues that the concept of the natural should not be equated with the concept of the sinful. It is a mistake to consider the natural to be synonymous with the rebellious. In Bonhoeffer's view, "The natural is that which, after the fall, is directed toward the coming of Jesus Christ."²⁴ The natural existence is oriented toward Christ; it views its reality from the perspective of its redemption. The existence of the natural is, by definition, directed toward God.

Bonhoeffer was the first German-speaking theologian to make such a distinction between the unnatural and the natural, and a pioneer in Protestant theology for discussing themes such as euthanasia, forced sterilization, torture, and abortion based on the dignity of the individual and "the rights to natural life".²⁵ As Bonhoeffer argues, it is the unnatural that seeks to be self-contained and closes itself off from Christ. Bonhoeffer refutes the conventional criticism of the natural world; he argues that the natural is to be interpreted from the perspective of its eschatological completion.

Thus, in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer asserts that the world (universe, nature, or culture) belongs to God not only by virtue of being under God's control but also because it exists for and toward God. The destiny of the world binds it to God and at the same time directs it towards God.

2. C. Humanization

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* describes the third result of reconciliation as humanization. He argues that when the disciples of Christ are conformed to the likeness of Christ, it is not only divine nature that is bestowed on them; they also begin to be truly human for the first time. When people become more Christ-like, they become more of their human selves. The extent

²⁴ DBWE 6, 173. (DBW 6, 165.)

²⁵ DBWE 6, 431. (DBW 6, 437.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

of one's "humanization" can be measured against the similarity to Jesus' humanity.²⁶ In Bonhoeffer's words, "in Jesus Christ human beings are set free to be truly human before God. ... What is 'Christian' is not an end in itself but the means by which human beings may and should live as human beings before God."²⁷ For Bonhoeffer, to be a Christian is to be human. It is not an overstatement that Christians are to be humanists in the most radical sense of the term.²⁸ God designed the existence of the church as a catalyst of humanization, not the other way around. As Bonhoeffer puts it, "Therefore essentially [the church's] first concern is not with the so-called religious functions of human beings, but with the existence in the world of the human beings in all their relationships."²⁹ The God-intended goal of salvation is not to produce people who are less earthly than they were before but to make them more fully human.

When Bonhoeffer speaks of the humanity of Christ, it is the existence of Christ in first century Palestine to which he is referring. In Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* Christ is never to be seen as just an idea of a universal logos, it is his historical incarnation that Bonhoeffer has in mind. Bonhoeffer is emphatic that every construct of reality that leads human beings to something either less or more than the incarnate Christ is *not* Christian. What Bonhoeffer sees as a point of reference for humanity is not an elevated view of secular humanism: "To be conformed to the one who has become human – that is what being really human means."³⁰

²⁶ Green in his introduction notes that when talking about God becoming human, Bonhoeffer consistently uses humanization (*Menschwerdung*). Because of concern for English style, it is translated on two or three occasions as 'incarnation,' but Bonhoeffer himself avoids the word incarnation (*Inkarnationen*). Bonhoeffer does this because he wants to underline the ongoing process of becoming genuinely human, rather than the finished nature of Christ's sacrifice for us, which he believes as well. (Cf. Green in his introduction to *Ethics*, *DBWE 6*, 6; editorial footnote 20.)

²⁷ *Ethics*, *DBWE 6*, 400. (*DBW 6*, 404.) At this point one may also recall Bonhoeffer's love for music, physical exercise, interest in history and culture.

²⁸ 'Christian humanism' in Bonhoeffer is a main theme in Jens Zimmermann's writings. Zimmermann acknowledges the main intent of John W. de Gruchy's *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* and sees it as identical to his own intent, but Zimmermann wants to radicalize de Gruchy's proposal by grounding it in Bonhoeffer's patristic Christology. (Cf. Jens Zimmermann, *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, 26.)

²⁹ *DBWE 6*, 97. (*DBW 6*, 84.)

³⁰ *DBWE 6*, 94. (*DBW 6*, 81.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

In Bonhoeffer's view, 'humanization' is like a second incarnation: "The unity of the reality of God and the reality of the world established in Christ (repeats itself, or, more exactly) realizes itself again and again in human beings."³¹ Becoming human occurs in people because of the reconciliation that God had achieved in Christ, and it is given in the process of following Christ. Jens Zimmermann summarizes Bonhoeffer's view with precision: "We only know who God is and who we are in the light of the incarnation."³²

3. Towards a Christ Who Is Lord Over All

As illustrated in Chapter Six of the preceding study, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* claims that within the light of the reconciliation of Christ a spacious room is opened where all that God loves can benefit from God's love. In Bonhoeffer's words, "There is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God".³³ Thus, In *Ethics*, Christ is portrayed as the Lord over every facet of earthly existence, commonly referred to as 'the world'. Christ is marked by tangible expressions of care for others, a genuine respect for everyone, regardless of their confessional stance, and an unwavering dedication to influencing all aspects of worldly existence.³⁴

As far as people are concerned, because God's will towards the world is that its existence is oriented towards God, Christians should live not only in but also for the world. In Bonhoeffer's words, "Christianity must be used polemically today against the worldly in the name of a better worldliness."³⁵ The manifestation of Christ among humanity relies on

³¹ *DBWE* 6, 59. (*DBW* 6, 44.)

³² Jens Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, 333.

³³ *DBWE* 6, 67. (*DBW* 6, 53.)

³⁴ Cf. James Patrick Kelley, "Recent Bonhoeffer Research: On Making Sense of Bonhoeffer's Ethics" (Convocation at Lexington Seminary, 20 April, 1990), in *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 25, October 1990: UTS Archives, Bonhoeffer Secondary Papers, Series 2A Box 2) 112-115.

³⁵ *DBWE* 6, 60. (*DBW* 6, 45.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

individuals who in their own actions reflect the responsible actions of Christ in the first century. Christ appears today through people who act responsibly.

To grasp the Christological significance of *Ethics* within the life-long development of Bonhoeffer's thought, it is important to repeat two characteristic emphases represented therein, the role of the concrete and the movement toward greater inclusivity.

First, the "genuine worldliness" ("echte Weltlichkeit")³⁶ that Bonhoeffer calls people for, which is in harmony with both God's original intent for the created world and his present will towards the world,³⁷ entails careful attention given to the concrete. Bonhoeffer speaks about people who insist on abstract and universal principles but "with their preconceived concepts cannot grasp what is real"³⁸ as those who fool themselves by referring to broad generalities.³⁹ In contrast, Bonhoeffer's emphasis is that:

We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about how Christ may take form among us today and here.⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer protests generalities, because through these the power of will is diffused.⁴¹ The world, Bonhoeffer contends, is "the *domain of concrete responsibility* that is given to us

³⁶ *DBWE* 6, 400. (*DBW* 6, 404.)

³⁷ Green rightly points out that Bonhoeffer's term "weltlich" must be translated "worldly," not "secular," because Bonhoeffer uses the term to express God's intent for the created world, not to describe its fallen state. (Green, "Bonhoeffer's Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm", 215.)

³⁸ *DBWE* 6, 77. (*DBW* 6, 63.)

³⁹ Bonhoeffer considers abstractions in matters of ethical guidance inadequate. He argues that the true and the false do not exist in pure form and the generalizations of Kantian idealism and the emphases on universal values are traps to be avoided: "Christ does not proclaim a system of that which would be good today, here, and at all times. [...] Christ does not want us to be first of all pupils, representatives, and advocates of a particular doctrine, but human beings, real beings before God. Christ did not, like an ethicist, love a theory about the good; he loves real people. Christ was not interested, like a philosopher, in what is 'generally valid,' but in that which serves real concrete human beings. Christ was not concerned about whether 'the maxim of action' could become 'a principle of universal law,' but whether my action now helps my neighbor to be a human being before God. God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid belief, or a law; God became human. [...] Thereby we are turned away from any abstract ethic and toward a concrete ethic." (*DBWE* 6, 98-99. *DBW* 6, 85-86.)

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 6, 99. (*DBW* 6, 87.)

⁴¹ Cf. *DBWE* 6, 221. (*DBW* 6, 220.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

in and through Jesus Christ.”⁴² Bonhoeffer’s ethics is built on a Christology that describes Christ as one who is ever becoming real in the world; a Christology without calling people for concrete response to God’s address in Christ, therefore, for Bonhoeffer, is an oxymoron, it is a Christology without Christ.⁴³

Secondly, a key characteristic emphasis represented in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* is the shift towards an inclusivity that is greater than what Bonhoeffer stood for before. While in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer earlier stress on the concrete continues and becomes even more intense, the assertion that the vicarious representative action of Christ is a gift not only to Christians but also, through Christians, to the entire world, is taken further towards its logical conclusion. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer is more adamant about following Christ in his responsible action than about insisting on ideals, including theological ideals, which might distract people from encountering Christ. A statement that Bonhoeffer uttered concerning ethics can be adopted to Christology without altering Bonhoeffer’s original intent: for Christology, “the norm” is “not a universal principle, but the concrete neighbor, as given to me by God.”⁴⁴

To summarize, in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer maintains his earlier emphasis on the concrete, while he decreases the exclusivity that Bonhoeffer suggested earlier based on either

⁴² *DBWE 6*, 267. (*DBW 6*, 266.) It is worth inserting an explanation on Bonhoeffer’s insistence on the concrete in Bonhoeffer’s Christology. In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer addresses specific challenges, he is not articulating general principles that always apply to all contexts. His basis is the Ten Commandments, as God’s authoritative word, but the way in which Bonhoeffer applies these commandments to any given situation requires attention to the given situation. As he stresses, “God’s commandment is utterly specific, clear and concrete or it is not God’s commandment” (*DBWE 6*, 379., *DBW 6*, 382). Bonhoeffer’s approach to euthanasia, choosing a marriage partner, abortion and sterilization are good examples of the need to take the specific challenges seriously within their own context. Bonhoeffer was addressing each of these above-mentioned issues in response to legally commanded practices of the authorities to annihilate Jews. In 1936 German law was amended to make compulsory the abortion of ‘genetically unfit’ fetuses up to six months in utero. The annihilation of ‘unworthy’ lives also had particular significance for the ill people who lived in church institutions and were legally selected for elimination. The discussions that were going on about ‘euthanasia’ were also initiated by the government’s experimentation to get rid of old people. To reiterate, Bonhoeffer’s ethical conclusions are not absolute. Instead, they are to be read within the bounds of the context. As Bonhoeffer writes: “Timeless and placeless ethical discourse lacks the concrete *authorization* that any genuine ethical discourse requires” (*DBWE 6*, 371., *DBW 6*, 373. and cf. *DBWE 6*, 373., *DBW 6*, 375-376).

⁴³ For Bonhoeffer, ethics, when taken as a discipline of a strictly horizontal existence is atheism because it leaves God out of the picture. As Brocker puts it “ethics, as it is typically engaged in, is sin. (Mark S. Brocker, “Bonhoeffer’s Appeal for Ethical Humility.” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, vol. 3, issue 8, August 2003 (http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/839?_ga=1.99440281.667982572.1472415321), accessed Dec. 15, 2015).

⁴⁴ *DBWE 6*, 221. (*DBW 6*, 220)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

intellectual or confessional associations. Bonhoeffer interprets the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ more radically as the restoration of humanity in its entirety. In Bonhoeffer's words, "The whole of the past is embraced by the word 'forgiveness,' the whole of the future is preserved in the faithfulness of God."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *DBWE* 6, 147. (*DBW* 6, 137)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

CHAPTER SEVEN: *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON*, CHRIST AS POWER IN POWERLESSNESS

After spending the first sixteen years in freedom articulating the form in which Jesus Christ becomes concrete in one's everyday life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life took a dramatic turn on April 5, 1943, when he was arrested. He spent the remaining two years of his life as a prisoner. This experience forced Bonhoeffer to view the world from a different vantage point, one of powerlessness and weakness that was previously unfamiliar to him. In his prison writings, Bonhoeffer explores the concept of the voluntary weakness of God manifested at the cross of Christ. This perspective allows him to see the persecuted and the feeble from the viewpoint of a God who is deeply involved in the existence of the Suffering Servant.

Introduction to Chapter Seven

Although *Letters and Papers from Prison* is hailed as a classic text of the Christian faith, and rightly so, the total number of the pages that make up Bonhoeffer's "theological letters" (as Bethge called them) that shook the theological world of the twentieth century is merely forty.¹ Even if one includes the extensive editorial footnotes and the two other documents that belong to them, one is looking at a document that is less than fifty pages long.² On the list of Christian classics, one hardly finds another piece of this length with such an enormous influence.

¹ Six years after the death of Bonhoeffer Bethge gained confidence and published Bonhoeffer's letters. Until that year (1951) Bethge kept these letters in his desk, he was not sure if Bonhoeffer's letters had a value for a wider audience. In 1951, Bethge handed a selection of these letters over to the publisher and a short selection of Bonhoeffer's letters were published in German as *Widerstand und Ergebung*, compiled and edited by Bethge himself. When Bethge chose a title for the first edition of Bonhoeffer's prison letters in German, he took it from one of Bonhoeffer's letters to him, where Bonhoeffer wrote: "I've often wondered here where we are to draw the line between necessary resistance [Widerstand] to 'fate' and equally necessary submission [Ergabung]" (Bonhoeffer's letter of February 21, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 303., *DBW* 8, 333). The letters from prison were received with great attention because they spoke to issues that were highly relevant during the 1950s.

² The total number of the letters, together with the shorter essays and poems, and the longer pieces of his novel, drama, and story, that Bonhoeffer wrote from prison between 1943 April and 1945 April are more than two hundred. They comprise two big volumes and part of a third that contains supplementary materials and other letters from the period of 1940 and 1945. (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 7, DBWE 7, Fiction from Tegel Prison*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans Nancy Lukens, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999. And *DBWE 8, Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dekar, Paul Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010; and *DBWE 16, Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-*

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Nothing contributed more to the wide-ranging interest in Bonhoeffer's theology in the second half of the twentieth century than his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (the title of the newer editions). At the same time there is no other publication based on Bonhoeffer's writings that was the subject of so many misinterpretations, debates, and confusions as this one. A careful consideration of Bonhoeffer's own intent, therefore, is particularly crucial for a reliable study of Bonhoeffer prison writings.³

The main assertion of the current chapter about Bonhoeffer's prison writings in 1944 is that he perceives Christ as God's self-revelation through the powerlessness of the cross. While in prison, Bonhoeffer encounters a Christ who engages with individuals, especially those who are in need, face injustice, or experience suffering, in a more concrete and inclusive manner than in any of Bonhoeffer's previous writings.

Chapter Seven begins with a brief overview of the events and circumstances among which these writings were born. Then, the main section of Chapter Seven delineates the three key components of Bonhoeffer's prison theology: the world "come of age," "religionless Christianity," and the "discipline of secret" (or "arcane discipline" as Bonhoeffer also calls it).⁴ At the closing section of the chapter, the Christological emphases identified in Bonhoeffer's prison writings will be viewed from within the perspective of the entirety of Bonhoeffer's journey.

1945, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006). The citations in English are taken from these editions. The ones in German are taken from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 7 (DBW 7), Fragmente aus Tegel*, eds. Renate Bethge and Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994); *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 8 (DBW 8), Widerstand und Ergebung*, eds. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, and Renate Bethge with Ilse Tödt, (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998); *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 16 (DBW 16), Konspiration und Haft 1940-1945*, eds. Jørgen Glenthøj, Ulrich Kabitz and Wolf Krötke (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996).

³ In a 1997 overview of secondary literature on Bonhoeffer, Ernst Feil lamented that although one would think that the rich resources of Bonhoeffer's scholarship of the day would lead contemporary interpreters to mature Bonhoeffer interpretations, too often the opposite is the case. Feil laments that in Germany the one-sided interpretations of Bonhoeffer's letters from prison abide because people are prone to interpret Bonhoeffer's letters "according to the interpreter's own understanding." (Ernst Feil, "Bonhoeffer studies in Germany: A Survey of Recent Literature," *Bonhoeffer Studies*, no.1 (1997), series ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, Philadelphia, PA: International Bonhoeffer Society English Language Section, Bonhoeffer Center), 7). The situation is similar today.

⁴ The three expressions occur in the following three letters from Bonhoeffer's to Bethge written on June 8, 1944 (*DBWE 8*, 426., *DBW 8*, 448.), April 30, 1944 (*DBWE 8*, 363., *DBW 8*, 404), and May 5, 1944 (*DBWE 8*, 373., *DBW 8*, 415).

1. Factors Impacting the Making of the Prison Writings

1. A. Imprisonment, Friendship, and a Move towards a New Sense of Freedom

On April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer was detained at Tegel interrogation prison because he misused the privileges of his membership of the Abwehr. According to a letter of Maria von Wedemeyer, Bonhoeffer's fiancée, Bonhoeffer was charged with "subversion of the armed forces"⁵ and for the first 18 months of Bonhoeffer's imprisonment, the Gestapo did not know anything about Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance movement. Until the end of July 1943, Bonhoeffer was confident that he would be cleared and released soon. He was hoping to be reunited with his family and his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, with whom he was newly engaged.

In this season, and especially during the spring of 1944, while outside the walls of Tegel prison World War II was accelerating, Bonhoeffer's work in his cell gathered momentum. In April 1944 he wrote that "After being unproductive for so long, [I] feel more creative now that spring is coming."⁶ Among all his letters, it was in his letters to Bethge, that Bonhoeffer spelled out his fresh thinking about a new way to interpret the contemporary world. Out of the fifty-one letters that Bonhoeffer addressed to Bethge there are seven that provide the bulk of the material for reconstructing Bonhoeffer's 'new' Christology. The seven letters⁷ together with two crucial essays that belong to them ("Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge" and the "Outline for a Book"),⁸ all written within a period of less

⁵ Maria von Wedemeyer's letter is quoted by John W. de Gruchy in the Editor's Introduction to the English Edition, *DBWE* 8, 12. The correspondence between Bonhoeffer and Maria was first published in German in 1992 and in English in 1994 by Harper Collins (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maria von Wedemeyer, eds. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck, R.A.V., Ulbrich Kabitz and Eberhard Bethge, trans. J. Maxwell Brownjohn, *Love letters from cell 92: 1943-1945*. London: HarperCollins, 1994.) and then slightly revised by Abingdon Press as *Love Letters from Cell 92 Bonhoeffer D. Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, 1943-1945*. Abingdon Press; 1995.), these letters are now included in *DBWE* 16.

⁶ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 22, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 359. (*DBW* 8, 399.)

⁷ The seven letters that have been referred to as 'the theological letters' were written to Bethge on April 30, May 5, May 29, June 8, July 16, July 18, and July 21, 1944. (All published in *DBWE* 8).

⁸ *DBWE* 8, 383-390. (*DBW* 6, 428-436.) and *DBWE* 8, 499-504. (*DBW* 6, 556-561.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

than three and a half months between April 30 and August 3, 1944, make up the primary sources for identifying Bonhoeffer's Christology in the present chapter.⁹

When Bonhoeffer heard that the plot against Hitler on July 20, 1944, failed, he stopped writing letters of intense theological exploration so far characteristic of his prison writings. Knowing that any correspondence could threaten all involved, the content for the remainder of his letters (written to Bethge, Maria and his parents) became restricted to personal reflections and issues relevant to these specific relationships.¹⁰ Bonhoeffer knew that his life had reached a point of no return.

When on September 22, 1944, the Gestapo found files in the Abwehr bunker in Zossen, Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance group was discovered. In April he was transported to the Flossenbürg concentration camp. He was then tried hastily and condemned to death. Early next morning, on April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged.

Interpreting Bonhoeffer's imprisonment is a sensitive issue. What drew Bonhoeffer towards the *Abwehr* initially was his desire to prevent a call into the army. Bonhoeffer was taken to prison because of this reason, for misusing the privileges of his office in *Abwehr*. His participation in the resistance movement, which he joined later, was to keep the relationship with international Church leaders in Europe. Dohnanyi and Oster thought that Bonhoeffer's ecumenical relationships could serve as an effective cover for the real purposes of the plot to assassinate the Führer, giving the Gestapo the impression that Bonhoeffer collected information from the West for the Reichstag. Victoria Barnett, Bonhoeffer scholar and director of church relations at the United States Holocaust Museum, seeks to temper the heroic narrative pertaining to Bonhoeffer, stating that "Bonhoeffer acted more on the margins

⁹ Bonhoeffer sent his letters to Bethge not through the official route, because of their content, but with the help of a friendly guard, who smuggled Bonhoeffer's letters out of the prison and mailed them to Bethge. Bethge sent them home to his wife Renate (Bonhoeffer's niece), who buried them in their garden, where the letters remained until the end of the war.

¹⁰ In these final letters, Bonhoeffer includes a poem entitled "By the Powers of Good" as a Christmas greeting for his family on December 19, 1944, and sends it to Maria (*DBWE* 8, 548-550; *DBW* 8, 607-608). He also writes a short and hasty letter on his mother's birthday on December 28, when he was unexpectedly given permission to write. The very last letter that anyone received from Bonhoeffer in his lifetime was written to his parents three weeks later on January 17, 1945 (*DBWE* 8, 551-553; *DBW* 8, 609-611). In these final letter Bonhoeffer recalls glimpses of the past and (without explicitly saying so) says goodbye to his loved ones.

than at the center of the resistance, such as there was a center.”¹¹ As Marsh puts it, it was Bonhoeffer’s friend, Bethge, who proposed “a more dramatic and central involvement for Bonhoeffer than can be assessed by the evidence.”¹² Bonhoeffer was arrested and executed on account of being involved in actions against the Führer. Although his decision to be involved in the plot was motivated by his sense of responsibility as a Christian, he was neither arrested nor killed on account of any explicitly Christian commitment.

A significant factor in the development of Bonhoeffer’s Christology in his prison writings is that in his cell Bonhoeffer has no academic criteria to meet and no church confession to represent, in a sense he has nothing to lose. At the same time, he has a reader in Bethge who understands him. Personal letters presuppose that their reader knows about the background to which the author is referring, so statements may be left open. Bonhoeffer rests assured that his thoughts would be interpreted according to his thinking, so he does not try to clarify all his thoughts. He writes to Bethge, “One writes some things in a more uninhibited and lively way in a letter than in a book, and in a conversation through letters I often have better ideas than when I’m writing for myself.”¹³ A few months earlier he depicted Bethge as one of “the four people who are the closest to me in my life,”¹⁴ along with his parents and Maria. Then, following a visit of Bethge on December 23, 1943, Bonhoeffer wrote from cell 92:

There is a spiritual hunger for discussion that is much more tormenting than physical hunger, and I can speak in that way and about certain things with no one else but you. Entire complexes of questions are opened and clarified in a few words and hints. Our attunement, our familiarity with each other, achieved by years of not always

¹¹ Cited by Charles Marsh in his *Strange Glory*, 326.

¹² Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 326. See also in Mohler’s interview with Marsh, “Christianity amid the Ruins: A Conversation about Dietrich Bonhoeffer with Professor Charles Marsh”, <https://albertmohler.com/2015/04/13/thinking-in-public-charles-marsh>, accessed December 16, 2015) Andras Csepregi in his lecture given at John Wesley Theological College Budapest on April 9, 2016, makes the same point (Andras Csepregi, “Követés és ellenállás: láthatóan és láthatatlanul” [Following and Resistance: Visible and Invisible], lecture, Bonhoeffer Conference, John Wesley Theological College, Budapest, April 9, 2016.)

¹³ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 8, 1944, to Bethge (*DBWE* 8, 458; *DBW* 8, 513.)

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer’s letter of November 26, 1943, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 199. (*DBW* 8, 209.)

frictionless practice, is something we must never lose. It is an unbelievable advantage and an extraordinary help.¹⁵

Bethge could see issues from perspectives that lied close to Bonhoeffer's own. The affinity of their thinking gave Bonhoeffer a particular courage. As Bonhoeffer wrote:

I feel as though, to a certain degree, you [Eberhard] see things through my eyes just as I see what is here through yours as well. So we are experiencing our different destinies, in some way, vicariously through each other.¹⁶

Bonhoeffer's trust in Bethge's interpretation of Bonhoeffer's thoughts becomes unmistakable from what Bonhoeffer writes following one of their discussions in Tegel prison. "From our conversation the other day, I saw again that no one can interpret my thoughts better than you can. That's always such a satisfying feeling to me."¹⁷ A month later, Bonhoeffer confesses to Bethge: "You are the only one with whom I venture to think aloud like this, hoping it will clarify my thoughts"¹⁸. Without Bethge one could not have Bonhoeffer's prison theology as one has it today; for it was Bethge who enabled Bonhoeffer to express views that Bonhoeffer might not have otherwise expressed.

1. B. Karl Barth's New Theological Affirmation of The World

Bonhoeffer visits Karl Barth in Basel three times during the time of working on his *Ethics*. But it is only in prison where he reads Karl Barth's new volume of his *Church Dogmatics (II/2)*, just published in the previous year (1942).¹⁹ Bonhoeffer is deeply impacted and inspired by seeing how Barth allows for the possibility of God's grace in Christ extending

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer's letter of Christmas Day, 1943, to Renate and Eberhard Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 240. (*DBW* 8, 258.)

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer's letter of January 23, 1944, to Renate and Eberhard Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 265. (*DBW* 8, 288.)

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer's letter of June 5, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 417. (*DBW* 8, 467-68.)

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 8, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 457. (*DBW* 8, 512.)

¹⁹ Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol 2/2. eds Geoffrey. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and J. C. Campbell et al G. T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957.)

to all people. This perspective resonates with Bonhoeffer and opens new possibilities for him to affirm the goodness in all creation. Barth's work motivated Bonhoeffer further towards a bold integration, in which all the concepts and insights that Bonhoeffer had accumulated up to that time (whether from German idealists, medieval thinkers, the Bible, his atheist family members, or friends from the resistance) would come into a whole. The way Barth argues for the irresistible grace of God and affirms that in Christ all of humanity has been redeemed in the past, present, and future, aligns well with the emerging synthesis of Bonhoeffer's mind of a world "coming to age."²⁰

The above-mentioned factors lead Bonhoeffer to a level of freedom he never enjoyed before. Bonhoeffer speaks of a psychological liberation from guilt and self-doubt in his life and he describes this state of his life with the term *hilaritas* as having "optimism about one's own work, boldness, willingness to defy the world and popular opinion, the firm conviction that [he is] doing good for the world with [his] work, even if the world is not pleased with it, and a spirited self-confidence."²¹ At a time unlikely for creative writing, Bonhoeffer experiences a new intellectual and spiritual fertility.

2. The Specific Contributions of the Prison Writings to Bonhoeffer's Christology

In his "Outline for a Book" (which remained an outline) written in August 1944, Bonhoeffer suggests that the Christ-reality that emerges in a newly conceptualized way has three emphases: "the world come of age", "religion" (to be precise its antidote as religiouslessness), and "the discipline of secret."²² The three concepts provide guidance to better understand the Christology that embraces the painful aspects of human life and the description of how Christ manifests himself in darkness and desolation. In the following, Bonhoeffer's prison Christology will be explored along the lines of these three categories.

²⁰ I am indebted to Marsh for calling my attention to the profound impact that Barth's *Church Dogmatics II/2* had on Bonhoeffer's thinking during his theological development in prison (cf. Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 366).

²¹ Bonhoeffer's letter of March 9, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 319. (*DBW* 8, 352.)

²² *DBWE* 8, 499-504. (*DBW* 8, 556-561.)

2. A. The World That Has “Come of Age”

The concept of a world “come of age” (“die mündig gewordene Welt”)²³ is Bonhoeffer’s attempt to explain how the historical processes of human civilization can be seen as expressions of God’s work in preparing people to meet Christ. Through the concept of the world come of age, Bonhoeffer refers to the current state of a maturation process in which people are being freed to act in freedom from all the forces that might distract them from doing the will of God, which is the freedom to love the other and the freedom to follow the example of Jesus.

From 1942 onward Bonhoeffer was increasingly puzzled by the reality of two opposing tendencies in the world. On the one hand, most German Christians, including even the leaders of the Confessing Church, were preoccupied with their individual well-being and did not display any sense of social responsibility toward their neighbors. Bonhoeffer saw this way of relating as childish and immature. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer saw others who did not believe in God, but acted responsibly, Bonhoeffer concluded that people with no religion at all were becoming more mature. They did not talk about or did not even believe in God, yet acted in more Christ-like manners than the Christians Bonhoeffer knew. Bonhoeffer recognized that the name of God sounded inauthentic on the lips of the religious, and the name of God fitted more to the religion-less. Several of them belonged to his family and the resistance movement, such as: his sister, Christine, and her husband, Hans von Dohnanyi, the attorney, who drew Bonhoeffer into the Military Intelligence, and his other sister, Ursula, and her husband Rüdiger Schleicher, also an attorney. Whether consciously, or not, they imitated Jesus’ example of ‘existing for others.’²⁴ Bonhoeffer wanted to theologically understand this

²³ Bonhoeffer’s letter of June 8, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 426. (*DBW* 8, 476.)

²⁴ From the perspective of Hungary, it is important to note that the first memorial (a sculpture) that was erected in Hungary to one of these key people, Hans von Dohnanyi, was dedicated on December 10, 2015, at the John Wesley Theological College in Budapest. The sculpture, made by Laszlo Rajk, that shows Dohnanyi and Bonhoeffer together, was unveiled in the presence of the artist, the members of the Hungarian Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society and guests. What adds to the local significance of this memorial is that Dohnanyi was a Hungarian, a member of a well-known family of musicians, and his son is a famous and active musician in Hungary today.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

puzzling phenomenon, “the question about ‘unconscious Christianity’ that preoccupies me more and more,” as he called it in one of his letters.²⁵

Bonhoeffer had an expectant sense about God’s new work, which he described as, “something genuinely new was coming to be that did not fit with the existing alternatives.”²⁶ Bonhoeffer observed a shift in human consciousness from one generation to the next, which is a shift toward a new willingness to take responsibility.

In Bonhoeffer’s interpretation, the ‘godlessness’ of the world can be a step for people toward becoming free to take responsibility for their action, so that they would do whatever lies in their control for the sake of the other:²⁷

The movement toward human autonomy (by which I mean discovery of the laws by which the world lives and manages its affairs in science, in society and government, in art, ethics, and religion), which began around the thirteenth century (I don’t want to get involved in disputing exactly when), has reached a certain completeness in our age. Human beings have learned to manage all important issues by themselves, without recourse to ‘Working hypothesis: God.’²⁸

For Bonhoeffer, it is the old concept of God that is fading, and this change that takes place in the human mind reflects God’s active involvement in making people ready to act in the world in a way that is in harmony with God’s will. Life without the old concept of God

²⁵ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 27, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 489. (*DBW* 8, 545.)

²⁶ *DBWE* 8, 38. (*DBW* 8, 20.) For instance, as Bonhoeffer’s niece, Renate Bethge tells us, members of Bonhoeffer’s family, like his sister, Christine, and her husband, Hans von Dohnanyi, did not speak much about faith in God. Yet, they tended to be more honest about what they knew and what they did not, and were ready to follow up on the consequences of what they knew more than some of the religious people for whom knowledge and action were often not so closely related (cf. Renate Bethge Afterword to the German Edition, *DBWE* 7, 202-205., *DBW* 7, 213-216 and *DBWE* 223-227., *DBW* 7, 235-240).

²⁷ Bonhoeffer takes Kantian and Schleiermacherian conceptions of human autonomy and employs the truth embedded in them in the service of the Gospel. (Bethge refers to the influence of Dilthey’s philosophy, who took the idea of “being of age” from Kant’s *What is Enlightenment*, cf. Bethge, *Biography*, 867, endnote 196). Bonhoeffer both uses and redefines Kant’s concepts of maturity. Bonhoeffer sees maturity as a freedom that allows people to submit to God voluntarily and fully: the new self that Bonhoeffer envisions assumes responsibility. Bonhoeffer speaks of human autonomy as the freedom of the individual from the forces that would hold him or her back from functioning in an obedient relationship with God.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer’s letter of June 8, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 425-6. (*DBW* 8, 476.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

will draw people toward maturity; when people are freed from their concept of a non-involved (and in that sense ‘transcendent’) God, they can become who they were meant to be before God: responsible agents: “God himself compels us to recognize [...] that we must live as those who manage their lives without God.” After dealing with the false concept of God, Bonhoeffer continues: “The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually.”²⁹

God invites people into the godlessness of the world as to a school of love, in which people learn to seek the benefit of the other without receiving anything in return. People learn what unconditional love is, asserts Bonhoeffer, when they are deprived of the privileges that often go with loving others. When their love is reciprocated it is easy to be immersed in love, but in the privation of affirmation from God, acting in love by faith and not by sight requires activity. Bonhoeffer claims that false dependence on God can be a hindrance to proper dependence on God. Proper dependence is that in the absence of any reward, compensation, or even the felt presence of the other people one is able to act responsibly. In the absence of the positive experience of God, or to use Bonhoeffer’s statement, “by eliminating a false notion of God”, people become free to see the God of the Bible.³⁰ This what the world come of age is, God’s way of opening people toward voluntary self-discipline and self-sacrifice.³¹ The apparent godlessness of the world is a training ground for growing in the genuineness of love. People learn to extend God’s love the most when they live as if God would not exist.³²

²⁹ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 16, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 478-9. (*DBW 8*, 533-34.) If one takes ideas or terms from Bonhoeffer’s letters like the world come of age, the godless-ness of the world, or the end of religion, and treats them without reference to Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical intent, one may easily end up using them as supports for atheism. Yet, the concept of the world’s “coming of age” is an eschatological proclamation regarding the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. The changes toward greater responsibility are steps toward accepting God’s rule. Bonhoeffer welcomes the loss of the assurances and power structures of religion as a gain, but this loss does not have a value in and of itself, it is valuable only in the fact that when false certainties are removed, people are freed to live and act responsibly toward their neighbors. Bonhoeffer invites the reader to view the godless world from the perspective of “the claim of Jesus Christ on the world that has come of age” (Bonhoeffer’s letter of June 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 451., *DBW 8*, 504).

³⁰ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 16, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 480. (*DBW 8*, 534-35.)

³¹ As Bonhoeffer explains: “I don’t mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection” (Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 21, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 485., *DBW 8*, 541).

³² It is helpful to call attention to two other renderings of the same conviction concerning spiritual growth from two distinct phases of church history. First, in Saint John of the Cross, God in the ‘dark night’ teaches the soul to love God with pure love, even in the absence of any consolation. John of the Cross did not directly influence

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer suggests that the church should learn from God's work in the world come of age. Instead of declaring the world come of age as condemned, the church should stop using the concept of 'God' as a form of self-justification and stop blaming others for their failures and using the name of God as an alibi for mistakes, sins, and inaction.³³ Christians and non-Christians alike should stop escaping from the raw realities of life. Bonhoeffer maintains that humanity's real need is to grow up. In Bonhoeffer's words, "After all, the most important question for the future is how we are going to find a basis for living together with other people, what spiritual realities and rules we honor as the foundations for a meaningful human life"³⁴. God enables the world to encounter Christ. In Bonhoeffer's words, "Jesus claims all of human life, in all its manifestations, for himself and for the kingdom of God. [...] Let me just quickly state once again, the issue that concerns me: the claim of Jesus Christ on the world that has come of age."³⁵

In summary, in Bonhoeffer's interpretation, the world come of age in which people live as if there was no God is not necessarily bad. Just the opposite, it is God's gift. "The world come of age is more god-less and perhaps just because of that closer to God than the

Bonhoeffer. However, Thomas á Kempis, whom Bonhoeffer often read and highly respected, was building on the same ascetic theology that John of the Cross was. Á Kempis frequently refers to how true love, bereft of any comfort or encouragement from God, grows to be pure. The second rendition that carries similar emphases is from twentieth century postmodern theology. Stanley J. Grenz, a representative of postmodern theology, interprets the loss of rationalistic and dogmatic certitudes of their generation as God's work through which God enables people to relate to God in intimate ways. The idea is that God uses deconstruction in his work of construction: He withholds what the human senses need so that people would experience that they can endure without them and love God without conditions. The common denominator in John of the Cross, the postmodern theologians (like Stanley J. Grenz) and Bonhoeffer, is that (i) they each place God at the center of the maturation process, (ii) they each point out that when false dependencies are taken away new doors are open in relating to both God and people, and (iii) these lessons are the deeds of God. When God causes people to lose their security and become bereft of their familiarity with certain experiences and concepts in life, they are deeply shaken. Yet, it is God who makes them free to live without these dependencies so that they could embrace God in a new way. In each of these experiences God opens new doors through losses and these losses become his invitations into a fresh way of relating. (By noting this similarity among these three different historic sources, the current researcher does not want to minimize their theological differences. That would be unfair. His intent is to read Bonhoeffer in the context of similar voices from both before and after Bonhoeffer.)

³³ Bonhoeffer finds consolation in the promise of the future restoration of all creatures in Ephesians 1:10. He writes to Bethge, "The doctrine originating in Eph. 1:10 of the restoration of all things, [the idea of] *recapitulatio* [in] Irenaeus, is a magnificent and consummately consoling thought" (Bonhoeffer's letter of December 19, 1943, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 230, *DBW* 8, 246). For Bonhoeffer, the hope lies in the all-inclusive potency of Christ.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer's letter of June 2, 1944, to Hans-Walter Schleicher, *DBWE* 8, 409. (*DBW* 8, 548.)

³⁵ Bonhoeffer's letter of June 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 451. (*DBW* 8, 504.)

world not yet come of age.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer views the development of the world from the perspective of its increasing prospects for maturity. For Bonhoeffer, the godlessness of the world that has come of age prepares people for the coming of the Lord, who calls them for mature living.

2. B. Religion and its Antidote as Religionless Christianity

In Bonhoeffer’s prison writings religion is an antidote to all that growth toward maturity would require. Bonhoeffer identifies religion as a desire to gain and keep power at all costs and for its own sake.³⁷ At the time of his detainment Bonhoeffer’s concern about religion is that it is a means of self-preservation. Religion is an attempt to attain or preserve power for personal gain, and to this end it covers up or transfigures the godlessness of human existence. Even when religion disguises human efforts for self-justification under the name of piety, for religion God is just a cover for self-interest. Religion is “escapism in the guise of piety.”³⁸

Bonhoeffer sees religion as a misuse of power³⁹ and argues that the survival of religion depends on holding people back from growing up and regarding themselves as free agents.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 482. (*DBW 8*, 537.) Bethge adds: “that humanity and the world’s coming of age are inescapably interconnected” (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 869).

³⁷ Bonhoeffer’s negative view of religion is partly an echo of the criticism of pietism. Pietism often described religion as a force that leads people to compromises and contributes to turning living faith into anthropocentric institutions. Bonhoeffer reflects this bias: “I will definitely not come out of here as a homo religious! Quite the opposite: my suspicion and fear of ‘religiosity’ have become greater than ever” (his letter of November 21, 1943, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 189., *DBW 8*, 197). It is important to realize, however, that Bonhoeffer’s apprehension goes beyond this criticism of pietism; he defines the very existence of religion as a struggle for power.

³⁸ Bonhoeffer’s letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 367., *DBW 8*, 408. Cf. Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge (*DBWE 8*, 480., *DBW 8*, 535).

³⁹ It is from the vantage point of the use (and misuse) of power that Bonhoeffer treats the concept of transcendence with suspicion and speaks of transcendence as an affirmation of an unbridgeable gap between this world and God with an intent that religion could capitalize on this gap. Bonhoeffer argues that since in the traditional view transcendence cannot share its existence with the world, religion offers itself as a mediator between God and man. Thus, transcendence becomes the justification for much of the abuses of religion. Bonhoeffer redefines the concept of transcendence as interpersonal movement from one person to another. (The idea was already present in his *Sanctorum Communio* as social transcendence (cf. *DBWE 1*, 51-54., *DBW 1*, 31-33). Bethge also writes about this in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 890.) In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer writes that “Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God’s transcendence.” (Bonhoeffer’s letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 367.) In his attempt to redefine transcendence as a movement that leads human beings to move toward (and not away from) the other person, Bonhoeffer transfers transcendence from a

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer asserts that the leaders of religion ensure that those who see themselves as weak and inferior continue to see themselves as such. It is in the greatest interest of religious institutions to keep their members immature.⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer describes the activities of religious leaders as deeds that appear to help people, but they major on the weaknesses of people. They focus on the sins of people to make them feel dependent on religion.⁴¹ According to Bonhoeffer, much that goes on under the name of Christian apologetics falls in the category of “religious blackmail” (“religiöse Erpressungen”).⁴²

In his letter on June 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer describes “religious blackmail” in the following way:

[I]f people cannot successfully be made to regard their happiness as disastrous, their health as sickness, and their vitality as an object of despair, then the theologians are at their wits' end. The person being dealt with either is a stubborn sinner of the most malignant kind or is living an existence of bourgeois self-satisfaction, and the one is as far from salvation as the other. You see, this is the attitude that I am contending

metaphysical category to a social category: “genuine transcendence ... is a new life in ‘being for others,’ through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbor within reach in any given situation. God in human form!” (*DBWE* 8, 501., *DBW* 8, 558.)

Yet, when Bonhoeffer transposes the concept of transcendence from the realm of the divine and relocates it within the realm of the human as an aspect of human relationality, Bonhoeffer overstates his case and ends up in a theologically one-sided position. According to the Bible the idea of transcendence has to do with the holiness of God that is beyond human existence and comprehension. God is characterized in the Bible as Almighty, Eternal, Creator, Unfathomable, and these are transcendent qualities. These attributes of God can be and were misused by theologians and priests as weapons in their struggle for power. But this danger does not negate the fact that God’s existence is beyond the human. In fact, the transcendence of God is indispensable to human life. When the New Testament describes God as “the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1Tim 6, 15-16, *NIV*), it describes the ultimate foundation of Christian faith, love, and hope. The fact that Bonhoeffer does not address the *necessary* link between the divine attributes of God, which are referred to as his transcendence, and human life in the world, is a weakness in Bonhoeffer’s approach to transcendence.

⁴⁰ The social criticism of Karl Marx and his revolution theory was certainly known for Bonhoeffer (but a direct relationship between the ideology of Marx and Bonhoeffer is not documented).

⁴¹ Bethge calls this need driven definition of the church as “spiritual pharmacy” (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 876).

⁴² The term “religious blackmail” first occurs in Bonhoeffer’s letter of January 29-30, 1944, to Bethge (*DBWE* 8, 276 or *DBW* 8, 301.) Then again in Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 8, 1944, to Bethge (*DBWE* 8, 455).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

against. When Jesus made sinners whole, they were real sinners, but Jesus didn't begin by making every person into a sinner. He called people from their sin, not into it.⁴³

Thus, Bonhoeffer is convinced that religion pulls people down, into sin, to then offers itself as an indispensable help for lifting them up. Bonhoeffer uses a very strong expression and suggests that what religious leaders commit is nothing less than “religious rape” against the “unfortunates in their hour of weakness.”⁴⁴ This is violence (whether intellectual violence, like apologetics can be,⁴⁵ or physical violence, like military war is) which aims at stopping people from attaining power.⁴⁶

In Bonhoeffer's new theology it is this religious way of living that is ending. The power-centered self-identification of the church will have to die, and the church needs a radical reorientation toward the needs of the other. In Bonhoeffer's words: “Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. The words we used before must lose their power, be silenced [...]”⁴⁷

The concept of ‘religionless’ Christianity is Bonhoeffer's attempt to articulate a way of life that places the following of the Servant of the Lord at the center, which is dependent on the relinquishing of personal rights and privileges. The voluntary weakness of Christ that Bonhoeffer promotes in the prison writings is antithetical to the weakness that religion imposes on people. A post-religious Christianity will replace traditional religious categories of the faith. Religion is “historically conditioned,” and the justifications of its existence are

⁴³ Bonhoeffer's letter of June 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 450. (*DBW* 8, 504.)

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 363. (*DBW* 8, 404.)

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer considers Christian apologetics an “attack [...] on the world's coming of age” (Bonhoeffer's letter of June 8, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 427., *DBW* 8, 478.) See also his letter of June 30, 1944 (*DBWE* 8, 450-451., *DBW* 8, 503-504.)

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer adds that although, there is “a sort of evil satisfaction in knowing that every person has failings and weak spots,” the proclamation whereby someone capitalizes on the defenselessness of the weak and goes around spying on their sins, is not legitimate. (Bonhoeffer's letter of July 8, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 455., *DBW* 8, 510). Showing people worse than they are is the overpowering of the weak, which is not consistent with the Gospel.

⁴⁷ “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, May 1944”, *DBWE* 8, 389. (*DBW* 8, 435.)

outdated.⁴⁸ The cure that the church needs cannot be painless. Conventional perceptions and structures need to be left behind. To restore the essence of the faith, Jesus Christ, as the servant, needs to be in the middle of the church.

This is where Bonhoeffer's focus on the kenotic Christ becomes significant. The church that Bonhoeffer envisions in a world coming of age is one that represents Christ, who focuses on the needs of others in a selfless way, as opposed to the self-focused attitude of religion. Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation is formed by the humble and serving Christ. Bonhoeffer asks:

How do we talk about God – without religion, that is, without temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, the inner life, and so on? How do we speak of (or perhaps we can no longer even 'speak' the way we used to) in a 'worldly' way about 'God.'"⁴⁹

Thus, Bonhoeffer seeks to deconstruct the dysfunctional nature of religion to construct or reconstruct a functionality that can fulfill the Gospel mandate. In his prison writings, the central question of Christology for Bonhoeffer is: Who is the Christ who came to serve, not to be served, today? Bonhoeffer's religionless interpretation is an attempt to give an answer in his day.

2. C. The "Discipline of Secret"

The third aspect of Bonhoeffer's prison theology that has implications to his Christology has to do with the cultivation of one's growth in the serving mentality of Christ.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge. *DBWE 8*, 363. (*DBW 8*, 403.)

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE 8*, 364. (*DBW 8*, 405.) In the same letter Bonhoeffer also asked: "If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed – and this garb has looked very different in different ages – what then is religionless Christianity?" (*DBWE 8*, 363., *DBW 8*, 404). It was first Schleiermacher and then Adolf von Harnack, Bonhoeffer's respected professor, who said that two different layers can be distinguished as "husk and kernel," or form and content (cf. *DBWE 8*, 363, footnote 14).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

The term that Bonhoeffer uses to summarize the attitudes and actions that are suitable to the practices that help him to be like the Servant of the Lord is the “discipline of secret.”⁵⁰

In Bonhoeffer’s usage, the ‘discipline of secret’ or the ‘arcane discipline,’ refers to a way of affirming reality that is in harmony with the hiddenness of the source of life, like worship, liturgy, sacraments, prayer, silence, and reticence. Bonhoeffer maintains that the social effectiveness of the Christian faith demands the cultivation of attitudes and practices that are not public. The cultivation of hiddenness belongs to a genuine care for the world. In his “Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge” (Eberhard and Renate Bethge’s son), Bonhoeffer describes the connection between the public and the hidden with these words: “we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings.”⁵¹ In Bethge’s words, for Bonhoeffer: “worldliness without arcane discipline is nothing more than a boulevard.”⁵²

Bonhoeffer cautions against the tendencies that can be found in the personal devotion of Pietism that suggests that closeness to God is defined by a particular consciousness alone. As seen in his earlier works, for Bonhoeffer Christianity is never a private matter for the individual, God is not a matter of inwardness alone. In his *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer argued for the visibility of the Christian witness, in his *Life Together*, he stood up for the corporate nature of these practices, and in his *Ethics*, he insisted that the presence of Christ is tangible for those around. In his prison writings, Bonhoeffer continues with the same emphasis that

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer first used *arcanum* in reference to the practice of confession in his 1932 lectures on “The Nature of the Church” (*DBWE 11, 2, 269-332.*, *DBW 11, 239-303*). In the prison letters, the term *arcanum* occurs only twice, but the concept of an intentionality regarding the cultivation of the hidden source of the Christian faith is not as marginal for Bonhoeffer as the infrequency of the term might suggest. In fact, it is central to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of practicing a ‘non-religious’ Christian faith. The expression, the ‘disciple of secret’ or ‘arcane discipline,’ originates in the early Christians, who held intimate celebrations of the mystery of Christ, where only the baptized were allowed to participate. The expression ‘arcane discipline’ originates in 2 Cor 12:4 where one reads about the “mysterious” or “hidden” things (*arretos* in Greek, *arcanum* in Latin), which the Vulgate Bible translates as “things that are not to be told.” In this text the Apostle Paul is describing a deeply personal and mysterious encounter with God. Communities of the early church took this as an ideal and assumed “a practice of excluding the uninitiated, unbaptized catechumens, from the second part of the liturgy in which the communion was celebrated and the Nicene Creed sung” (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 881). The phrase was first used by the liberal theologians to whom Bonhoeffer felt committed through his education, but Bonhoeffer used it within the context of one’s rootedness in Christ (cf. *DBWE 8, 365*, editorial footnote 19).

⁵¹ “Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge,” May 1944, *DBWE 8, 389*. (*DBW 8, 435*.)

⁵² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 884.

one must not confuse hiddenness with privatism.⁵³ God can only be identified within the dynamics of inter-personality. Nevertheless, hiddenness in the Christian life is a key ingredient of and a prerequisite for acknowledging the suffering Christ.

There are two areas where Bonhoeffer practices hiddenness in his prison years: the first is in his personal devotion to God (Bonhoeffer's personal 'liturgy') and the second is his intentionality in using words (primarily in writing). First, Bonhoeffer observes the church calendar and for him the daily meditations on the life of Christ and the Psalms give a mental structure to identify with Christ. Concerning the daily rhythms that Bonhoeffer started in Finkenwalde and continued in prison he says, "We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus' life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfills."⁵⁴

Secondly, Bonhoeffer contended that one's speech belongs to the discipline of secret. Bonhoeffer's striving for brevity is partly a continuation of his family habit⁵⁵ and partly directed by theological considerations. Bonhoeffer wants to avoid the vain use of words, including the name of God.⁵⁶ Knowing God, for Bonhoeffer, requires certain reticence and

⁵³ Bethge raises the question whether Bonhoeffer's emphasis on a hidden practice, which not everyone in the community will follow, is in fact a self-contradiction, and whether Bonhoeffer in this case is proceeding towards the totality of reconciliation. Bethge concludes that Bonhoeffer's emphasis on these practices does make sense. Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 883-884.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer's undated letter to Bethge, dated by Bethge as August 21, 1944, *DBWE* 8, 515. (*DBW* 8, 572-73.)

⁵⁵ Renate Bethge, Bonhoeffer's niece, calls attention to the virtue of reticence being ingrained in the Bonhoeffer family. Being a member of the middle class meant the practice of being succinct. In such social milieu a certain extent of covering seemed normal. Cf. Renate Bethge, in her afterword to *Fiction from Tegel Prison*, *DBWE* 7, 202-205., *DBW* 7, 213-216. Another factor should be mentioned regarding what pointed Bonhoeffer to leave certain things unsaid, namely the ugliness of sin. To Bonhoeffer's mind the *status corruptionis* of the world also demands a certain covering. Bonhoeffer argued that the nature of fallen humanity demands covering; since after the fall, "there is a need for covering and secrecy" (Bonhoeffer's letter of the Second Sunday of Advent, 1943, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 215. *DBW* 8, 228). For Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the need to "cloak and conceal things" see also Renate Bethge's comment in the Editor's Afterword to the German Edition (*DBWE* 7, 203., *DBW* 7, 214).

⁵⁶ "Only when one knows that the name of God may not be uttered may one sometimes speak the name of Jesus Christ. [...] Whoever wishes to be and perceive things too quickly and too directly in New Testament ways is to my mind no Christian. [...] One can and must not speak the ultimate word prior to the penultimate" (*DBWE* 8, 213. *DBW* 8, 226). Bonhoeffer is weary of the thoughtless use of clichés and hollowed expressions that attempt to say too much, because they weaken the proclamation. He also wants to interpret faith from the vantage point of the world, by using a terminology comprehensible to the world, not a technical theological jargon, to describe aspects of God's work. This is where Stanley Hauerwas stands so close to Bonhoeffer in doing theology. (Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child*, MI, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.)

silence. Bonhoeffer is aware of the danger of not leaving room for the unexplainable aspects of reality, the approach which produces inauthentic interpretations⁵⁷, he wants to use words to foster participation in God's work. Christian proclamation in Bonhoeffer's Christology requires a space that respects the unknown. Leaving certain matters unspoken, argues Bonhoeffer, belongs to not only the essential task of communication but is integral to genuine interpretation which retains the incomprehensibility of the subjects discussed. With the words of Clifford Green one must intentionally leave "certain things unspoken, out of respect for personal boundaries and regard for the complexities of truth."⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer sees brevity and modesty as protective measures against the profanation of the Christian mystery: "telling the truth (about which I wrote an essay) means, in my opinion, to say how something is in reality, that is with respect for mystery, for trust, for hiddenness."⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer proposes the practice of reticence and modesty as practices that fit to who Christ is as Mystery.

⁵⁷There is similarity between how Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard, whom Bonhoeffer respected and read, used language. Their contexts were different, but they both spoke about the basic tenets of the Christian faith in indirect ways.

⁵⁸ Green, in his introduction to *Fiction from Tegel Prison*, *DBWE* 7, 18.

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer's letter on the Second Sunday in Advent, 1943, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 216. (*DBW* 8, 229.) Clifford Green, the editor of the English edition of *Fiction from Tegel Prison* lists expressions that are often repeated in Bonhoeffer's prison writings like the following: silence, reserve, reticence, refraining from speaking, mask, and secret (cf. "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition", *DBWE* 7, 18). With regards to the respectful attitude to modestly not reveal everything, Bonhoeffer refers to Proverbs 25:2 ("It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of the kings is to search things out"). In the same letter he also cites Eccl. 5:2-3. (Bonhoeffer's letter of August 24, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 521., *DBW* 8, 580). Bonhoeffer also writes: "That means an 'arcane discipline' must be reestablished, through which the mysteries of the Christian faith are sheltered against profanation" (Bonhoeffer's letter of May 5, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 373., *DBW* 8, 415). To give further examples from Bonhoeffer's other writings from prison, one of the characters of Bonhoeffer's *Drama* (*DBWE* 7, 25-70, *DBW* 7, 21-71), Renate (who resembles Bonhoeffer's fiancée, Maria in real life) expresses the following about the dynamics of what takes place when one remains silent before the other: "One must give the other time. Openness is something wonderful, but being open for the other, even for the other's silence, is more important. Trust is not based on knowing everything about the other person, but on one believing in the other" (*DBWE* 7, 48., *DBW* 7, 46). In the same drama Renate and Ulrich (whose character is close to Bethge's in real life) speak about the hidden dimension of life. Ulrich, Christoph's friend, reads a section of Christoph's work, and the character of Christoph stands for Bonhoeffer himself: "I speak to you to protect from abuse the great words that have been given to humanity. They do not belong on the lips of the masses or in newspaper headlines, but in the hearts of the few who guard and protect them with their lives. [...] Those who guard genuine values with their lives [...] seek genuine values in the silence of the sanctuary which only the humble and the faithful may approach. [...] Let us honor the highest values by silence for a while. Let us learn to do what is right without words for a while. Then, around the quiet sanctuary of the highest values a new nobility will form in our time" (*DBWE* 7, 50., *DBW* 7, 48-49).

2. D. The Christological Synthesis of the Prison Writings: Power in Weakness

The previous examination of the contributions of Bonhoeffer's prison writings to his understanding of Christ has pointed to three main emphases in Bonhoeffer's theological development. Firstly, to Bonhoeffer's assessment of the world, which he perceives as having reached a state of maturity thereby providing a providential opportunity for people to grow. Secondly, to Bonhoeffer's critique of religion for hindering the process of personal maturation, juxtaposed with Bonhoeffer's proposition of a religionless interpretation of Christianity centered solely on Christ. Thirdly, to Bonhoeffer's emphasis on attitudes and practices that cultivate a life in Christ, enabling one to live in a manner that becomes an embodiment of Christ's own life of servanthood. In Bonhoeffer's prison theology, these three emphases converge in the self-revelation of God in and through the powerlessness of Christ of the cross.

In Bonhoeffer's prison letters, the central assumption is that when Christ accepts suffering during his passion and even at the cross, he shows how God engages in the lives of the afflicted and all those who suffer injustice in the most caring and powerful way. In the last two years of his life, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that God's self-revelation in Christ is found most fully in the condescension of the kenotic Christ.

One of Bonhoeffer's poems entitled *Christians and Heathens* articulates how God reveals himself through Christ in his suffering on the Cross and how the movement of "being pulled into the messianic suffering of God in Jesus Christ"⁶⁰ (a most unlikely place of finding the life of the living God) becomes a source of life energy for those who stand by God even in his weakness. Bonhoeffer's three-stanza poem begins with indicating that people tend to go to God because of their need:

People go to God in their need, plead for help,
ask for happiness and bread,

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 481. (*DBW* 8, 536.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

for deliverance from sickness, guilt, and death.

So do we all, all of us, Christian and heathen.⁶¹

The first lines of Bonhoeffer's poem state what most people know by experience: people turn to God when they are in trouble. In this respect Christians and non-Christians are alike.

As the poem progresses, the attention is directed toward people who turn to God not only when they are in need but who choose to stand by God when their needs are not met, and even when they find God weak, in his need, as he is in Christ, thereby allowing themselves to be pulled into God's suffering:

People go to God in his need,
find him poor, abused, homeless, without bread,
see him entangled in sin, weakness, and death.
Christians stand by God in his suffering.⁶²

It is at the point of encountering the suffering God and in the identification with Christ in his sufferings where the Christian is set apart. In a letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer interprets this poem by saying that "'Christians stand by God in God's own pain' – that distinguishes Christians from heathens."⁶³ It is between self-centeredness and other-centeredness where the dividing line is found.

Bonhoeffer's poem concludes with the promise that when people go to God and stand by him in his weakness and death, God comes to them. He feeds and forgives them:

God goes to all people in their need,
satisfies them body and soul with his bread,

⁶¹ *DBWE* 8, 460-61. (*DBW* 8, 515-16.)

⁶² *DBWE* 8, 460-61. (*DBW* 8, 515-16.)

⁶³ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 480. (*DBW* 8, 535.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

dies for Christian and heathen on the cross of death,
and forgives them both.⁶⁴

For Bonhoeffer in his imprisonment, the point of access to encounter God is the identification with the suffering Christ and through him with God in his weakness. He expresses this conviction in a letter to Bethge written in the same period:

God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us. Matt 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! This is the crucial distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.⁶⁵

Looking at the world through the suffering of Christ reinterprets the experiences of all who suffer. There is an aspect of the knowledge of reality that can only be gained in suffering, a depth of knowing that skips the attention of those who neglect the suffering servant.⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer's emphasis on discovering Christ from the perspectives of the despised of this world is both an invitation for people to abandon their privileges and obsessions for power (all that religion stands for) in order to become one with the weak, and a hope for those who experience hardship that it may be a participation in the life of Christ.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *DBWE* 8, 460-61. (*DBW* 8, 515-16.)

⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 16, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 479. (*DBW* 8, 534.)

⁶⁶ In this respect, Bonhoeffer in his exegesis on the Beatitudes in *Discipleship* has already explored that people who are poor, grieving, and persecuted are more prone to understand Jesus than the rich and the healthy (cf. *DBWE* 4, 77., *DBW* 4, 69. and *DBWE* 4, 107., *DBW* 4, 106-107).

⁶⁷ With the words of the Apostle Paul, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord'." (1Cor 2: 27-31, *NIV*)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

The powerless of this world can find meaning in discovering the suffering of Christ within their own suffering, but the powerless Christ as the chief point of the revelation of God's glory is more than comfort for the afflicted. God is glorified in Jesus when he is "lifted up from the earth" (John 12: 32, cf. 12-23 & 13: 31-32. *NIV*).

The cross calls all Christians to identify themselves with the suffering Christ and his voluntary weakness. In the same way as Christ lived out of his powerlessness when facing the world, Christians are to imitate him by taking up the sufferings of the world with Christ. Turning to the incident in Gethsemane, where Christ asks his disciples to stand by him in the hours of his agonies Bonhoeffer writes, "[t]his is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities – then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane."⁶⁸

Bonhoeffer (like Irenaeus) interprets the cross as an expression of God's love in the incarnation of Christ to bear the burdens of humanity and not as a divine afterthought to overcome sin. For Bonhoeffer, the essential meaning of the cross cannot be fully identified as a correction to what went wrong in the Garden of Eden. The cross represents the unbroken continuity of God's loving care for the world manifest in the incarnation, and "sharing in God's suffering in the worldly life"⁶⁹ is part of this love.

3. The Christology of the Prison Writings Within the Entirety of Bonhoeffer's Narrative

When Bonhoeffer's prison writings are considered within the broader scope of his theological legacy and from the perspective of his overall narrative, what stands out foremost is Bonhoeffer's double emphasis on power and powerlessness, particularly as it pertains to Christ.

⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 21, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 486. (*DBW* 8, 542.)

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 480. (*DBW* 8, 535.)

For Bonhoeffer, the power and the powerlessness of Christ belong together, these two aspects of Christ's portraiture are inseparable in his Christology. The powerlessness of Christ is a God-chosen means to reveal God's power and presence to all who suffer. The personhood of Christ unifies power and powerlessness. There is no dichotomy between Bonhoeffer's earlier writings including his *Ethics* and his prison writings, even though it is through the free and responsible action of Christ that the power of God is emphasized in *Ethics*, and it is through the voluntary powerlessness of Christ that God's power is revealed in the prison letters. They can only be understood together, God "gains ground and power in the world by being powerless" in Christ.⁷⁰ The powerlessness of Christ does *not* overwrite the emphasis on his power. The God of power in Christ reveals himself as powerful even on the cross. It is the kenotic Christ, who points to the fullness of God by revealing God in total condescension that is at the heart of Bonhoeffer's Christology during his imprisonment.⁷¹

Just as in Bonhoeffer's earlier writings, Christ in his prison writings is shown as "being there for others,"⁷² taking responsibility for the benefit of people and bearing it to the end. Christ's entire life is an obedient action to his Father in Heaven. Bonhoeffer's central assumption is that when Christ accepts suffering during his passion and even at the cross and identifies himself with the afflicted, he shows people how power is to be used and how people can find meaning even when they are treated harshly or suffer injustice.⁷³ In the prison

⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer's letter of July 16, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 480. (*DBW* 8, 535.)

⁷¹ There are parallels between Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the weakness of God and the similar emphasis of some contemporary authors approximately sixty years after the prison letters. John D. Caputo, for instance, considers the helpless body of Jesus on the cross as the greatest symbol of God's powerless power in a way that is similar to Bonhoeffer (cf. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 41-54). Caputo echoes Luther's theology of the cross, just as Bonhoeffer does. The "weak theology" that Caputo sees as an interpretation of reality through the event of the cross is, as he puts it, not a "sorry spinelessness," but a testimony to God as a future event of justice (Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 301). As Peter Goodwin Heltzel summarizes Caputo's line of argumentation, "Caputo's primary thesis is that God is an indeterminate weak force that nevertheless still lays an unconditional claim on the lives of all humans. [...] The weakness of God is an expression of God's vulnerable love and faithful justice in contrast to an almighty warrior who massacres all enemies" (Peter Goodwin Heltzel, "The Weakness of God," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 7.2, Spring/Summer 2006, 96-97). Different as Bonhoeffer and Caputo are in their understanding of revelation, their Christological basis allows them to make exactly the same point, concerning the affirmation of weakness as a central posture in approaching the subject of one's interpretation from a Christian perspective.

⁷² *DBWE* 8, 501. (*DBW* 8, 558.)

⁷³ It would be a misinterpretation of Bonhoeffer to set up an artificial polemic between Christ as a figure of power and Christ as a figure of powerlessness. One has the impression that Lisa E. Dahill falls in this trap. She objects that a mentality that lifts the value of powerlessness can be psychologically harmful, especially for those who face abuse and violence, and may lead to self-victimization (Lisa E. Dahill, "Reading from the Underside of

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

writings, Christ as “the human being for others” (“der Mensch für andere”), is a powerful figure.⁷⁴ Only one who can face the opposing forces of the world with commitment can stand by God in God’s voluntary weakness.⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer’s stress on taking responsibility for one’s action presupposes a Christ who is full of power:

Jesus’s ‘being-for-others’ is the experience of transcendence! Only through this liberation from self, through this ‘being-for-others’ into death, do omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence come into being. Faith is the participating in this being of Jesus.⁷⁶

In certain cases, Christ manifests himself to people as the powerful Christ who brings about change for the benefit of the other, and calls people to follow him in responsible action.

Selfhood: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 1, no. 2, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Fall 2001, 186-203.) Her concern is certainly valid, but the question is if her concern really applies to Bonhoeffer. I think Dahill fails to recognize that not only Bonhoeffer by temperament was far from being a person who was becoming the victim of other people, theologically the difficulty that Dahill addresses originates not in Bonhoeffer but in the Pauline concept of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul speaks about the seeming self-contradiction that exists between the power of God and the powerlessness of Christ at the cross, and that it is the self-chosen weakness of God that shows the power of his love. Although, for people who want to see the demonstration of power, the cross is a scandal in this world (an “offense” in Gal 5: 11, *NIV*); Paul argues that the form in which God chose to share his love with people was the cross. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1Cor 1: 18). Or later: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1Cor 1: 25).

⁷⁴ “Outline for a Book,” *DBWE* 8, 501. (*DBW* 8, 559.) For Bonhoeffer, the cross the is ‘place’ where God expresses his glory the most (cf. John 12: 23). The divine power is revealed in the powerlessness of Christ and when people follow Christ in his solidarity with the powerless, they carry the same power in them. It is in his awareness of having a powerful will that Bonhoeffer wrote his account for Christmas 1942 (nearly four months before his imprisonment), in which looking back at the previous ten years he gives the following prognosis: “Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call. Where are these responsible ones?” (“An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943”, *DBWE* 8, 40., *DBW* 8, 23).

⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer contends that Christ, as Master and Lord, liberates people from being self-occupied; he makes people other-oriented and empowers them to act responsibly. In one of his letters, he writes: “One must become clear about what one wants, one must question whether one can take responsibility for it, and then with unconquerable confidence one must do it. Then and only then can one also bear the consequences.” (Bonhoeffer’s letter of December 22, 1943, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 236., *DBW* 8, 253). Although this is a reference to the military elite who were hesitant to depose Hitler, the statement has a broader application for responsible action as well. In another letter to Bethge Bonhoeffer writes: “You see, there are always reasons not to do something; the question is whether you do it in spite of them. If you only want to do things that have *every* reason in their favor, you’ll end up never doing anything [...]. Yet every real deed is one that no one else can do, only you yourself.” (Bonhoeffer’s letter of June 8, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 425).

⁷⁶ *DBWE* 8, 501. (*DBW* 8, 558.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

In other cases, he comes to people as the powerless Christ, who calls them to follow him by taking up the burdens of others and acting like the servant of God in Isaiah 53, who “as a sheep before her shearers is silent” (Isa 53: 7, *NIV*). In Bonhoeffer’s prison writings, for those who are free to serve as agents of change in the world, Christ manifests himself as ‘the powerful man’ who calls them to exert power, as Christ himself does for the sake of others. For those who must suffer misuses of power and are not permitted to act freely and suffer unjustly, God in Christ, who is the God of power, manifests himself as the powerless man, who by voluntarily bearing the burdens together with and for all who suffer is the God, who speaks and acts at his own will.

As follows from Bonhoeffer’s concentration on the weak and powerful Christ, two further considerations arise in Bonhoeffer’s portrayal of Christ, through which the prison writings make a significant contribution to the Christology of Bonhoeffer.

First, Bonhoeffer’s prison writings depict a cosmic Christ. The conditionality of who and on what basis can benefit from the reconciliation of Christ which appeared in different forms in Bonhoeffer’s earlier writings – due to either the high social rank of Bonhoeffer’s family, his national pride he grew up with, the monastic traits of perfectionism or his radicalism in insisting on belonging to the group of confessing Christians – loses its edge. In fact, it is no longer present.⁷⁷ The exclusivity being based on even religion or belief in God gives room to the primacy and inclusivity of God’s grace. In Bonhoeffer’s prison writing, the

⁷⁷ The universal aspect of human suffering, embraced and embodied by the suffering Christ, leads Bonhoeffer toward a more radical and explicit inclusivity towards all people than his previous writings exhibited. By the time of his prison writings, Bonhoeffer is acutely aware that the dichotomy he previously perceived between the church and the world in the earlier phases of his life is insufficient for understanding the biblical mission of Christ to bring salvation for the world. In a letter from his prison cell, five years after the publication of his *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer demonstrates self-criticism by acknowledging: “Today I clearly see the dangers of that book” (Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 21, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 486. 21., *DBW* 8, 542.) What Bonhoeffer likely means is that by this time in prison he has come to see the sharp division between the church and the world (which he stood for in his *Discipleship*) as unnecessary in Christ. Bethge writes that when in 1936 Bonhoeffer referred to the “very large gap” in his interpretation – although Bonhoeffer himself never articulated explicitly what this gap was –, Bonhoeffer separated the church from the rest of the world both in the Old Testament and in his contemporary culture too heavily. Bethge suggests that this is why in 1936 Bonhoeffer wanted to author an article or even a book on “hermeneutics,” even though he never carried out this plan (cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography* 528). Kelly and Godsey in their introduction to *DBWE 4* also highlight the danger Bonhoeffer came to see in his *Discipleship*: “Among those dangers, one can infer that he was alluding to the possibility of a Christian life that could easily be turned in on itself. By the time of his arrest, Bonhoeffer had seen the counteraction to the evil of Nazism emanate as much from nonreligious, nonbelieving good people as from himself, who were motivated by their concern of faith and human dignity to deliver himself and to deliver their nation and the world from the evil of Nazism.” (*DBWE 4*, 21., footnote 32).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

only criterion that is left for human beings to complete is a concrete and wholehearted participation in God's work in Christ.

Second, consequent upon the preceding, the trait that characterizes Bonhoeffer's Christology in his prison writings is a high-level inner freedom both personally and intellectually. In giving himself for all, out of his free choice in love, the Christ of the Cross is free to be a lifegiving bread for others. Borrowing Bethge's words, the Christological emphasis in Bonhoeffer's prison theology could be summarized in the following way: "Christ exercises his lordship solely through powerlessness, service, and the cross [...] the suffering and powerless Christ becomes the defining, liberating, and creative center of this world."⁷⁸ While Bonhoeffer's struggles remain present in his life until the end, Bonhoeffer's liberty towards being free from the self for the other keeps increasing even more and becomes the final legacy of Bonhoeffer, the one that most people know him for.

The central contribution of the prison writings to Bonhoeffer's embodied Christology lies in the catalytic impact of discovering Christ and meaning in the darkest situations of human experience. Perhaps there is no better way to summarize Bonhoeffer's understanding of the role of the powerlessness of Christ than by pointing to the text Bonhoeffer has chosen for his last sermon to his fellow prisoners, just a short time before he was called to face his own execution: the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

In the early morning on April 9, 1945, when Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, the constant unfolding of his thought was left incomplete. The 39 years of Bonhoeffer's life, which was so intense and expressed such a manifold approach to who Christ is, came to a too early and violent end.

⁷⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 865.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SYNOPSIS

The preceding seven chapters of the dissertation examined seven consecutive phases of Bonhoeffer's writing career and analyzed the Christological emphases in each of his works, spanning from his initial dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, to his final work, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It has been demonstrated that Bonhoeffer's consistent focus on Christ and on the manifestation of Christ guided Bonhoeffer to distinct emphases in interpreting who Christ is. While all these emphases are rooted in biblical teachings, they highlight various aspects that correspond to the challenges Bonhoeffer and his contemporaries encounter.

As the review of secondary literature in the introduction indicated, it is widely acknowledged among Bonhoeffer scholars that "if there is one unifying thread in Bonhoeffer's life and theology, it is his enduring love for Jesus Christ."¹ It is all the more noteworthy that the precise articulation of Bonhoeffer's Christology in all of his theological works has characteristically remained unexplored. This gap has formed the rationale for the current researcher's decision to undertake an in-depth study of Bonhoeffer's Christology.

The dissertation has aimed at reconstructing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christology in line with Bonhoeffer's intentions expressed in his own writings. It sought to provide guidance for rectifying the noticeable trend of disintegration in the interpretations of Bonhoeffer's texts by drawing attention to the centrality of Bonhoeffer's Christological focus throughout his work. Consequently, the research has been consistently guided by the following question: *How does an exploration of Bonhoeffer's Christology, contextualized within the framework of his life experiences, contribute to a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted nature of his theology?*

To articulate the present researcher's proposal that ensues from the examined phases of Bonhoeffer's Christology in his major writings, this concluding chapter of the dissertation will first pull the threads together by reviewing and summarizing the emphases of these seven phases of Bonhoeffer's Christology as have been explored in Chapters One to Seven. Then, as one of the implications of the thesis statement of the dissertation, the progressive character of Bonhoeffer's Christological journey will be explicated.

¹ Cf. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Interpretation of Scripture for the Church," *Ex Auditu* 17 (2001) 25.

1. The Contributions of Bonhoeffer's Individual Writings to His Mature Christology

While all Bonhoeffer scholars agree that Christology is central for Bonhoeffer, the way in which Bonhoeffer views about Christ become a cohesive whole has hardly been the target of a focused study in all of Bonhoeffer's writings. Feil asserts that "It is in the concentration on Jesus Christ that the continuity of Bonhoeffer's theology is particularly apparent."² Godsey states that for Bonhoeffer it was always "the figure of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord that captivated his attention."³ Yet how exactly the diverse fragments of Bonhoeffer insights about Christ as described in his individual writings contributed to an overall framework remained to be answered.

The present study has focused on the particularities of Bonhoeffer's view of Christ in his individual works, identifying seven emphases as distinct characterizations of Christ in the consecutive phases of Bonhoeffer's life. Now, these emphases will be summarized in the sequence they occurred in the dissertation leading the way to the core argument of the dissertation that Bonhoeffer's Christology is of a progressive nature.

1. A. The Christ of *Sanctorum Communio* as a Conceptual Skeleton for the Idea of Sociality

In his first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer lays the conceptual foundations for the entirety of his later theological work. He seeks to reinterpret the social nature of human existence from a theological perspective, distinguishing it from Enlightenment individualism. Concepts like the vicarious representation of Christ (as a link that connects all that exists with their source) and the collective personhood of Christ serve as building blocks for an all-encompassing description of reality.

At this early stage, Bonhoeffer views Christ as a fundamental principle of reality. In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer considers participation in the social reality of Christ primarily as a matter of a cognitive exercise, Bonhoeffer in his doctoral dissertation is not

² Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 86.

³ Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 264.

ready to cross the borders into the realm of actual sociality and he does not yet approach Christ as a personal Lord. He describes the dynamics of sociality without giving specific attention to a Christ-centered and Christ-governed relationality. *Sanctorum Communio* indicates the desired orientation of the self toward the other, but it remains notably abstract, Bonhoeffer's Christology is not yet rooted in the concrete and incarnate Christ. The extent to which Bonhoeffer approaches concreteness in *Sanctorum Communio* is limited to the idea of the concrete and to the human dynamics of relationality, the point of departure for approaching the 'thou' is the neighbor, not God.⁴

1. B. The Representation of Christ as the Pattern for Human Consciousness in *Act and Being*

In his second dissertation, *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer critiques the Enlightenment, just as he did in his first dissertation, but his attention turns to human consciousness. Bonhoeffer completes this work with great haste, so the product is Bonhoeffer's least known work. In *Act and Being* he emphasizes that to be engaged with the sociality of human existence (the shapes of which he already established in his first dissertation), one must be linked to the Christ-defined matrix of sociality, which for Bonhoeffer at this time means a form of self-awareness that is defined as basic openness of the self to the 'other.' *Act and Being* is a reinterpretation of the self as relational existence, which is receptive to the social nature of God's revelation. The theological discipline to which *Act and Being* offers a contribution the most is epistemology, seeking to identify a way of knowing suited for receiving God's revelation.

Act and Being introduces the distinction between *actus directus* and *actus reflectus*, which remains a basic differentiation for the later Bonhoeffer, as well, emphasizing that the knowledge of God comes through direct action, not by mere reflection or speculation: "Being in Christ' means to have the new direction of will," by which Bonhoeffer means that "the revelation of God can only be known through action."⁵

⁴ Cf. Feil, *The Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 62.

⁵ *DBWE* 2, 102. (*DBW* 2, 98.)

In both of his early writings, Bonhoeffer lays the foundations for a theological framework that is further explored in his later years. *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* are approaches toward Christ within the boundaries of reason, they depict Christ more as a principle rather than a personal figure. In this season of his life, Bonhoeffer focuses on forming a conceptuality that can accommodate reality but is not facing reality itself. From the perspective of Bonhoeffer's theological development in his later years, the approaches of his doctoral and professorial dissertations to Christology can be considered 'pre-theological' in comparison to Bonhoeffer's later usage of the term 'theological' which by then reflects for him a shift towards a more dialogical (Barthian) understanding referring to a God-defined and dynamic encounter between God and the human being.

1. C. The Christ in Whom God Encounters People in *Creation and Fall* and *Christology*

In 1932, Bonhoeffer's perception of reality changes. This change is not dramatic, and it does not happen overnight, but it is penetrating. As Bonhoeffer explains it in a letter written twelve years later, it is a turning "from the phraseological to the real."⁶ From this time on Bonhoeffer begins to see a Christ who summons people to respond personally.

Thus, during the lectures he taught at the University of Berlin, which were published in 1933 as *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer reinterprets human existence from the perspective of the divine word, who addresses the human self. Bonhoeffer finds the true human self, as defined by selflessness relative to the other. What defines the new self is not a particular self-consciousness but Christ, who comes to the person in his or her neighbor. In his "theological exegesis" of the Genesis account, Bonhoeffer argues that people find life when they obey God's word. In interpreting the creation account, Bonhoeffer's recurring conviction is the following: "It is the Gospel, it is Christ, it is the resurrected one, who is being spoken of here"⁷, Christ is the word of God. In his lectures on *Christology* delivered in the same year in

⁶ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 22, 1944, to Eberhard, *DBWE* 8, 358. (*DBW* 8, 397.)

⁷ *DBWE* 3, 36. (*DBW* 3, 34.)

Berlin, Bonhoeffer also highlights the Lordship of Christ over humanity, Christ who summons all people to submit to him.

As a result of the paradigm shift that occurred in 1931 and 1932, Bonhoeffer begins to seek the actualization of Christ within the divine-human interaction and in the specific details of concrete history. Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* and *Christology* mark a turning point, because from this time onwards Bonhoeffer's question concerning Christ is no longer the 'what' but the 'who.' Bonhoeffer sees Christ as the Master addressing people personally and calling them to action.

1. D. Christ as the Lord Who Calls People to Follow Him in Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*

Bonhoeffer's lecture series – originally five different courses – was published in 1937 as *Nachfolge* (which in English was published under the title *Discipleship*). Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the divine-human encounter that has been expressed in his *Creation and Fall* and *Christology* continues, but the identity of the One who summons people emerges with a clarity that was not present in Bonhoeffer's works before. Bonhoeffer depicts Christ as the incarnate point of reference for obeying God and believing in him. In the Finkenwalde period (between 1935 and 1937), the new addition to Bonhoeffer's Christology is the concrete Christ who is calling people to follow him and thereby become like him. As Bonhoeffer puts it: "We surely intend our preaching to be Christ alone."⁸ The new humanity in Christ, who is selfless, loving and takes up responsibility for others, defines the life of the disciple. "Jesus is the only content [of discipleship]. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it."⁹ The Christological contribution of *Discipleship* lies in Bonhoeffer's consistent commitment to Christ. Imitating Christ becomes an irreplaceable and conscious component of Bonhoeffer's Christology: Christ becomes the norm for the entirety of the Christian life.

Bonhoeffer's radicalism in following Christ created a gap between those who were ready to follow Christ as Bonhoeffer suggested and those who were not. There was a similar

⁸ *DBWE 4*, 37. (*DBW 4*, 21.)

⁹ *DBWE 4*, 59. (*DBW 4*, 47.)

dualism between the church and the world. This time Bonhoeffer was not fully aware of the dualism that he maintained. At a time when conflicts between the Confessing Church and the rest of the church who sought compromises were increasing, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on separation from the world made sense. Bonhoeffer sought to restrict his students and the pastors of the seminary to building on motivations that were created directly by the word. Before 1937, Bonhoeffer saw that a contrast with the rest of the world was required. In his words: "[K]nowledge cannot be separated from the existence in which it was required. Only those who in following Christ leave everything they have can stand and say that they are justified solely by grace."¹⁰

1. E. Christ as Community in *Life Together*

In *Life Together* the intensification of the concrete character of a radical Christ-imitating lifestyle continues. Written ten years after his *Sanctorum Communio*, where Bonhoeffer examined community from a philosophical perspective, he now explores the communal practices he established in Finkenwalde as ways to make Christ's presence tangible. Bonhoeffer portrays concrete Christian community as not only the backdrop but also the central stage for the manifestation of Christ. At the Finkenwalde seminary for preachers, which Bonhoeffer directed, individuals regularly engaged in silence, meditation on the word, confession of sins, and receiving absolution, aiming to live in harmony with God's work and in the freedom of forgiveness. During this period Bonhoeffer saw the practices of the quasi-monastic community as indispensable for making the presence of Christ real.

One of the fruits of the radicalism expressed in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* is that community cannot be understood apart from the actual presence of Christ. This also implies the reciprocal assertion that Christ cannot be understood apart from the confessing faith community. Relying solely on psychological or sociological perspectives cannot lead to an authentic Christian community. Genuine community is open to its life source, Christ. For Bonhoeffer, this means that any attempt to absolutize community as a self-referential entity is

¹⁰ *DBWE* 4, 51. (*DBW* 4, 38.)

counterproductive. The vitality of genuine community depends on its connection to Christ. For Bonhoeffer, ecclesiology is an extension of Christology.¹¹

While Bonhoeffer discovered the potential of Christ becoming tangible in community, he tended to stress the practical implementation of Christ-shaped relationships forcefully. That is why Bonhoeffer's theological focus on Christ seemed at times contradictory to his contemporaries, who occasionally found him overly demanding in his daily relationships in Finkenwalde. This self-contradiction, which lies between Bonhoeffer's endeavor to allow Christ fully manifest in the community and his domineering behavior as the leader of the Finkenwalde community intending to shape the community through strict disciplines and rules, accompanies Bonhoeffer's practice during the Finkenwalde period and to some extent most of the rest of his life.

1. F. Christ as the Human Being for the Other in the World in *Ethics*

From 1940 onward – given the restrictions that forbade Bonhoeffer to speak and write publicly, the exponential disintegration of morality in Germany both in society and the church, and Bonhoeffer's new involvement with the resistance movement against the Führer – Bonhoeffer feels that he has to address ethics more directly than before. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer searches, as Bethge puts it, “for the totality of faith in relation to mature

¹¹ For Bonhoeffer, the center is not ecclesiology as if ecclesiology could exist on its own but Christology; he sees ecclesiology as an outworking of Christology. This is where Bezner in his “Understanding the World Better Than It Understands Itself: The Theological Hermeneutics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” goes astray. (Cf. his PhD Dissertation, Baylor University, 2008). Bezner suggests that it is ecclesiology that drives Bonhoeffer's theology. In the estimation of the current researcher, Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is the outworking of the social dimensions of Christ in the phase of the Finkenwalde period between 1935 and 1937. Green in 1972, in the first edition of his *Theology of Sociality* also stressed sociality as if it had a life of its own. However, by the 1999 edition of *Theology of Sociality*, Green's perspective is broadened, he himself adjusts his view and sees Bonhoeffer's attitude to the world as a factor that is also central to Bonhoeffer's own understanding of community (Cf. Green, “Bonhoeffer's Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm,” 205-218). Bonhoeffer himself had taken a journey into the romanticism of community before. He saw some of the youth movements through his international travels, and in the early phase of the Confessing Church entertained idealistic expectations himself. Towards the end of the 1930s, however, Bonhoeffer stressed the centrality of Christ as the criterion for community. In *Life Together* Bonhoeffer gives witness to his own struggle with transition from idealism to realism regarding community when he complains about the lack of a biblically based Christo-centric view in many of the Christian communities: “But who in this day has any proper awareness of the need for evidence from Scripture? How often do we hear innumerable arguments ‘from life’ and ‘from experience’ to justify the most crucial decisions? Yet the evidence of Scripture is excluded [...] But those who are not willing to learn how to deal with the Scriptures for themselves are not Protestant Christians” (*DBWE* 5, 63., *DBW* 5, 47).

responsibility in our contemporary involvement with the world.”¹² It is his *Ethics* where Bonhoeffer begins to point towards a new representation of Christ as a reality that expresses itself in all walks of life, in marriage/family, nation, work, and church, and at all times.

Thus, in his *Ethics*, the separation that existed between the church and the world in Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* becomes thin. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer continues standing by his commitment to follow Christ as the Messiah that belongs to the church, but he begins to affirm both the pre-Christian world of the Old Testament and the post-religious representatives of his era (at least those he sees as responsible people) as possible witnesses to Christ as well. Bonhoeffer expressed a new eschatological outlook that enables him to see the world from the perspective of its future consummation and when Bonhoeffer sees the ‘penultimate’ (the world) from the vantagepoint of the ‘ultimate’, the world is seen for what it will be, and thus, the present reality of the world calls for an active engagement with the world. Those who live by faith and hope prepare the way of the Lord.¹³

Thus, it is in and through people who act responsibly that Bonhoeffer portrays Christ in his *Ethics*: “The ‘world’ is thus the *domain of concrete responsibility* that is given to us in and through Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ The self-identification of Christ with the world through his vicarious representation suggests that people can participate in the Christ-reality through actions like his: “Christian life is participation in Christ’s encounter with the world.”¹⁵ For the author of *Ethics*, it is selfless action that lies at the heart of the Christian faith, where no room is left for abstraction or speculation (and one might add any form of elitism).

In Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* the church is defined by existing for the other.¹⁶ Bonhoeffer’s past focus on the in-house dynamics of the Christian community is now replaced by the

¹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 878.

¹³ Martin Kuske explores this shift in his *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ, An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer’s Interpretation*, trans. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976). Cf. also Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1970).

¹⁴ *DBWE* 6, 267. (*DBW* 6, 266.)

¹⁵ *DBWE* 6, 159. (*DBW* 6, 151.) Bonhoeffer adds: “Vicarious representative action and therefore responsibility is possible only in completely devoting one’s own life to another person. Only those who are selfless live responsibly, which means that only selfless people truly live.” *DBWE* 6, 259. (*DBW* 6, 258.)

¹⁶ Cf. *DBWE* 6, 379. (*DBW* 6, 382.) Bonhoeffer stresses the same already in his 1932 lectures, when he says: “Our church is here. [It is] not an ideal; otherwise we would still be in Advent. [...The] worldliness of the church

demonstration of the presence of Christ for the world.¹⁷ It is understandable that during this time Bonhoeffer's stress on action is strong. For him, the representation of Christ in the world is characterized by an element of activism. Kelley represents Bonhoeffer's position in his *Ethics* accurately when stating that "Christians must never be guilty of mistakenly 'thinking in two spheres,' opposing Christ to the world, since God has created and given his son to demonstrate God's love for the 'world', not just for 'the church,' or any other single part of creation."¹⁸

1. G. Christ as the One, who Unites Himself with the Powerless in *Letters and Papers from Prison*

After his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer is forced into a form of participation in Christ in which one's involvement in the lives of others through pro-active action is much less an option, although during the first year of his detainment Bonhoeffer is still hoping to be released. Considering the events of the world, his perspective concerning the form of participation in Christ changes, his potential for social impact is radically narrowed. Nevertheless, as his letter to Bethge on April 30, 1944 indicates, Bonhoeffer's Christological quest remains the same. The question which has served as a grid for Bonhoeffer all his life is posed in the following way: "what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?"¹⁹ As Lawrence says, the question for Bonhoeffer is still "not 'Who was Jesus when he lived two-thousand years ago?' but 'Who is Jesus *today*?' Who is Jesus here and now, at this point

is real, not only illusion. [The] church is wholly world! Furthermore, where [the] church [has] become homeless, this must be so. [The] church has become quite worldly for our benefit. It denies itself everything except Christ's word. The church existing in the world knows that it must renounce everything else." ("The Nature of the Church," *DBWE 11*, 328.; *DBW 11*, 298-299.)

¹⁷ As Bonhoeffer writes about the same subject to his friend Erwin Sutz a few years prior to his *Ethics* (on September 11, 1934): "'Speak out for those who cannot speak' [Proverbs 31:8] – who in the church today still remembers that this is the very least the Bible asks of us in such times as these?" (*DBWE 13*, 217., *DBW 13*, 205.)

¹⁸ James Patrick Kelley, "Recent Bonhoeffer Research on Making Sense of Bonhoeffer's Ethics," (Newsletter of the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, 41, May 2, 1989), 112.

¹⁹ *DBWE 8*, 362. (*DBW 8*, 402.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

in history, and in this time and place?”²⁰ Yet, in Bonhoeffer’s immediate environment of the Tegel prison and in the larger environment of the horrors of World War II, his understanding of the representation of Christ in the world gets adjusted; Bonhoeffer begins to stress the weakness of Christ more than he did before.

The awareness of human frailty is more palpable in Bonhoeffer’s prison letters than in his previous writings. In Bonhoeffer’s mature thought, the transformation of the mind entails making participation in Christ, through both responsible action and voluntary suffering, central to one’s perspective on life as a whole. The life of Christ is increasingly viewed as the platform upon which our human existence becomes what it is meant to be:

That is ‘metanoia,’ not thinking first of one’s own needs, questions, sins, and fears but allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks, into the messianic event, in which Isa. 53 is now being fulfilled!²¹

To be sure, in Bonhoeffer’s prison letters he insists that “God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin.”²² During his imprisonment, the image of the powerful Christ, as Lord, Creator and Redeemer is still present in Bonhoeffer’s writings but the suffering of Christ becomes the governing paradigm in Bonhoeffer’s Christology. As just months before his imprisonment Bonhoeffer already wrote: “The only fruitful relation to human beings – particularly to the weak among them – is love, that is, the will to enter into and to keep community with them.”²³ Bonhoeffer’s attention turns to the helpless and the defenseless. He sees himself not as a person who can help others by leading them out of their state, but as a person who is and remains one of them in the state that they are in. Bonhoeffer considers the powerlessness of Christ as a state, which Christ chose on behalf of others to identify himself with and to reveal himself to them.

²⁰ Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide to the Perplexed*, 33.

²¹ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 480. (*DBW* 8, 535-36.)

²² Bonhoeffer’s letter of May 29, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 406-7. (*DBW* 8, 455.)

²³ “An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-43,” Christmas, 1942, *DBWE* 8, 45. (*DBW* 8, 29.)

While in prison, the concept of ‘religionless’ Christianity, which leaves all claims for power behind, is an extension of Bonhoeffer’s Christology. Only a God who is strong enough to go to the cross can voluntarily leave all demand for respect behind. It is God’s power that enables God to choose powerlessness for the sake of those whom he loves without ceasing to be God. This perspective opens a view of a cosmic Christ, whose identification with the vulnerable and the defenseless in the world knows no bounds. For Bonhoeffer, “sharing in the suffering of God in Christ”²⁴ becomes so central during his imprisonment, especially in his second year, that he discovers and comes to honor Christ in all who suffer.

2. The Core Argument of the Dissertation

Building on the preceding research on Bonhoeffer’s Christology, the overview of the Christological assertions found in Bonhoeffer’s individual writings leads to the core argument of the dissertation.

The foregoing study on Bonhoeffer’s Christology puts forward a dual assertion, each bearing significant implications for the research question introduced in the Introduction and repeated at the beginning of this Synopsis.

First, Bonhoeffer’s Christology portrays Christ as a composite of distinct representations that demonstrate how communities and individuals embody diverse biblical portraits of Christ within their unique life circumstances. Bonhoeffer upholds the eternal Logos while acknowledging human limitations, simultaneously testifying to both the unchanging nature of Christ and the contingencies of human existence in which revelation occurs. The dignity that Bonhoeffer accords to all created elements is rooted in the incarnation of Christ, in whom all creation was reconciled and made complete. Therefore, in Bonhoeffer’s estimation, earthly aspects of human life possess sacramental value, and earthly circumstances have the potential to express Christ’s presence. Embracing the coexistence of the diverse

²⁴ Bonhoeffer’s letter of July 18, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 482. (*DBW* 8, 537.)

aspects of the world belongs to ‘Christian realism,’ a perspective Bonhoeffer met through Niebuhr and the social gospel movement during his first visit to the United States.²⁵

Secondly, Bonhoeffer’s writings reveal perspectives on Christ that not only portray the static complexities of human existence but also mirror a journey characterized by distinct stations on the way shaped by human actions expressing the reality of Christ. According to Bonhoeffer, Christ is not a static entity but a dynamic person who integrates polarities and movements within himself. Hence, accommodating change is essential to face reality as it is: a process progressively unfolding.

In light of this dual assertion, this concluding section of the dissertation will further delineate Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the progressive nature of God’s self-revelation in Christ leading up to some concluding reflections on the unifying impact of Bonhoeffer’s Christology.

3. The Progressive Nature of Bonhoeffer’s Christology

3. A. Christology as Foundation for Progressiveness

As it has been indicated, for Bonhoeffer, the progressive nature of Christology is founded on his understanding of God’s will, intending to reveal himself gradually to individuals and human communities. In this, Bonhoeffer’s evolving perception of the forms in which Christ reveals himself echoes the logic of the beginning words of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he

²⁵ The deep impact Reinhold Niebuhr had on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in and following 1932 during Bonhoeffer’s first visit in the United States regarding the paradigm that is associated with Christian realism has been discussed in Chapter Three of the present dissertation in section 1. B.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:1-2., *NIV*)

As the author of Hebrews focuses on the superiority of God's Son over the prophets, and even the angels, in revealing God's glory, so Bonhoeffer observes an evolving revelation of Christ across human history and personal narratives. The progression in God's communication means that each act of divine revelation proceeds from and builds on the preceding ones. Bonhoeffer recognizes a fundamental coherence between the Christ of the past and the self-revealing Christ of the present, indicating a trajectory towards greater fulfillment. Bonhoeffer's Christology encapsulates and portrays these developments in his own life and world.

Bonhoeffer perceives God's continual revelation in Jesus Christ as a gradual process, moving from one level to the next. From Bonhoeffer's perspective, the incarnation of Jesus Christ and faith in the future culmination of Christ's work of reconciliation lead to viewing Christology as a progressively unfolding presence. Recognizing the progressive nature of God's self-revelation in Christ is significant, as it allows people to partake in God's work where they presently are, by understanding how Christ guides history towards an eschaton. Embracing the journey towards the ultimate fulfillment necessitates acknowledging the gradual unfolding of the Christ-reality in the present and entails participation.

Bonhoeffer finds the recognition crucial that acknowledging the progressive nature of God's self-revelation in Christ can motivate individuals to engage in God's work. Understanding how God guides history gradually towards an eschaton may aid people in aligning themselves intentionally with God's purpose. Bonhoeffer's affirmation of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and his faith in the ultimate culmination of Christ's work of reconciliation lead him to perceive the future as open and Christology as an unfolding progression. Embracing one's life as a journey towards ultimate fulfillment, intensifies the need to realize the gradual unfolding of the reality of Christ in the present.²⁶

²⁶ It is interesting to note the similarities between the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa and Bonhoeffer. Gregory also spoke about the unending evolution of God's work in the human soul, and he arrived at similar soteriological conclusions. (Cf. Gregory of Nyssa's concept of *epekstasis* in his *The Life of Moses*, trans. Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe, Classics of Western Spirituality, New York, NY: Paulist, 1978). Just like it

3. B. Essence and Form in Bonhoeffer's Christology

The way Bonhoeffer examines the specific forms through which Christ revealed himself in his life can be illustrated through his analogy of polyphony, a useful conceptual device to show how different life forces and their inherent order can coexist simultaneously, and how even profound diversity can converge into unity. In one of his letters, Bonhoeffer describes the 'polyphonic' nature of human existence in the following way:

Life isn't pushed back into a single dimension, but is kept multidimensional, polyphonic. What a liberation it is to be able to think and to hold on to these many dimensions of life in our thoughts.²⁷

The recognition of a polyphonic perspective in understanding the multidimensional nature of reality is influenced by Bonhoeffer's conception of Christ. Through his incarnation, Christ unifies the various dimensions of life, and through his reconciliatory work in creation, Christ brings about harmony in the world.

Bonhoeffer stresses that while the human mind seeks rational categories for mastery and control, such pursuit often leads to taking things apart and isolating them, hence creating fragmentation. The pitfall of the pursuit of control lies in that it overshadows the reality of Christ, who is beyond the control of the human mind and stands as the source of diversity both as Creator and Redeemer.

An often-quoted line of Bonhoeffer from his letter to Bethge, written from Tegel prison in Berlin on April 30, 1944, sheds further light on the centrality of Bonhoeffer's progressive Christology. In this letter Bonhoeffer asks:

If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed – and this garb has looked very different in different ages – what then is religionless Christianity?²⁸

was the case with Irenaeus, Bonhoeffer stressed similar ideas to Gregory, to our knowledge without ever studying him in detail.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer's letter of May 29, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 405. (*DBW* 8, 453.)

²⁸ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 30, 1944, to Bethge, *DBWE* 8, 364. (*DBW* 8, 405.)

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer's line of thought embedded in his question is that clothing, much like religion, is visible and tangible, but its ultimate significance lies in what it adorns. The central emphasis here revolves around an essence, which, although not explicitly mentioned, pertains to Christ.

In Bonhoeffer's use of the term "garb", interpreters may find it tempting to direct the conversation toward the perspectives of Adolf von Harnack, who, concerning Christianity, was inclined to draw a clear distinction between form and content, referring to them as "husk and kernel."²⁹ Despite the echo of Harnack in the expression of "garb", such an interpretation misleads from the center of Bonhoeffer's actual intention in this question. Bonhoeffer poses his question based on the biblical premise that God in Christ manifests himself in various forms throughout history. Even in what he calls as the religionless Christianity of his days. To truly focus on the reality of Christ, certain willingness is required to look beyond the surface – appearances and forms that might or diversely might not impress one – and value that which lies beneath.

As pointed out earlier, Bonhoeffer's theology has often been seen as marked by internal inconsistencies, his theological legacy has been cited to support various theological and social positions. These include associations with liberal theology advocating secularism, engagement in political activism, notably within the Social Gospel movement, recognition as a symbol of civil disobedience, particularly in post-Communist nations like East Germany and Hungary, being a forerunner to passive resistance movements against oppressive regimes, as observed in South Africa, and depiction as a radical evangelical.³⁰ Yet, it is understanding the progressive view of Christology in Bonhoeffer's theology that helps his readers to reconcile the seemingly disparate ideas within the Bonhoeffer corpus.

A given Christological emphasis in a particular phase of his life which later Bonhoeffer transcends is not to be treated separately and on its own but is to be understood

²⁹ Adolph von Harnack's in his *What is Christianity?* distinguished between the 'kernel' and the 'husk': the kernel being the permanent, pure essence of Christianity, and the husk being its temporal and unreliable expression. (Cf. Adolph von Harnack, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1986, first published in 1901.)

³⁰ Examples for each of these attempts were given in the Introduction of this dissertation.

always in the context of Bonhoeffer's aspiration to distinguish mere outward appearances from what is significant in the ever-expanding rule of Christ.

3. C. The Christ Whose Sphere of Influence Continuously Expands

The distinctive Christological emphases in Bonhoeffer's literary legacy form a continuum from the abstract through the concrete to the cosmic. Bonhoeffer's early Christology begins by perceiving Christ primarily as an abstract concept, encouraging a reframing of one's approach to life's experiences. This conceptual foundation evolves into a perspective where Christ is regarded as the one who is calling people to follow him by setting strict conditions for them to participate in his life, which include active engagement within a Gospel-centered Christian community and its liturgical practices. As Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ becomes increasingly tangible "moving from the phraseological to the real"³¹, it progresses from seeing Christ as a challenging Lord commanding faith and obedience from his followers toward recognizing Christ as also being present in all responsible action. Then, it culminates in a standpoint where Bonhoeffer beholds God's care in Christ being universally extended to all, especially to those who are afflicted.

The evolution of Bonhoeffer's views concerning the relationship between the church and the world reflects a similar pattern. Initially, the church for Bonhoeffer is modeled on the abstract ideals of a human community. Later the church becomes for him a tangible reality of people committed to shared values, and Bonhoeffer sees it strictly as a community which only confessing Christians belong to. Then, the church in Bonhoeffer's eyes is expanding to include not just confessing Christians but also people who act ethically, moving toward an even greater inclusivity where all people who suffer are seen by Bonhoeffer as participants in the suffering of the Messiah and by implication members of the Body of Christ.

In this progression Bonhoeffer's Christology resembles the flow of sand through an hourglass, initiating in a broad expanse, then traversing a progressively narrower path, and culminating in a return to a wide expanse. Bonhoeffer's theological journey from the abstract

³¹ Bonhoeffer's letter of April 22, 1944, to Eberhard, *DBWE* 8, 358. (*DBW* 8, 397.)

Christ to the concrete Christ, and then from the concrete Christ to the cosmic Christ, mirrors the unfolding events in Bonhoeffer's life-narrative.

As Chapter One on *Sanctorum Communio* concluded, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christ as a concrete person emerges gradually (just as the concreteness of human identity increases step by step). At the end of his first dissertation, a study that belonged to the genre of philosophical theology, Bonhoeffer unexpectedly leaves behind the abstract ways of approaching his subject matter and writes: "All are in God, and each remains distinct from God. All are united with each other and yet distinct."³² Here one can already see the seedling of the distinct nature of each member of the Christian community, which for Bonhoeffer is the Christ³³, but it is only from 1932 onwards that Bonhoeffer begins to articulate that Christ is concrete and calls for concretion in radical ways. Godsey is correct in his assessment that Bonhoeffer's Christology finds its coherence in the "concretization of revelation,"³⁴ but it is often overlooked that before 1932, the world and the church or Christian community are separate entities for Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of the concrete nature of Christ's incarnation significantly deepens during his first visit to the United States in 1931, particularly in response to Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's influence, though never publicly acknowledged by Bonhoeffer himself, prompts a shift in Bonhoeffer's perception of Christ, who Bonhoeffer comes to see as inseparable from the world. As a result, Bonhoeffer comes to value the transient and material world God has created. It is from 1932 onwards – when his understanding of the world changes from viewing the world as being primarily and merely a stage for God's actions to seeing the world as becoming an active and acting participant in God's work – that the earthly aspect assumes a leading role in Bonhoeffer's theology. Following this time, as Jens Zimmermann aptly puts it, "Bonhoeffer's grounding of interpretation in the incarnation

³² *DBWE 1*, 288-289. (*DBW 1*, 198.)

³³ Cf. "the 'body of Christ' [...] is Christ existing as church-community" (*DBWE 1*, 190. (*DBW 1*, 127.)

³⁴ Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 263.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

provides a necessary correction to the overemphasis on God's ineffability, allowing us to once again take God seriously.”³⁵

Between 1935 and 1937, while at Finkenwalde, the concretion of Christ takes the form of specific community. This time Bonhoeffer holds the view that building on the confessional basis is indispensable for experiencing Christ in one's life and salvation is exclusive to the Confessing Church. He professes: “There is no community with Jesus Christ other than the community with His body!”³⁶

Four years later, in the years right before, during, and after 1941, in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer asserts that Christ's manifestation can occur both within and outside the church. This shift of perspective from the basis of one's connection with Christ being primarily on a confessional ground to being primarily on a moral ground leads Bonhoeffer to recognize individuals outside the church as potential conduits of divine grace. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer speaks of “genuine worldliness”³⁷, an attitude by which he means that God calls one to immerse oneself in the world and extend the presence of God to the world.³⁸ In the early 1940s, for Bonhoeffer, nature and the world have significance beyond being merely mission fields; they are the realms through which God reveals his caring plans. When Bonhoeffer speaks of ‘this-worldliness,’ he emphasizes the realm for the irresistible aspects of God's grace, which leads him to a robust affirmation of God's saving work both within the church and the world. The mission of the church is to be a representative of Christ for the world. To fulfill its God-given destiny, the world needs the guidance of Christ. As Bonhoeffer states in

³⁵ Jens Zimmermann, “Finitum Capax Infinity or The Presencing of Christ: A Response to Stephen Plant and Robert Steiner,” in Ralph K. Wüstenberg/Jens Zimmermann, *God Speaks to Us, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics* (Peter Lang Edition, Frankfurt am Main, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2013), 85.

³⁶DBWE 4, 216. (DBW 4, 230.)

³⁷ DBWE 6, 400. (DBW 4, 404.)

³⁸ It is here where Bonhoeffer differs from his respected teacher, Barth, who is much more cautious to attribute any revelatory role to the worldly dimension. Bonhoeffer's theological emphasis on ‘genuine this-worldliness’ became part of Bonhoeffer's mind due to his friendship with Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer's friends in the resistance. Victoria J. Barnett in her foreword to *The Letters and Papers from Prison* quotes Niebuhr's words on this integrative aspect of Bonhoeffer's theology from Niebuhr's eulogy published in 1945 shortly after Bonhoeffer's death. Niebuhr contends that Bonhoeffer's impact will contribute to the revitalization of the Protestant faith which “will have learned to overcome the one fateful error of German Protestantism, the complete dichotomy between faith and political life” (Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Death of a Martyr,” *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 11 (1945): 6-7. cited in DBWE 8, xvi).

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

1944, the church exists in the world to be a living reminder of ‘what it means to be there for others’:

The church is church only when it is there for others... The church must engage in the practical tasks of life within the community – not in a dominating manner but in a helping and serving role. It should demonstrate to people in every occupation what it means to live with Christ, what it means ‘to be there for others.’³⁹

From Bonhoeffer’s perspective in the early 1940s, the world can be given the orientation it was always meant to have. Through Christ self-centered worldliness, the world consumed by self-consciousness and self-knowledge is to be re-oriented toward “genuine worldliness”⁴⁰ which entails seeking the well-being of others. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer warns against the danger of overly emphasizing transcendence, ontology, or eschatology, and holding dogmatic positions too one-sidedly. The peril he wants to avoid lies in despising the created world and despising the mystery and the glory of Christ.⁴¹

Toward the end of his life Bonhoeffer comes to believe that the humanity of God in Christ is replicated in those who engage with the transformative impact of Christ in the world. This is what he means by the word ‘worldly.’ For Bonhoeffer, it is ethics and spirituality, not dogmatics that become the defining criterion of Christian authenticity. Bonhoeffer perceives Christ’s presence as a dynamic, ever-evolving reality manifesting himself in the world within the constantly changing confines of individual lives. When one affirms that the “Word became flesh,”⁴² one affirms the profound mystery of the organic unity of the divine and the human, as it is stressed in the Chalcedonian confession. In the mature Bonhoeffer’s

³⁹ “Outline for a Book,” *DBWE* 8, 503. (*DBW* 8, 560.)

⁴⁰ *DBWE* 6, 400. (*DBW* 6, 404.)

⁴¹ Stephen Plant suggests that Bonhoeffer’s stress on the incarnation of Christ indicates the new possibility to humanity for relating to transcendence, distant as transcendence is from humanity, by participating in the reality of the incarnation. However, Plant’s stress on the incarnation falls more on the role of the divine than on the role of human. The understanding of the present researcher is that Bonhoeffer stresses both the divine and the human in the same way, and if there is an imbalance it is toward the human, not the divine. (Cf. Stephen Plant’s *Taking Stock of Bonhoeffer: Studies in Biblical Interpretation and Ethics*, Routledge Publishing, Abingdon, England, 2016).

⁴² John 1:14 (*NIV*)

vocabulary, the term ‘worldly’ is integral to describing the identity of Christ, who is the head of the church.

In only two years after writing his fragments that later became his *Ethics*, in a letter written to Bethge in 1944, Bonhoeffer affirms that his perspective now encompasses ‘unconscious Christianity’ within the circle of the representatives of Christ.⁴³ At this stage, Bonhoeffer believes that religion is not a prerequisite for Christ to manifest himself, but Christ is present in every responsible action. That is why the first publication of Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* in 1951 left pastors who had known Bonhoeffer during his Finkenwalde days wondering whether their earlier experiences with him belonged to a passing phase in Bonhoeffer’s life. Given the evolution of Bonhoeffer’s views, his former students questioned if his radical commitment to the Christian faith may only have been a transitional period.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, when Bonhoeffer is interpreted through the paradigm of progressive Christology, one is made to see the unfolding representation of Christ through all the phases in Bonhoeffer’s life and written legacy, even in the final one. Allowing for the progressive view of God’s revelation enables Bonhoeffer’s reader to acknowledge that what Bonhoeffer represented all his life, namely that he wanted to know Christ, was in fact the case. The Bonhoeffer of 1944 was seeking the same Christ as he did earlier, between 1935 and 1937. What changed was that Bonhoeffer now began to perceive Christ also in and through his family members and new friends who were not confessing Christians. Bonhoeffer came to understand that Christ was not limited to confessional affiliations. He manifested himself even among those whom earlier Bonhoeffer had not considered suitable carriers of Christ’s presence. This realization compelled Bonhoeffer to broaden his perspective.⁴⁵

⁴³ Bonhoeffer’s undated letter to Bethge, dated by Bethge as July 27, 1944, *DBWE* 8, 489. (*DBW* 8, 546.) See also in Bonhoeffer’s novel “A Quiet Forest Pond”, *DBWE* 7, 106. (*DBW* 7, 110).

⁴⁴ Cf. *DBWE* 4, 309. (*DBW* 4, 327.)

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer’s mental journey runs parallel with the Apostle Peter’s when in Acts 10: 47-48, Peter says: “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (NIV) Cf. Robert MacAfee Brown’s comment about Eberhard Bethge’s book *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr* in *Theology Today*, 1976, 292.

The vision of a Christ whose essence is being other-centered in this world and whose love extends to all individuals, whether they are acting responsibly or are too weak to do so, aligns with Bonhoeffer's own experiences in the last five years of his life. As Bonhoeffer nears the conclusion of his own journey, his conception of Christ becomes increasingly tangible in calling people to action, while simultaneously assuming a cosmic dimension.

The dynamic nature of Christ's self-revelation in Bonhoeffer's theological framework resembles a dramatic narrative. His conception of Christ unfolds progressing toward a crescendo: the day when Christ will be fully revealed as God will be "all in all."⁴⁶ The interconnection of the various facets within Bonhoeffer's Christology is akin to scenes within a cinematic narrative, all leading toward a climactic moment. Each diverse element contributes to the overarching narrative, although the precise manner of their contribution is comprehensible only when viewed from the vantage point of the end – what Bonhoeffer terms the Ultimate. In Bonhoeffer's perspective, the vicarious representation of Christ shapes every facet of the evolving manifestation of Christ and provides cohesion to its multifaceted details.

Bonhoeffer's Christology suggests that it is not only the understanding of the rule of Christ, an ever-expanding reality, which necessitates a sequential and dynamic viewpoint, like frames in a film. Bonhoeffer's spiritual legacy implies that such a dynamic perspective is imperative for all individuals seeking to comprehend Christ witnessed to in the Bible.

4. Implications of Bonhoeffer's Christology for the Fragmentation of Human Existence in the Twenty-First Century

Christian theology has long aimed at fulfilling the role of unifying the fragmented aspects of life, yet the awareness in the twenty-first century has sharpened regarding the delicate balance needed for integration that respects both individual dignity and the essential need for unity. One clearly sees that on the one hand, efforts for unity often compromise individuality, multiplicity, and human freedom, imposing alien factors and even violence in the pursuit of unity. This tendency reflects the homogenization of modernism, at times leading

⁴⁶ 1 Cor 15: 28 (NIV)

even to abusive suppression of diversity. On the other hand, emphasis on individual rights, tolerance, and the celebration of otherness even at the expense of the absence of social rules and ethical norms threatens cohesion, harmony, and order – which is a dead-end characteristic of a one-sided postmodern approach.⁴⁷

The identification of Bonhoeffer’s Christology as the “presencing” of Christ, using Jens Zimmermann’s apt terminology,⁴⁸ offers fresh perspectives for realizing unity within diversity but without compromising the multidimensional nature of our human existence. Bonhoeffer’s robust Christology provides essential guidance and vital orientation in our contemporary era characterized by fragmentation. As a tree planted by the water relies on its roots for its health and for bringing the unseen life-giving source to its branches, leaves and fruits, Bonhoeffer’s Christology articulates the connection between the ultimate source of existence and the creaturely aspects of life’s complexities, which impacts the growth, the productivity, and the resilience of our human life in the world.⁴⁹

Bonhoeffer’s Christological paradigm is rooted in the historic Christian (Chalcedonian) perspective of Christ, in whom the perfect union of God and humanity became reality as both the origin and the culmination of human existence. Bonhoeffer sees the vicarious representation of Christ as the path, while active faith in Christ as the means to reach this culmination. Bonhoeffer’s Christology describes how life is sustained, and it provides guidance on how life is dynamically transformed into becoming an expression of Christ’s perfect humanity in our own lives. In Bonhoeffer’s Christology, Jesus Christ as the

⁴⁷ Contemporary authors who represent a similar position rooted in the historical Christian tradition concerning orthodoxy but critical about arrogant tendencies in rationalist apologetics include Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996); Myron Bradley Penner, *End of Apologetics, The Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013); Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Truth and the Crisis of the Post-Modern University,” Audio lecture, ID: RGDL2520H (Vancouver, B. C.: Regent Bookstore, 1995).

⁴⁸ Jens Zimmermann, “Finitum Capax Infinity or The Presencing of Christ: A Response to Stephen Plant and Robert Steiner,” 86.

⁴⁹ James K. A. Smith, a contemporary philosopher and theologian resonates with Bonhoeffer’s stress of the re-emergence of Christ in all of life, when Smith in his *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.) emphasizes the incarnational value of liturgies so that the divine reality would be embodied in the ordinary details of human life.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

head of all creation serves as the unifying power for the entirety of creaturely existence integrating all aspects of life into a coherent whole.

Bonhoeffer believes that the theological depiction of Christ is authentic when it aligns with the identity of Christ, in other words, the essential goal of Christology is achieved when it enables not just a testimony to, but also a fresh embodiment of the re-emerging Christ in those who articulate, receive, or delve into such descriptions.

Bonhoeffer's Christological legacy lies in that humanity is saved through fostering the adaptation of a viewpoint that perceives the world as a unified entity from a Christ-focused perspective.

It is fitting to conclude this dissertation by recalling Bonhoeffer's words in his *Christology* lectures which assert that teaching about Christ must commence with silence: "To speak of Christ is to be silent, and to be silent about Christ is to speak."⁵⁰ This silence is an expression of adoration and a longing to witness the manifestation of Christ in our midst, which for Bonhoeffer is both the prerequisite and the fruit of approaching Christ.

As Bonhoeffer progresses towards the end of his life, the concept of Christology as the "presencing of Christ"⁵¹ becomes more and more evident. For the mature Bonhoeffer, the only kind of Christology worthy to be named after Christ is embodied Christology. In Christ, heaven and earth harmoniously unite; in him, there is neither confusion nor separation. Those who follow Christ have the hope of finding the same integration within themselves and in the other.

⁵⁰ *DBWE 12*, 300. (*DBW 12*, 280.)

⁵¹ Jens Zimmermann, "Finitum Capax Infinity or The Presencing of Christ: A Response to Stephen Plant and Robert Steiner," 86.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

SUMMARY

Embodied Christology: An Exploration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Lifelong Quest for the Self-Manifesting Christ is a dissertation about the writings of the Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) from the perspective of Christology. The study aims to identify central assumptions that drove Bonhoeffer in his thinking and practice concerning Christology.

Through a systematic examination of Bonhoeffer's major works, the following writings were reviewed in chronological order: *Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *Creation and Fall*, *Discipleship*, *Life Together*, *Ethics*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*; and, whenever necessary, his other writings were consulted as well. The primary sources are used from the seventeen volumes of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*.

Having recognized that Bonhoeffer's interpretations of reality, be it philosophy, biblical texts, Christian community, responsible action, or suffering, greatly reflect the dynamics of the German society of Bonhoeffer's day, and Bonhoeffer's own narrative; a study on Bonhoeffer's Christology calls for thoroughgoing research of both Bonhoeffer's background and the content of his theological writings. Furthermore, efforts were directed towards interpreting the Christological assertions in the individual writings of Bonhoeffer, both in the context of the phases of Bonhoeffer's life in which he wrote them and in the context of his life as a whole.

While examining Bonhoeffer's writings and the above-mentioned sources, the following research question was asked repeatedly: *How does an examination of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christology, contextualized within the framework of his life experiences, contribute to a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted nature of his theology?*

The dissertation concluded that Bonhoeffer's Christology is best understood as his articulation of God's unfolding presence in Christ—a journey toward its telos, namely, the manifestation of God in Christ within the specific life situations of those who seek to emulate Christ. The dissertation asserts that beyond the significance of this study in Bonhoeffer scholarship, Bonhoeffer's progressive Christology holds the promise of offering guidance to individuals grappling with the fragmented nature of contemporary life. Bonhoeffer offers a

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

perspective rooted in Christ's reconciliation permeating all aspects of life, providing a cohesive center for the multiplicities of human existence which enables integration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

The seventeen volumes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's collected writings are listed according to their volume number first in German and then in English followed by the earlier editions of Bonhoeffer's writings used in the present dissertation.

The collected works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are published in the original German critical edition as *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke. 1-17*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge, et al. Munich and Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser-Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1986-1999 and are abbreviated as *DBW*.

The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Project in English are published as *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. 1-17*. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., General Editor. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1996-2014 and are abbreviated as *DBWE*.

The individual volumes of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW)* and their translations in English (*DBWE*) are:

DBW Vol. 1. *Sanctorum Communio. Eine Dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche (1930)*. Edited by Joachim von Soosten. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986.

DBWE Vol. 1. *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998.

DBW Vol. 2. *Akt und Sein. Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der Systematischen Theologie*. Edited by Hans-Richard Reuter. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988.

DBWE Vol. 2. *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*. Edited by Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. Translated by Martin Rumscheidt. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1996.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

DBW Vol. 3. *Schöpfung und Fall: Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1-3*. Edited by Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1989.

DBWE Vol. 3. *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997.

DBW Vol. 4. *Nachfolge*. Edited by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1989; 2nd. ed. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994.

DBWE Vol. 4. *Discipleship*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2000.

DBW Vol. 5. *Gemeinsames Leben. Das Gebetbuch der Bibel*. Edited by Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1987.

DBWE Vol. 5. *Life Together [and] Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly. Translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1996.

DBW Vol. 6. *Ethik*. Edited by Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992; second edition 1998.

DBWE Vol. 6. *Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles West and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2005.

DBW Vol. 7. *Fragmente aus Tegel*. Edited by Renate Bethge and Ilse Tödt. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994.

DBWE Vol. 7. *Fiction from Tegel Prison*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1999.

DBW Vol. 8. *Widerstand und Ergebung*. Edited by Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, and Renate Bethge with Ilse Tödt. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

DBWE Vol. 8. *Letters and Papers from Prison.*, Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2010.

DBW Vol. 9. *Jugend und Studium 1918-1927.* Edited by Hans Pfeifer with Clifford Green and Carl-Jürgen Kaltenborn. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986.

DBWE Vol. 9. *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927.* Edited by Paul D. Matheny, Clifford J. Green and Marshall D. Johnson. Translated by Mary Nebelsick with the assistance of Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003.

DBW Vol. 10. *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika 1928-1931.* Edited by Reinhard Staats and Hans Christoph von Hase with Holger Roggelin and Matthias Wünsche. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1992.

DBWE Vol. 10. *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931.* Edited by Clifford Green. Translated by Douglas W. Scott. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2008.

DBW Vol. 11. *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931-1932.* Edited by Eberhard Amelung and Christoph Strohm. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994.

DBWE Vol. 11. *Ecumenical, Academic & Pastoral Work: 1931-1932.* Edited by Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker and Michael B. Lukens. Translated by Anne Schmidt-Lange, with Isabel Best, Nicholas Humphrey and Marion Pauck. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2012.

DBW Vol. 12. *Berlin 1932-1933.* Edited by Carsten Nicolaisen und Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997.

DBWE Vol. 12. *Berlin: 1932-1933.* Edited by Larry L. Rasmussen. Translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2009.

DBW Vol. 13. *London 1933-1935.* Edited by Hans Goedeking, Martin Heimbucher and Hans-Walter Schleicher. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

DBWE Vol. 13 *London: 1933-1935*. Edited by Keith Clements. Translated by Isabel Best. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007.

DBW Vol. 14. *Illegale Theologenausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935-1937*. Edited by Otto Dudzus und Jürgen Henkys with Sabine Bobert-Stützel, Dirk Schulz, and Ilse Tödt. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/ Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996.

DBWE Vol. 14. *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*. Edited by H. Gaylon Barker and Mark Brocker. Translated by Douglas Stott. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2013.

DBW Vol. 15. *Illegale Theologenausbildung: Sammelvikariate 1937-1940*. Edited by Dirk Schulz. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998.

DBWE Vol. 15. *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940*. Edited by Victoria J Barrett. Translated by Victoria J Barrett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick and Scott A. Moore. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2012.

DBW Vol. 16. *Konspiration und Haft 1940-1945*. Edited by Jørgen Glenthøj, Ulrich Kabitz and Wolf Krötke. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996.

DBWE Vol. 16. *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*. Edited by Mark S. Brocker. Translated by Lisa E. Dahill. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2006.

DBW Vol. 17. *Register und Ergänzungen*. Edited by Herbert Anzinger and Hans Pfeifer assisted by Waltraud Anzinger and Ilse Tödt. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999.

DBWE Vol. 17. *Indexes and Supplementary Materials*. Edited by Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski and Clifford Green, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2014.

Bethge, Eberhard., ed. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1967.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Christ the Center*. Translated by Edwin H. Robertson. London: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1966.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. Translated by J. W. Doberstein. New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1954.

Robertson, Edwin H., ed. *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, From the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Vol. 1. Translated by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden. London: Collins; New York, New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich and Von Wedemeyer, Maria. *Love letters from cell 92: 1943-1945*. Edited by Ruth-Alice von Bismarck, R.A.V., Ulbrich Kabitz and Eberhard Bethge, translated by J. Maxwell Brownjohn. London: HarperCollins, 1994.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich and Von Wedemeyer, Maria. *Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, 1943-1945*. Revised edition, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995.

Secondary Sources

Á Kempis, Thomas. *The Imitation of Christ*. Alachua, Florida: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999.

Barnett, Victoria J. "The Bonhoeffer Legacy as Work-in-Progress: Reflections on a Fragmentary Series." In *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*. Edited by Clifford J. Green & Guy C. Carter, 93-100. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2013.

Barth, Friederike. *Die Wirklichkeit des Guten: Dietrich Bonhoeffers "Ethik" und ihr philosophischer Hintergrund*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 156, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*, vol 2/2. Edited by Geoffrey. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and J. C. Campbell et al. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Bernard of Clairvaux. *On Loving God*. Translated by Robert Walton OSB. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1995.

Bethge, Eberhard. "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology." The Alden-Tuthill Lectures, 1961. In *World Come of Age, A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Edited by Ronald Gregor Smith. London: St James Place, 1967.

_____. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*. Revised edition, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2000.

_____. *Friendship and Resistance, Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Geneva: WCC Publications; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1995.

Bethge, Renate, and Gremmels, Christian, eds. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Life in Pictures*. Translated by Brian McNeil, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2006.

Bezner, Steven M. "Understanding the World Better Than It Understands Itself: The Theological Hermeneutics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer." PhD dissertation, Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 2008.

Blamires, Harry. *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1980.

Bouyer, Louis. *The Christian Mystery, From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism*. Petersham, Massachusetts: Saint Bede's Publications, 1990.

Brocker, Mark S. "Bonhoeffer's Appeal for Ethical Humility." *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Vol. 3, issue 8 (August 2003)

http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/839?_ga=1.99440281.667982572.1472415321 (accessed December 15, 2015).

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Burtness, James. *Bonhoeffer und Luther: Zur Sozialgestalt des Luthertums in der Moderne* [Bonhoeffer and Luther: The social form of Lutheranism in modernity]. In *Internationales Bonhoeffer Forum*, Vol. 6. Edited by Christian Gremmel. München: Chr. Kaiser, 1983.

Caputo, John D. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 2006.

Casey, Michael. *Sacred Reading, The Art of Lectio Divina*. Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1996.

Champion, Maxwell Lloyd. "Knowledge of God as the Transformation of Human Existence in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer." PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1988.

Childs, Brevard S. *Recent Bonhoeffer Research in a Canonical Context*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1970.

Coffman, Elesha. "Dietrich's Friend Eberhard, A fellow resister of the Nazis, editor, and biographer dies half a century after his subject and companion," *Christianity Today* (April 28, 2000), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/aprilweb-only/55.0c.html?start=1> (accessed October 31, 2015)

Conway, John S. *Bonhoeffer Conference 2006*, Regent College, Lecture 4, Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent Bookstore, Audio Recording, 2006.

Csepregi, Andras. Interview by Agnes Fekete, *Református Félóra* [Reformed Half-hour], Kossuth Radio Broadcasting, Budapest, October 21, 2015.

_____. "Követés és ellenállás: láthatóan és láthatatlanul" [Following and Resistance: Visible and Invisible]. Lecture, Bonhoeffer Conference, John Wesley Theological College, Budapest, April 9, 2016.

_____. "Two Ways to Freedom, Christianity and Democracy in the Thought of István Bibó and Dietrich Bonhoeffer." *Acta Theologica Lutherana Budapestinensia II*, Budapest: University of Lutheran Theology, 2003.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Dahill, Lisa. "Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 1, no. 2, The Johns Hopkins University Press (Fall 2001): 186-203.

De Gruchy, John W. *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1984.

_____, ed. *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1997.

_____. *Daring, Trusting Spirit, Bonhoeffer's Friend, Eberhard Bethge*. London: SCM Press, London, 2005.

_____. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ, A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*. London: Collins, 1963.

_____. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer." In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 93. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005.

_____. "The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy, 93-109. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

DeJonge, Michael. *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation, Berlin, Barth, & Protestant Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Dekar, Paul R. *Community of the Transfiguration, The Journey of a New Monastic Community*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008.

Dick, Elmer., ed. *The Act of Bible Reading*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

Dramm, Sabine. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, An introduction to his Thought*. Translated by Thomas Rice. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.

Dumas, André. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Theologian of Reality*. New York, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1971.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Ebeling, Gerhard. *Word and Faith*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1963.

Feil, Ernst. "Bonhoeffer studies in Germany: A Survey of Recent Literature." In *Bonhoeffer Studies*, no.1, Kelly, Geoffrey B. Series Editor. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: International Bonhoeffer Society English Language Section, Bonhoeffer Center, 1997.

_____. *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by Martin Rumscheidt. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1985.

Floyd, Wayne Whitson. *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive Theory, Essays on Methods and Understanding*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2013.

_____. *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1988.

Floyd, Wayne Whitson and Frick, Peter. "The Imitatio Christi of Thomas á Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer." In *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*, Edited by Peter Frick, 31-52, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck (Religion in Philosophy and Theology, 29), 2008.

Godsey, John D. *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1960.

Gollwitzer, Helmut. "The Way of Obedience." In *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith and translated from the German by Kathe Gregor Smith, 138-144. St James Place, London: Collins, 1966.

Green, Clifford J. *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999.

_____. "Bonhoeffer's Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm." In *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, Edited by Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, 205-218. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2013.

_____. "Human sociality and Christian community." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by John W. de Gruchy, 113-133. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

_____. "Two Bonhoeffers on Psychoanalysis." In *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, Edited by A. J. Klassen, 58-75. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1981.

Gregory of Nyssa. *The Life of Moses*, Translated Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe, Classics of Western Spirituality, New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.

_____. *The Social God and the Relational Self, A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Guigo II. *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, London: Mowbray, 1938 Garden City: Doubleday, 1978. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, CS 48, 1981.

Harnack, Adolph von. *What is Christianity?* Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1986. First published in 1901.

Hauerwas, Stanley. *Hannah's Child*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010.

Haynes, Stephen R., and Hale, Lori Brandt. *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Heltzel, Peter Goodwin. "The Weakness of God," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 7.2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 96-97.

Houston, James M. *Joyful Exiles, Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

Huntemann, Georg. *The Other Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by Todd Huizinga. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993.

Jensen, Hans-Werner. "Life Together." In *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith and translated from the German by Kathe Gregor Smith, 152-155. St James Place, London: Collins, 1966.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Kant, Immanuel. *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960.

Kelly, Geoffrey B., and Nelson, F. Burton. *The Cost of Moral Leadership, The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003.

_____. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Interpretation of Scripture for the Church," *Ex Auditu*, 17 (2001): 1-30.

_____. "The influence of Kierkegaard on Bonhoeffer's Concept of Discipleship." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1974): 148-151.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Luther, Der Einzelne und die Kirche: Über Luther und den Protestantismus*. Translated by W. Kütemmeyer, Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag/Der Neue Geist Verlag, 1934.

_____. *The Sickness unto Death*, Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946.

Kelly, James Patrick. "Recent Bonhoeffer Research: On Making Sense of Bonhoeffer's Ethics." Convocation at Lexington Seminary, 20 April, 1990. *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 25, UTS Archives, Bonhoeffer Secondary Papers, Series 2A Box 2. (October 1990): 112-115.

Kuske, Martin. *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation*. Translated by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1976.

Lawrence, Joel. *Bonhoeffer: A Guide to the Perplexed*. London: T&T Clark International, 2010.

Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, A Study of Monastic Culture*. New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.

Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, Sabine. *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Louth, Andrew. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, From Plato to Denys*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

Luther, Martin. *Devotional Writings, Luther's Works*, vol. 42. Edited by Martin O. Dietrich. Translated by Martin H. Bertram. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1969.

_____. *Lectures on Romans*. Edited by Wilhelm Pauck. Westminster, Philadelphia: John Knox Press, 1961.

Marsh, Charles. Interview by R. Albert Mohler, Jr. "Christianity amid the Ruins: A Conversation about Dietrich Bonhoeffer with Professor Charles Marsh", An Interview of "Thinking in Public". April 13, 2015. <http://www.albertmohler.com>. (accessed December 16, 2015.)

_____. *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

_____. *Resisting the Bonhoeffer Brand: A Life Reconsidered*. Atlanta, Georgia: Cascade Books, 2023.

_____. *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

Michener, Ronald, T. *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013.

Moltmann, Jürgen and Jürgen Weissbach. *Two Studies in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by Reginard H. Fuller, New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.

Müller, Hanfried. *Von der Kirche zur Welt: Ein Beitrag zu der Beziehung des Wort Gottes auf die Societas in Dietrich Bonhoeffers theologische Entwicklung*. Leipzig and Hamburg-Bergstedt: Reich, 1966.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. "The Death of a Martyr." *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 11 (1945): 6-7.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Ott, Heinrich. *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. London: Lutterworth, 1971.

Pangritz, Andreas. *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999.

_____. “Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?” In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by John W. de Gruchy, 134-153, New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Penner, Myron Bradley. *End of Apologetics, The Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013.

Philips, John A. *The Form of Christ in the World, A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*. London: Collins, 1967.

Plant, Stephen. *Taking Stock of Bonhoeffer: Studies in Biblical Interpretation and Ethics*. Abingdon, England: Routledge Publishing, 2016.

Pryzwara, Erich. *Religionsphilosophie Katholischer Theologie*. München: Oldenbourg, 1927.

Richards, Jeffrey Jon. “Hermeneutics and Homiletics of Rudolf Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the American Discussion,” PhD dissertation, Marburg, Germany: Theological Faculty of the Philips-University Marburg, 2008.

Ricoeur, Paul. “The Non-Religious Interpretation of Christianity in Bonhoeffer,” Translated by Brian Gregor. In *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought, Cruciform Philosophy*, Edited by Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, 156-176. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009.

Robertson, Edwin. “Eberhard Bethge, Theologian who took Bonhoeffer's message to the world,” *The Guardian* (3 April, 2000), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/apr/03/guardianobituaries1> (accessed October 31, 2015).

Robinson, John A. T. *Honest to God*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: SCM Press, 1963.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Rumscheidt, Martin. "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by J. W. de Grouchy. 50-70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Saint Benedict of Nursia. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd., 2012.

Schlingensiepen, Ferdinand. "Making Assumptions About Dietrich: How Bonhoeffer Was Made Fit for America." *International Bonhoeffer Society Newsletter* 110 (2015): 23-27.

Schönherr, Albrecht. "The Single-heartedness of the Provoked." In *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, Translated by Kathe Gregor Smith, 126-129. St James Place, London: Collins, 1966.

Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009.

Taylor, Justin. "Interview of Justin Taylor with Eric Metaxas", *The Gospel Coalition*, (April 26, 2010), <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2010/04/26/an-interview-with-eric-metaxas-on-bonhoeffer> (accessed February 7, 2016)

Tietz-Steiding, Christiane. *Bonhoeffers Kritik der verkrümmten Vernunft: Eine erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 112, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1999.

_____. "Bonhoeffer's Strong Christology in the Context of Religious Pluralism." In *Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*, Edited by Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, 181-196. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2013.

_____. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theologe im Widerstand*. München: C. H. Beck, 2013. Published in English as *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2016.

Torrance, Alan. "Preface" in Justin Thacker, *Postmodernism and the Ethics of Theological Knowledge*. London, Routledge: Ashgate Publishing, 2007.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Van den Heuvel, Steven. "Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology and Fundamental Debates in Environmental Ethics." PhD. Dissertation, Leuven: Evangelische Theologische Faculteit and Kampen: TU, 2015.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

_____. ed., *Postmodern Theology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Volf, Miroslav and McAnnally-Linz, Ryan. *The Home of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, Baker, 2022.

Walker, Jon. *In Visible Fellowship, A Contemporary View of Bonhoeffer's Classic Work Life Together*. Abilene, Texas: Leafwood Publishers, 2011.

Weikart, Richard. "The Troubling Truth About Bonhoeffer's Theology." *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 35, no. 06, 2012.

Westphal, Merold. *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009.

Walterstorff, Nicholas. "Finitum Capax". *Truth and the Crisis of the Post-Modern University*, Audio lecture, ID: RGDL2520H, Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent Bookstore, 1995.

Willmer, Haddon. "Costly Discipleship." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by John W. de Gruchy, 173-189. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Zimmermann, Jens. "Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Humanism." In *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, Edited by Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, 25-48. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

_____. “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Heidegger: Two Different Visions of Humanity.” In *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, Edited by Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, 102-136. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009.

_____. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism*. Oxford University Press 2019.

_____. “Finitum Capax Infinity or The Presencing of Christ: A Response to Stephen Plant and Robert Steiner.” In *God Speaks to Us, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Biblical Hermeneutics*, Edited by Ralph K. Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmermann, 85-98. Frankfurt am Main: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Peter Lang Edition 2013.

_____. “Recovering Incarnational Humanism.” In *Tradition and Formation: Claiming an Inheritance. Essays in Honor of Peter C. Erb*, Edited by Michel Desjardins and Harold Remus, 361-79. Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2008.

_____. *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics, An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004.

Zimmermann, Wolf-Dieter. “Finkenwalde.” In *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, translated from the German by Kathe Gregor Smith, 107-111. St James Place, London: Collins, 1966.

_____. “Years in Berlin.” In *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, translated from the German by Kathe Gregor Smith, 59-67. St James Place, London: Collins, 1966.

Films

Beller, Hava Kohav. *The Restless Conscience, Resistance to Hitler in Nazi Germany*, DVD. Docurama Films, 1992.

Doblmeier, Martin. *Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*. DVD. Journey Films, South Carolina ETV, 2003.

10.18456/EHE.2025.001

Mohan, T. N. *Hanged on a Twisted Cross*. DVD. Written by Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge and Christian Gremmels. Worcester, Pennsylvania: Lathika International Film and Entertainment Inc., 1996.

Till, Eric. *Bonhoeffer, Agent of Grace*. DVD. Gateway Films, Vision Video, Worcester, 2000.