

## **Living through the fire: Bonhoeffer's thoughts on a credible church for today**

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### **Abstract**

This article offers a brief excursion into Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, arguing that Bonhoeffer's struggle throughout his life to render the church of his day more credible and authentic, was at the very heart of his theology. In this regard the article will highlight three characteristics of what a credible church meant for Bonhoeffer. After unpacking Bonhoeffer's theological arguments in this regard, they will then be applied to our own context.

### **Key words**

*Bonhoeffer; ecclesiology; spirituality; authenticity*

## **1. A brief introduction into Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology**

The vast literature on Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology today confirms the fact that he had a very particular interest in the church of his day. Not only did the church form the central theme of his theological reflections, but his theological endeavour was almost exclusively in service of the church. In fact his work and writings were continuously, as his life unfolded in different contexts, shaped and employed to help the church in a time of extreme pressure and persecution to stay true to its own identity (Godsey 1960:17).

In this regard Bonhoeffer throughout his life was intrigued by the mystery that the church as a human entity or institution could also at the same time act as the bearer of God's revelation in Christ – that is as the place

which God chose to make his will for the world visibly known and tangible. After Bonhoeffer, in an ironic twist of his life, discovered in Rome that the institutional church can indeed, through its colourful liturgies and rituals, serve as a vehicle of God's grace to ordinary people, the life and witness of the church became his main focus as he embarked on his doctoral studies (Wind 1990: 31-33; GS VI:60-73).

The big problem addressed in *Sanctorum Communio* – his somewhat ambitious and overly academic doctoral dissertation – can be articulated in the following question: “How can the church as a community of saints empirically exist or operate as a social institute?” (Berger 1962:57)

Unlike scholars like Troeltsch and Barth who, although for different reasons, relativized the visible church and its meaning for the world, Bonhoeffer in *Sanctorum Communio* developed a theory in which he not only fully accepted the importance of the empirical church, but also insisted on a close connection or coherence between the concrete church and its theological essence (Koegelenberg 1990:142). In fact, it was his conviction that the mystery of the church will only be properly understood if we constantly keep this close unity between the human and divine dimensions of the church in mind.

It was Wolfgang Huber who, in one of the more significant contributions on Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, showed how Bonhoeffer's struggle to retain this unity between what he called the essence and the empirical shape of the church, that is between the truth which the church confesses and the manner in which this truth is proclaimed, lived and structured, played a central role throughout his life (Huber 1985:170).

It is important to remember that Bonhoeffer's efforts to clarify and resolve this ecclesial problem did not remain, as reflected in his ground-breaking dissertation a purely academic interest or exercise. As the political and social pressure mounted – due mainly to Hitler's racial policies and the paralyzing effect it had on the authority and form of the official German church – the gap between, what Lange (Lange 1967:526) calls, the existing empirical church and the church that had, in term of its theological essence, still to be visibly realised, became bigger. Hence the question was no longer just to theoretically understand and clarify the theological mystery of the empirical church.

The question now was of a more urgent and practical nature namely how the empirical church can really become the true church in times of extreme pressure and blackmail. Or in terms of our theme: How can the church, while living through the fire, retain its unique identity, meaning? “How can it still visibly and concretely express and hold on to its confession, despite extreme pressure and even persecution, thereby proving itself to be a credible witness to Christ in the world? And that not only through its preaching, but especially through its actions and life form, that is through the way it also visibly assembled, structured and managed its institutional life?

For Bonhoeffer this concretely structured life form of the church which was constantly evoked and also challenged by the Word of God, was not only supposed to reveal its essence as the body of Christ – it was also meant to serve as the critical norm for the quality of the truth it claimed to exemplify and serve (Honecker 1963:138). Because in practice – and that happened as the Confessing Church became more compromised and was drawn into Hitler’s war by allowing their pastors to be conscripted into war work – the church was able through its preaching and confessions to subscribe to sound teaching, while at the same time live a lie.

This struggle to help the church counter the lie and become a credible witness for Christ, especially through its life form and actions, should however not only be seen as the central theme in Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, thus lying, in the words of Eberhard Bethge “Ganz am Kerne” (Bethge: 1990, Personal interview), that is: at the very heart of Bonhoeffer’s thoughts – it should also be distinguished from the more popular quest to be simply relevant.

This latter statement is quite important. Because more than the search to be credible the quest to be relevant, which characterizes so many of the current churches’ efforts to survive, often remains trapped in strategies that are solely opportunistic and pragmatic. These strategies often play up to the traditional sentiments and claims of the so called weak and thus ignore or put on hold the more crucial question – often posed by the more prophetic voices in the church – regarding the true identity of the church and how the struggle to uphold should eventually inform the necessary strategies.

According to Huber this was the great contribution of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, however fragmented and open it was. In die words of Huber:

“Bonhoeffer's contribution to the problem of appropriate church action, showed that as far as the theological ground for such actions was concerned, it made no sense to isolate the question regarding the right strategy for church action from the question regarding the grounds and the goal for such action. The efficiency of the church's action can never be properly tested independently of the reflection on the theological grounds for such an action.” (Huber 1985:200-201).

This brings us to a further interesting perspective with regard to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. Given that Bonhoeffer's struggle for the church's credibility was throughout his life at the very heart of his theology, the credibility question thus also provides an important key to the continuity in Bonhoeffer's thoughts concerning the church.

The debate about the continuity in Bonhoeffer's ecclesial thought, was introduced more pertinently by the East German theologian Hanfried Müller who argued in his book “Von der Kirche zur Welt” (Müller 1956) – which was, by the way, the first systematic study of Bonhoeffer's theology after the war – that there was towards the end of Bonhoeffer's life, specifically when he became more disillusioned with the Confessing Church's inability to address the challenges of the hour, a definite break or a qualitative leap in Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological thought (Müller 1963:49).

The argument would then be that specifically during the time of his *Ethics* and his imprisonment, when he was reflecting on the responsibility of the Christian community and especially on the role of religion, first of all in a misguided society, but also in a secular environment, we have, according to Ernst Lange, a so called functionalization of the church, thus a move which deliberately undervalued its institutional structure or role and reduced its identity to humane deeds of solidarity and fellow-feeling, especially towards those that suffer (Lange 1967: 544).

This viewpoint is not widely supported today. Even when Bonhoeffer later in his life focused more strongly on the secular meaning of the gospel, defining the church's role more pertinently within this context, it did not render the empirical church totally irrelevant or redundant. Neither was

the church's theological essence or identity at this stage understood only in term of its worldly function. (Peters 1987:170-171).

While the political turmoil indeed at the time made the church's social or worldly involvement almost a condition sine qua non for the realization of its true essence or identity, this did not exclude efforts to give institutional structure to this deliberate focus on the world. In fact these efforts, even when they were only visible in the work and actions of individuals, whether of an ecumenical, confessional or secular flavour, could (according to Bonhoeffer's reasoning), well serve as a vital nourishing source for a new form of institutional life. This conclusion is not only confirmed by the outline of his planned last book (WE: 413-416) – which was unfortunately destroyed – but also by Bonhoeffer's vision of how the church needed to exist and operate in the future.

So to conclude: It is clear that Bonhoeffer, exactly for the reason that the church should remain true to its own unique identity and thus be a credible witness to Christ, consistently and in different ways held on to what can be called: the “dialectical unity” between the church's essence and its ensuing life form. Or put in other words: between a necessary distance from and an inescapable solidarity with society and its plight.

And where the church failed in this regard, Bonhoeffer's sacrificial choices, which eventually led to his death, became the ultimate symbol or example of how one's beliefs and actions, confession and life can collude, making it clear what a credible life and witness is all about.

## **2. Characteristics of a credible church**

What does a credible church today look like in terms of Bonhoeffer's thoughts?

### **(a) A church who is not afraid to embrace the apostolic tradition that proclaims Christ as Lord and centre of the universe**

Like with the authors of the Bible one can hardly miss that from very early on Bonhoeffer in an almost childlike way accepted the existence and reality of God. Although he grew up in a liberal and partly unreligious family, Bonhoeffer seemingly never harboured any agnostic or atheistic feelings.

On the contrary, his interest in theology and especially his choice to become a theologian – although at first somewhat strange and embarrassing for his family – over time became a taken-for-granted part of his life. This choice was again inspired by and over time strengthened by a very strong, but growing conviction that the God of the Bible is indeed a caring God who is deeply involved in the affairs of humans, especially when their lives become strenuous, if not unbearable.

On occasion of his father's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday Bonhoeffer wrote in his very first letter from prison to his parents the following:

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation...Shelters thee under his wings, yea, and greatly sustaineth.” He then adds: “That is true, and it is what we must always rely on.” (WE:31-32).

In his last letter from Tegel on August 23, 1944 this conviction is even more strongly expressed when he writes:

“I am so sure of God's guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty...My past life is brim-full of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified... May God take care of you and all of us, and grant us the joy of meeting again soon. I am praying for you every day.” (WE:427-428).

A few days earlier he wrote similarly:

“God does not give us everything we want, but He does fulfil his promises.” And then a page further on he adds: “If Jesus had not lived, then our life would be meaningless, in spite of all the other people whom we know and honour and love.” (WE:425-426).

And then finally on the day before he was executed he held a worship service referring amongst other things to this text from 1 Peter 3:3:

“Blessed be God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (Metaxas 2010: 528).

What immediately strikes the observant reader is the easy and almost unproblematic way Bonhoeffer interchanges the terms God and Christ in these letters, suggesting that they signify the same divine reality. This striking trend in Bonhoeffer's almost childlike testimonies was of

course not accidental. In fact it represented a fundamental view on God and God's dealings with our world, one which not only determined the unique character of his theological reflections, but also coloured the way he engaged with the church throughout his life.

Under the influence of Karl Barth's dialectical theology, Bonhoeffer in his thoughts on God, from the outset embraced the apostolic testimony that the God of Israel revealed Godself in the incarnated Logos that is in the life, works and words of an ordinary Jewish man called Jesus of Nazareth (Pfeifer 1963:73-79).

“All that we rightfully expect from God, or may ask from God, is to be found in Jesus Christ.” (WE: 425).

In fact, in this Jesus's life, according to Bonhoeffer, the mystery of God's transcendence offers itself no longer as a distanced and inaccessible reality, but as a gift of ongoing and undeserved encounter. In the words of Pfeifer:

“God's transcendence, or better God's extra me, is not to be understood in a far off transcendental way, but in a more personalistic manner, that is in the encounter with our fellow being.” (Pfeifer 1963:82).

This belief was fundamental to Bonhoeffer's understanding of God and persisted until the time of his imprisonment when he wrote:

“Das Jenseitige ist nicht das unendliche Ferne, sondern das Nächste”  
– “That which is beyond is not at an infinite distance, but is that which is closest.” (WE:408).

The Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who through his death and resurrection became for his followers the risen Lord, eventually was for Bonhoeffer the answer to a lifelong longing that God should reveal himself more visibly and concretely in our bewildered world. According to Bonhoeffer – and this he already spelled out in his earliest Christology lectures (GS III:166-242) – Christ was, although hidden in human weakness, this visible face of God, the presence of the divine Other, the vital encounter in our life. In the life of Christ, God, so Bonhoeffer argued, is first of all revealed as a God pro me, a God who sides with humankind as a loving and forgiving God,

constantly offering us the gift of justification, reconciliation and peace in and through Christ.

At the same time Christ for Bonhoeffer revealed God as a divine reality who longed to enter and claim the very centre of our lives. It was specifically this belief that triggered his resistance against any concept of God that relegated God to the fringes of our life, either as a “God of gaps” or as an “emergency solution” in times of distress. His reluctance in prison to help those in panic is explained by this conviction (WE:307).

Indeed it is at the centre of our lives where the God in Christ exercises His Lordship by saving and confirming our humanity, allowing us to be secular, free and independent – living, similar to the suffering Christ, before God as if God was not there (WE:394-396). Here in solidarity with the suffering Christ, those who follow God were are also challenged to seek their true humanity, not in the superficial offers and joys of life, but in the sacrificial life of Christ, thereby becoming a church for others and a credible witnesses to Jesus as Lord of all (WE:401-402).

It is especially at this junction where it becomes clear how Bonhoeffer, although still adhering to the confession of Chalcedon, eventually located the central christological problem not primarily, like the classical tradition, in the relationship of God to Jesus, nor even of Jesus to the church, but in the relationship of Jesus and the world (Philips 1967:83).

This then became the leading question as Bonhoeffer’s struggle with the church to be a credible witness to Christ intensified, namely, “Who is Christ for us today?” (WE: 305). Or as it was posed earlier in the *Ethics*: “How can Christ become visibly embodied in the church as his body?” (Anthonissen 152, 179). It was only when something of Christ starts shining through in the life of the church that the church approaches its true identity. Because in the end Christ and Christ’s gracious identification with the church as his living body is the only criterion and guarantee for its credibility.

Listening to how Bonhoeffer’s faith in Christ as the Lord and centre of life informed and eventually determined his struggle to render the church more credible, the question arises anew to what extent this apostolic faith or confession still holds true for the church of today. Even more



importantly: Does it still have a central and determining influence on the life and witness of the church today?

Similar to Bonhoeffer there are different voices today that challenge the truth and validity of the traditional confession which regards Jesus as God's revelation to the world. From the side of the natural sciences we are almost daily confronted with new questions regarding the truth of the biblical view on life, leading to new doubts about the existence of God as creator and provider.

Biblical scholars themselves are today raising new questions regarding the identity of Christ and his claims to divinity. These questions of course can rarely be ignored by the church any more. When taken seriously they can help the church not only to sharpen its hermeneutical tools, but also, like with Bonhoeffer, find fresh language with which to understand, translate and proclaim its message.

However, it will be of great concern, especially with regard to the church's credibility in a modern age, if an inability – or even reluctance – to meet and address these questions properly, will lead, on the one hand to an alienated fundamentalist response. Or even worse: if, on the other hand, it triggers a process of self-secularization within the church which not only will lead members away from the revelatory truth regarding Christ, but also renders the Bonhoefferian confession about Jesus superfluous and embarrassing.

Without underplaying the complexity and seriousness of the question, specifically the confession regarding the divinity of Jesus Christ as Lord, which for Bonhoeffer throughout his life remained the vital criterion for the credibility of the Church's message and identity, I briefly want to draw your attention to what can be called the debate about the so called sources that currently inform our choices regarding this very fundamental theological issue.

Already Bonhoeffer in his early Christological lectures, by referring to the self-testimony of Jesus as the source of faith in his divine nature, had in his own way unmasked the inadequacy of the historical studies of his time to penetrate and reveal this mystery hidden in the life of the man Jesus.

Today research has of course progressed much further, revealing new sources as well as fascinating outside Biblical analogies to the gospel stories

and the apostolic tradition, specifically regarding the accounts about the birth and resurrection of Christ. Although these studies do indeed shed new light on the history and life of Christ, it remains a question whether they, when weighed up against the older and more extensive gospel and apostolic traditions, are adequate and convincing enough to totally relativize or nullify the truth claimed by the gospels with regard to Jesus.

On a more personal note: Reading some of the newer studies, I have discovered that although many of the new research and their almost revolutionary insights and claims, do resonate with my own curious and somewhat modern, critical mind, I have over the years felt myself increasingly drawn and definitely more moved, inspired and consoled by those who, like Bonhoeffer, had to wrench these truths from the proverbial fire, and then being so surprised and convinced by them, found themselves willing to suffer and die for it. Such a raw existential struggle with the truth just rings much more true and credible than an exclusively theoretical and more distanced involvement with the truth.

If we relate to this the question regarding the reasons for the dramatic changes in the lives of those in the New Testament who confessed Jesus as Lord – and there are many – with Paul as a prime example – the issue becomes even more fascinating. Because then we really need to look anew at the status and “truth-quality” of these testimonies. Granted, we are free to speculate from a more psychological or even sociological angle about what made someone like Paul make a 180-degree turn in his life, but it should not make us so short-sighted, sceptical and even dishonest to ignore his own version or testimony.

Thus we must be careful not to bypass or ignore the apostolic tradition, or even worse, to deal with it in such a selective way that we render it insignificant. Apart from the fact that it still forms the bigger bulk of the testimonies concerning the identity of Jesus, even allowing us to experience his Lordship through many eyes, this was the tradition from which Bonhoeffer drew his inspiration and courage. This was also the tradition in which he wanted to immerse the church, although in a new way, helping her to become a truthful witness to the living Christ – a church who is no longer ashamed to live from the testimony of the apostles and in accordance with them keeps confessing and proclaiming Christ as the centre and Lord of the universe.

**(b) A church who dares, on behalf of the world, to be an alternative community**

It is a well-known fact how Bonhoeffer at an early stage of his life complained that the invisibility of God was driving him crazy. He longed to know and even experience God's involvement with our lives more directly and concretely.

Partly inspired by the liberal tradition's wish to render the mystery of the divine rationally more accessible – thereby making Christianity also more relevant for a secular world – but at the same time also acknowledging this tradition's obvious limitations, Bonhoeffer eventually found the key to knowing God in Karl Barth's scriptural viewpoint – a viewpoint that claims that God had, before and also apart from any human initiative, intention or faculty, revealed Himself coming to us in the person of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth (Anthonissen:116-118).

Unlike Barth however it did not satisfy Bonhoeffer only to adhere to this so-called historical or temporal dimension of God's revelation. Latching on to Luther's "finitum capax infiniti"- position, which in opposition to the extra-Calvinisticum principle, longed to vindicate for faith the possession of the divine, making it possible to have a more direct and clear grasp or hold on it, Bonhoeffer claimed and introduced what can be called a more spatial dimension for God's revelation (De Gruchy 1972:107-108; Mayer 1969:41)

That God's revelation also included such a spatial dimension was due to the fact that God's freedom, according to Bonhoeffer was never meant only to be a freedom from people, but also a freedom for them – a freedom expressed in God's willingness to stand by us and to form a visible bond or covenant with people. In the end this is what makes God's revelation humanly more accessible and palpable (AS:85)

Although Bonhoeffer was careful not to compromise God's freedom and sovereignty in the way he depicted or described the space where God's revelation became visible, he was also quite ready to give the revelation a specific form. Following from his belief that Christ was the kernel of God's revelation, the space where this revelation touched down and gained its visible form was for him nothing else than the church as the body of Christ, the concrete expression of God's will for humankind (AS:112).

As such the church needed to express itself as a totally alternative and unique community, one which at the same time served as an archetype for all true community. This according to Bonhoeffer was possible because Christ's life, death and resurrection did not only signify a turn in history, but a total change and transformation in the basic relationships which people are supposed to have and maintain with one another (SC: 90-93).

On the basis of God's conciliatory work through Christ, God's spirit integrates this Christ-deed into the church, rendering Christ present in the form of community ("Christus als Gemeinde existierend"), thereby transforming the lifestyle of the church in accordance with Jesus's way of living – that is into a life of loving communion for and with the other. In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer describes this Christ-like lifestyle in a moving way showing how it expresses itself out in three distinctive ways: immediate aid and help, intercessory prayer and the forgiveness of sins (SC:106-128).

According to Renate Bethge it is quite possible that, apart from the biblical picture, Bonhoeffer's family life, where he constantly experienced the value of mutual acceptance, care and love, may have (in an indirect and unconscious manner) contributed to his description of the church as a community. In fact in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Life together* Bonhoeffer describes the family as the first and most intimate circle of community (Bethge 1987:1-23).

Whatever the case may be, it is clear, that in accordance with Bonhoeffer's belief that all biblical concepts eventually have a social intention, encouraging us to follow in Jesus's footsteps and into closer encounter and communion with our fellow believers, as well as with the suffering neighbour, the concept of community became for Bonhoeffer the main description and characteristic of a church that wanted to follow Christ and witness to Him in a credible way.

What this means is most clearly expressed by Bonhoeffer in his book *Life together*. In this powerful little book, which was the result of his own first-hand experience of such an exercise, if not an experiment in community during his Finkenwalde period, Bonhoeffer, after depicting the varied gifts of visible community, highlights one example of communal life as the extraordinary, the "roses and the lilies" of the Christian life: when

Christians commit themselves to live together in simplicity and sobriety, sharing their belongings like in the case of the first Christian communities (LT:11).

In the context of the community as a life together, a space is offered where the old disciplines and practices of the Christian faith – disciplines like communal prayer and eating together, solitude and meditation, confession and intercession, singing and play – can be freely exercised. In this way discipleship, so Bonhoeffer believed, is expressed in its most unique form or habitat. Even more importantly: a way of living is cultivated that can constantly nourish the faith of the community and help them to become more prepared and defensible in times of difficulty (Anthonissen 1993:74-80).

To a large extent this was the great value of the Finkenwalde period during which time Bonhoeffer, inspired by similar initiatives in England, set up a house for the trainees for theological education. For Bonhoeffer the community life practised there was based on the mores and guidelines of the Sermon on the Mount which became paradigmatic for the kind of discipleship that he believed Christ required from the church (Bethge: 335-336) .

Countering the criticism that Finkenwalde, by isolating itself temporarily from the direct heat of Hitler's choking laws, had compromised its witness, Day writes:

“Nothing less than living together, conviviality, sharing of resources and risk, common daily prayer and discipline and mundane cares, (all this) was necessary if the word of God was to be heard, obeyed and proclaimed in the land. That was Bonhoeffer's conviction and his experience during those years.” (Day 1975: 246-247).

As the political situation in Germany worsened, the Finkenwalde initiative and even the “Nachfolge” theology that inspired and supported it, although never totally irrelevant for Bonhoeffer, retreated somewhat into the background. Bonhoeffer was now moved to more drastic action. Acting as a respected member of the Bonhoeffer -Dohnanyi circle, one of many secret movements planning to overthrow Hitler's regime – starting with the elimination of the Führer himself – the question concerning Christ's presence in the world and the ensuing role of the church as the body of Christ, now became more urgent for Bonhoeffer (Anthonissen: 90-98).

The view of the church which emerged for Bonhoeffer during this time was that of a “community of responsibility” – a community which like Christ was willing – in this case on behalf of the oppressed and the persecuted, the majority being Jews – to oppose the powers and even to suffer on behalf of Christ. It was a community which was now also challenged to be more open and inclusive, accommodating all those who were willing to struggle and uphold those human values which over centuries had formed the basis of Western civilization.

In this regard there was a specific event which not only moved Bonhoeffer to reconsider the nature and scope of Jesus’s Lordship, but also the witness and shape of a church or community which now stood up to follow Christ as Lord in a time of crisis.

In an essay called “Kirche und Welt” Bonhoeffer refers to this amazing experience by recalling how many so-called humanists, in the hour of crisis, experienced a new affinity for the church and specifically for the gospel. It was in particular the compassionate way of Christ, exemplified in the life of many Christians, which drew them nearer. In a remarkable way – and this was how Bonhoeffer articulated it – the old humanitarian values like truth, justice and freedom suddenly found a home with Christianity and especially within a church who faithfully adhered to the gospel (Anthonissen 1993:192).

In this way the biblical word from Mark 9:40 – “For he that is not against us, is for us” – in which Christ himself expanded the church beyond the circle of disciples, fulfilled itself. Now the so-called “good person” who was prepared to suffer for justice, but did not openly confess the name of Jesus, also enjoyed room and acceptance within the church as the visible body of Christ.

These thoughts were in a fascinating way further developed in Bonhoeffer’s final writings. In his *Ethics*, which partly reflects Bonhoeffer’s effort to clarify and even lay the moral foundations for a new societal order, the leading Christological question was about “Gestaltung” (Anthonissen 1993:179), that is: “How the reality of Christ as the ‘pantokrator’ was able to transform our life, culture and history” (Anthonissen 1993:181-182).

Within this context the church as God's most important order or mandate within the structure of society represents that part of humanity where Christ initially takes form, thereby serving as the first sign of a new humanity. As such the church is called through its communal life, to exemplify the suffering Christ's inclusive and sacrificial love, thus reminding the world of its destination (Anthonissen 1993:195). To express the unique character of the church as an alternative and completely inclusive community Bonhoeffer introduced the term "Gemeinwesen" (Day 1975:368-369). In this "Gemeinwesen" or convivial togetherness, being a Christian and being human come together. The church becomes a space where human beings reach out to each other like Christ, caring and even suffering for one another. In alliance with each other they may now also enjoy play and friendship, thereby celebrating the resurrection of Christ.

In his *Letters and Papers from Prison* where Bonhoeffer was reflecting on the conditions for and especially on the form of the Christian faith in a modern secularized society, he took his reflections on the credible witness of the church as a unique and alternative community even further. Answering the leading Christological question of the time: "Who is Christ for us today?" he proposes that the meaning of Christ for us today only becomes clear where the church, like Christ becomes a community which is there for the other, prepared to live without privileges and even to suffer for and on behalf of those who suffer, in this case the Jews. That is the place where the church as the body of Christ needs to be. In fact Bonhoeffer in Thomas Day's words, proposed:

"The body of Christ as including all of humanity, a place where people of all tongues would find some common language so that all be understood. As the heart of human sympathy the church would be the starting point to winning free space in the world for art and education, for free friendship, play, the whole of what Kierkegaard called 'aesthetic existence', a place where everything serves the community and community serves others." (Day 1975:466-467).

Reflecting on the relevance of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology and especially the ongoing challenge it entails for the church to become more credible, his notion of the church as an alternative community remains without doubt one of his most potent and valuable legacies. Thomas Day expressed the

importance of this (basic notion and) thrust in Bonhoeffer's theology best when he wrote:

“Bonhoeffer's writings are there to remind us that Christ is not about building successful religious organizations, but informing human community among the poor and the suffering of the world; and that faith in Jesus' God means full, active commitment in human solidarity (Day 1975:461).

It is no surprise that this particular focus on true community as the vital key, if not the crucial prerequisite for a more credible life and witness of the church in the world, has inspired many to explore and test Bonhoeffer's suggestions. They have rightfully recognized that community not only expresses the heart of what a truthful church is all about, but also the place to which the gospel wants to constantly lead us – and that for the sake of a more just and humane world.

In the words of the Franciscan writer Richard Rohr:

“There is no other form of Christian life except a common one... Until and unless Christ is someone happening between people, the gospel remains largely an abstraction.” (Rohr 1993:50). This of course latches on to Bonhoeffer's own observation: “Christ in one's own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother.” (LT 1963:13).

Bonhoeffer's concept of the church as community first of all reminds us that a church which is only geared to serve the so-called eternal needs of the individual can miss and even distort its real purpose. Writing in an extremely helpful way Richard Rohr gives interesting insight in what this distortion is and why it happened:

“We are now paying the price of centuries of which the church was narrowed from a full vision of peoplehood to an almost total preoccupation with private persons and their devotional needs. But history has shown that individuals who are confirmed in their individualism by the very character of our evangelism will never create church, except after the model of a service station: they will use it as a commodity like everything else...We are saving souls while God is creating people” (Rohr 1993:50-51).



Further on he writes:

“If the community model of church has seldom taken hold, it can probably be attributed to many causes: individualism, authoritarianism, clericalism, fear, plus an overly intellectualized communication of the gospel. But the cause that I want to deal with is a certain kind of apathy, a fear of passion” (Rohr 1993:50-51).

Rohr’s remark, apart from offering an interesting historical analysis, also draws our attention to the positive challenge that Bonhoeffer’s concept of the church as an alternative community offers us. This challenge is to become and at the same time offer a space where people from all walks of life, including Christians from different countries, traditions, cultures, sexes, classes and races can come together to really meet and serve each other.

Of what can happen where people are drawn into real community and have an honest encounter with one another, Rohr writes grippingly:

“One of the hopeful signs of a familial church community is that the issues that we struggle with – love, sexuality, guilt, doubt, frustration, disillusionment etc. – have a safe environment where they can be dealt with openly. Here it is OK to show affection...It is acceptable to feel here, and you do not have to be ashamed or afraid. (Rohr 1993:51-52).

“The spiritual family of the church has the right theory, but lacks the practice, experience and lifestyle setting. We need quite simply places of sharing where the Word can be shared, and where hearts and bread can be broken and passed around...If the church is to be renewed, if family is to happen anywhere, we must again make it possible for heart to speak to heart” (Rohr 1993:51-52).

**(c) A church that keeps a delicate balance between solidarity and silence, between the search for justice and the necessity to pray**

For Bonhoeffer a church that risks following the incarnated Christ can never retreat into a ghetto, but is from the outset, exactly like her Lord, directed towards and involved in the world. The church is not only an end in itself, but also a means to an end.

The theological basis and impulse for this involvement was for Bonhoeffer throughout his life informed and guided by the notion of life orders, or as they were later called and explained in his Ethics, as “divine mandates”. These mandates which consist of the church, marriage and family, culture and the state were to Bonhoeffer’s mind life forms created by God.

By existing and functioning together in harmony, interacting in a cordial and healthy way, these mandates express the will of God, thereby guaranteeing the necessary peace and justice society so desperately needs. However, when one of these mandates, like in the time of Hitler’s totalitarian state, oversteps its boundaries and claims the dominant place in this delicate network, it not only disturbs the God-given order in society, but also starts to erode the moral fibre and crucial human values that are so vital for the wellbeing, harmony and happiness of a society (Anthonissen 1993:187-188).

Then the time has arrived, according to Bonhoeffer, for the church as God’s most important mandate to step in and to testify to God’s will. Bonhoeffer did not believe that it was the church’s first calling to provide a recipe devised to solve the problems of the world. No, the church needed under all circumstances to remain a credible witness to its Lord by simply staying true to its own unique identity as the body of Christ, believing that the unique form of community that it represented and embodied – that is a community of reconciliation, love and forgiveness – is not only an image of a new humanity, but a first sign of God’s love for all humanity, the crucial reminder of society’s real purpose and destination (Huber 1985:199).

Being a sign or image of God’s love of course does not exclude the courageous and prophetic proclamation of God’s word but actually calls for it. In fact the word of God and the authority of the preacher, is seen by Bonhoeffer as a vital key to and source of the church’s ongoing existence, while the unique form of the church is the visible expression of the effect and influence of God’s word in the church’s life. In this way the church becomes the place of Christ’s presence.

To express the importance and urgency of this challenge to continuously and bravely witness to the world, not only by speaking a prophetic word through preaching, but also by appealing to the world through the way in which the church exists, Bonhoeffer coined the almost provocative

phrase, that the church should heed to the commandment of the hour. This challenge was not only put to the local church, but also to the ecumenical church (Anthonissen 1993:108-115).

As the situation in Germany worsened and the pressure on the church to conform grew, Bonhoeffer's view of the manner in which the church should involve and address the challenge of the hour also changed. Whereas in earlier years the prophetic witness which Bonhoeffer expected of the church was to prepare a way for the word of God to be heard more clearly, (allowing for the church to engage more cordially and patiently with the state), his expectation at a later stage changed. In his *Ethics* and his *Letters from Prison*, he for instance suggested a more drastic, open and confrontational character, expressed specifically by the word "responsibility" (Anthonissen 1993:149-207).

In a way the notion of "responsibility" characterizes Bonhoeffer's conviction of this ongoing obligation of the church to bravely render its witness to the world. As Bonhoeffer's reflections on Christ's place and work in the world developed this responsibility became more urgent. It included not only official members of the church, but all those who were prepared to suffer for the oppressed.

Listening to this presentation one can easily get the impression that Bonhoeffer was primarily a social activist, whose main interest was the church's ongoing involvement with the issues of society; that his effort to render the community credible, was geared only to witness in public. Of course this is only partly true. For Bonhoeffer there was also a mystical core at the centre of his own life and also at the heart of the church as the body of Christ, which not only served as a nourishing source for himself and the life of the community, but also for its testimony in the world.

It is the space where Christ himself enters the heart of his followers through his Word and Spirit and where the church – by practising amongst other things the disciplines of solitude, silent contemplation, prayer, meditation and confession – is able to receive and be consoled, and yes, even changed by the gift of God's love and grace.

How this spiritual gift should be received, embraced and nurtured is wonderfully expressed by Bonhoeffer in one of his last letters to Bethge on 21 August 1944:

“We should allow ourselves again in a quiet and unhurried way, and for longer times, to become totally engrossed in the life, words, acts, suffering and death of Jesus to really discover and see what God has promised and made true.” (WE:425).

This more contemplative spirituality and pious commitment to Christ, was an indispensable part of Bonhoeffer’s life. Not only did this commitment, shortly after his return from America, change his life and moved him during his time as a lecturer and pastor in Berlin to confront some of his students with the very personal question whether they loved Jesus – it is also well known how he nurtured this relationship with the living Christ himself through the regular practice of reading the Bible and prayer (Bethge 1985: 154-155).

A vital part of the training of students in Finkenwalde within the relatively isolated context of community, was also the practising of these old disciplines, helping the Confessing Church at that time to be more prepared and defensible against the looming crises (GS I:42; GS II:285). Even after Finkenwalde had to be shut down Bonhoeffer received letters from Finkenwalde students, thanking him for introducing them to the discipline of meditation (Bethge 1985:607).

In prison Bonhoeffer maintained the daily discipline of Scripture meditation and prayer he had been practicing for more than a decade. Each morning he meditated for at least half an hour on a verse of Scripture. He also interceded for his friends and relatives, and for his brothers in the Confessing Church who were serving on the front. In one of his last letters to Bethge Bonhoeffer shares how he meditated on the Moravian daily readings (“Losungen”), remarking that all boils down to being in Him, Christ (Bethge 1985:425).

But for Bonhoeffer the practice of these disciplines was not only a personal necessity, it was also an unflinching condition for a credible and meaningful testimony of the church in the world. For it is only when God is allowed to serve his followers in spaces of silence and prayerful expectation with his

love, that their words and witness will also have power and meaning. That is why the so called cultus or inner life of the church is always extremely important for Bonhoeffer, also when suggests that the church has to interpret and live the gospel in a new non-religious way.

What that would entail was never properly spelled out by Bonhoeffer, but he did give a clue by referring to the importance of the so-called *disciplina arcana* (Anthonissen 1993:232-240). The *disciplina arcana* encompassed those disciplines which from earlier ages formed the sacred heart of the church's existence. They were vital in protecting the church from rendering its message profane and impious.

It is necessary to remind ourselves as believers of the importance and necessity to always in the way we live and testify to our faith, retain this balance between solidarity and silence, between social involvement and prayer? Concerning this I want to highlight just one more aspect of this challenge – an aspect that Bonhoeffer himself stressed during his time at Finkenwalde – and which concerns the issue of theological training.

Shortly before his return from London to take up the position as Director for Theological Training in Finkenwalde, he wrote to Erwin Sutz:

“The whole training of a next generation of young theologians need today to be undertaken in a church-monastic related environment or schools (kirchlich-klösterliche Schulen) in which the true doctrine or teaching, the Sermon on the Mount and the Christian worship should be taken seriously. In the case of all three these things this is currently not happening at the University” (GS I:42).

Later on 19 September 1936, after Bonhoeffer had already practised theology in the context of a caring community in Finkenwalde, he shared his conviction in this regard with Karl Barth:

“I am firmly convinced that with regard to what is expected from our young theologians today in terms of their responsibilities, both in what they bring along from the University, as well as their work in the congregation – especially here in the Eastern part – we need a totally different model of education, one which for sure belongs in such a community-orientated seminary...That both our theological work, as well as a real caring and pastorally-inclined community

can only grow in a kind of life together which is determined by regular morning and evening gatherings around the Word, and by established times for prayer, is for sure” (GS II:285).

Finally, in a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich during this time, it becomes clear how he visualised the renewal of the church:

“The restoration of the church comes from a new kind of monasticism, one which only has this in common with a previous tradition: the uncompromising way of life in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount and following in the footsteps of Jesus” (GS III:25).

These thoughts seem to me to be of extreme importance for the training of a next generation of pastors and theologians in our own context. In this regard I finally want to share a story, if not a keen observation, which to my mind highlights some of the problems as well as some of the main challenges we face in this regard.

According to a former student of this faculty, who in the meantime has become a lecturer at another University, most students when they come to study theology are usually quite pious and naive. In fact it is exactly because of this piety, which mostly implies a strong sense of vocation that they come to study theology.

However, during the course of their training they are inevitably exposed to the newer critical, historical and hermeneutical research and discourses which for many are a positive, liberating and enlightening experience, broadening their horizon and also stimulating a more rational engagement with the traditional concepts of their faith, often making them leave behind many of these concepts and the practices related to them.

For others, however, this introduction into the more critical tradition, is perceived as an erosion and even, in some cases, an undermining of their traditional piety and faith, leaving them with nagging doubt, growing confusion and even outright resistance or indifferent cynicism.

In both cases a glaring spiritual vacuum often remains, one which, according to my colleague, requires a spirituality which can, on the one side help the more critically minded students to regain a so-called “second naivety”, not forgetting or neglecting the disciplines of prayer, silence,

meditation and even fasting. On the other hand such a spirituality needs to restore new confidence in the authority of Scriptures for those who have become disillusioned while guarding at the same time against the dangers of fundamentalism and self-complacency.

It would not be out of place to think of Bonhoeffer's suggestions in this regard – suggestions which in short amount to a critical revision of our current model of theological training, undergirding and complementing it with a tested spirituality which should be practiced and appropriated within the context of a nourishing and caring community. The vital ingredients of this spirituality should be those which over the centuries have proved themselves to provide the so-called “spiritual armour” referred to in Ephesians 6. This armour has rendered most of the apostles fireproof in difficult situations. And putting on this armour has in the older church, similarly to what Bonhoeffer proposed, often been associated with the practices of silence/ silent contemplation, solitude, prayerful reading of the Bible, meditation and especially spiritual direction or accompaniment – all geared to help people, and in this case theological students and future ministers to cope with life's challenges and difficulties in a more hopeful and meaningful way.

On a personal note: I was glad to hear that since professor Denise Ackermann was appointed within the Department of Practical Theology a few years ago to assist with spiritual formation in the Faculty of Theology that the teaching and practising of some of these disciplines, including an annual retreat, were integrated into the curriculum. My impression, however, also on the basis of discussions with Prof. Ackermann, was that these exercises or practices, and in particular the possibility of a retreat, were usually only introduced at the end of the training, serving as a finishing touch. The question remains whether the guidance into these exercises or disciplines should not have been introduced earlier, thus forming a more integral part of the whole training? Perhaps the more vital question is whether those who are responsible for the training are themselves also committed to the practising of these disciplines?

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