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Evangelikus  
Hittudományi  
Egyetem

DOCTORAL SCHOOL

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

EMBODIED CHRISTOLOGY:

AN EXPLORATION OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S LIFELONG QUEST

FOR THE SELF-MANIFESTING CHRIST

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Budapest, 2024.



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## Research Background and Objectives

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), one of the most influential German Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, has been interpreted in various ways. Some see in him a resister, others a pacifist, some consider him a liberal theologian, still others an evangelical theologian. Despite these varying perspectives, there is consensus among all Bonhoeffer scholars that Christology is central to Bonhoeffer's theological legacy. It is therefore striking that no comprehensive study of Bonhoeffer's Christological emphases has been published since Ernst Feil's *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (1977). While hundreds of books and articles have appeared on Bonhoeffer's Christology over the past five decades, they tend to either focus on a particular work or a specific period of Bonhoeffer's life.

The dissertation seeks to address this lacuna by examining Bonhoeffer's Christology across the entirety of his theological works and in light of the relevant secondary literature. It interprets Bonhoeffer's various Christological emphases in the context of the corresponding periods of his life, the specific works that contain these emphases, and Bonhoeffer's theological development. The purpose of the dissertation is to demonstrate that incarnation-centered Christology is both the interpretative key and the unifying source of Bonhoeffer's intellectual legacy.

## Research Premise

Bonhoeffer's perspectives on Christ can be best understood as an interplay between the influences from the biblical depictions of Christ and the prisms that were shaped by Bonhoeffer's life experiences amidst the circumstances of his narrative.

## Key Findings

Bonhoeffer's Christology is a fusion of the emphases on God's ongoing act of self-revelation in Christ and the affirmation of the diversity inherent in creaturely existence. Bonhoeffer's Christology is indispensable for the correct interpretation of the Bonhoeffer corpus, as it helps to recognize the inner cohesion in all of Bonhoeffer's endeavors, while appreciating the diversity of his emphases.

## The Development of Bonhoeffer's Christology

**1. Bonhoeffer's Christology is dynamic.** It can be captured as a narrative gradually unfolding in Bonhoeffer's lifelong quest for Christ. In this narrative, Christ reveals himself to the truth-seeking Bonhoeffer with different emphases at different life stages, namely:

- (1) as a conceptual skeleton for the idea of sociality,
- (2) as the way of knowing truth,
- (3) as the One in whom God encounters people,
- (4) as the Lord who calls people to follow him,
- (5) as community,
- (6) as the human being existing for the other,
- (7) as the suffering servant uniting himself with the powerless.

**2. Bonhoeffer's Christology is progressive and continuously changing.** Bonhoeffer's portraiture of Christ initiates in a broad *theoretical* expanse, later narrows to *confessional* identity, and culminates in opening toward *cosmic* spaciousness.

This progression resembles the flow of sand through an hourglass from the abstract Christ through the concrete Christ to the cosmic Christ.

### **2. A. The first phase of Bonhoeffer's Christology, between 1927 and 1931, is characterized by a theoretical approach put forth in his doctoral and postdoctoral dissertations *Sanctorum Communio* and *Akt und Sein* [Act and Being].**

For Bonhoeffer, this period is marked by the desire to formulate an overarching thought. Christology in Bonhoeffer's conception at the time is primarily an abstract system that provides a conceptual framework for all of reality.

It is here that his theological concepts such as the „collective person” and „vicarious representative action” are born, which remain key concepts in Bonhoeffer's later works.

This initial period in Bonhoeffer's Christology, like the upper expanse of the hourglass, appears as an all-embracing abstraction, which Bonhoeffer later refers to as merely „phraseological”.

**2. B. The second phase in Bonhoeffer's Christology, between 1931 and 1937, is represented by *Schöpfung und Fall* [Creation and Fall] and several other lectures, and his books *Discipleship* and *Life Together*.**

This second period is governed by Bonhoeffer's conviction that Christ is most fully revealed in the act of personal encounter with him and through the community of confessing Christians. Bonhoeffer upholds that Christ is known in unhesitant following in response to his call. The church is defined by following Jesus. In Bonhoeffer's eyes, those who do not meet this criterion are excluded from knowing Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's Christology like the neck of an hourglass narrows during these years. Looking back on this standpoint in a few years', Bonhoeffer himself is critical of his elitist position.

**2. C. The third phase of Bonhoeffer's Christology falls between 1938 to 1945. It is his *Ethics* published posthumously and his *Prison Letters*, especially the ones Bethge calls 'theological letters' that give voice to Bonhoeffer's Christological approach during this period.**

In this final phase, Bonhoeffer sees and envisions a Christ who expresses himself in solidarity with the powerless and the suffering, manifesting himself especially in and through those who are vulnerable and defenseless.

Bonhoeffer's Christology is once again characterized by spaciousness. Although this kind of expansiveness differs from that of the first phase: for Bonhoeffer, life is no longer held together by a theoretical model, but by God's personal concern. God manifests himself in all responsible and loving action. In Bonhoeffer's view, the natural and the supernatural do not compete, unlike in Luther's and Calvin's understanding, but are equally valuable, God-chosen arenas of the manifestation of grace, that is, of God's self-revelation.

Bonhoeffer's Christology like the lower part of an hourglass expands introducing the concepts of "unconscious Christians" and "religionless Christianity" and envisions the cosmic Christ who one day will be all in all.

## Four Key Characteristics of Bonhoeffer's Christology

**1. *In Bonhoeffer's Christology, the incarnation is an already complete yet ongoing act.***

Bonhoeffer depicts Christ as the One in whom the perfect unity of the divine and the human is already fully manifested in the first century yet seeks to manifest anew in every age and in every person.

**2. *Bonhoeffer's Christology is both indicative and imperative. These two are simultaneously and inseparably true.***

For Bonhoeffer after the turn of his life in 1931-1932, a Christology that does not confront and challenge is not Christology at all; Christology, by definition, calls for a response, confronting human beings at their core.

**3. *Bonhoeffer's Christology is radically hopeful.***

Bonhoeffer underlines, especially in his later works, that all that exists is being reordered on its way to ultimate reconciliation. This hopefulness is reflected in that Bonhoeffer compared to mainline Protestant thought elevates the value of the created world and 'this-worldliness'. Not merely on the grounds of having been created - suggesting that what has come from a good Creator cannot be bad - but due to the restoration already accomplished in Christ. In other words, the created world in its present state is to be understood from the perspective of its future fulfillment.

**4. *For Bonhoeffer, Christology is the heart of soteriology.***

Bonhoeffer is consistent in upholding that it is in Christ that the union of the divine and the human takes place. This Irenean emphasis linking Christology and soteriology so closely is rare in 20th century Protestant theologians. It is foundational to Bonhoeffer that the salvation Jesus brings is participation in the divine nature.

## Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's seven main works describe seven consecutive phases of his Christology, while two distinctive Bonhoefferean traits run through the entire corpus. On the one hand, his Christology takes different forms, sometimes clashing with each other, but Bonhoeffer is not afraid of this, he respects reality as he perceives it in its multiplicity. On the other hand, at the core of the different emphases and diverse forms of manifestation of Bonhoeffer's Christology

their common essence is brought to light: the loving, creating and redeeming God unceasingly seeking to reveal himself in Christ.

In the final analysis, Bonhoeffer's bold Christology is a catalyst. Bonhoeffer is convinced that Christology as a discipline, by its very nature, is meant to facilitate the process of Christ manifesting ever more fully in and through human beings. The authenticity of this manifestation is guaranteed by the presence and the person of Jesus, his will, his character, his compassion, and the fulfilment of his love. For Bonhoeffer, there is only one kind of Christianity: the one that embodies Christ.



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