

“Prophets, Faust, and First-Years: Bonhoeffer and the language of charismatic experience”

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Abstract

Across the Global South, contemporary Christian theology is grappling with the best way to understand and respond to the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and the associated emphasis on charismatic experience. Speaking from a vastly different contest, the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer nonetheless offers a way to critique the self-serving excesses of this phenomenon while engaging it seriously and graciously, on its own terms, in a productive ecumenical conversation. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of discipleship as the condition in which it is possible to speak truthfully challenges our normal expectations for theological discourse. It redirects our attention from speech that is merely semantically correct and towards the conformation of the act of our speaking with the intention of Christ.

Key words

Bonhoeffer; global south; Pentecostalism; charismatic; discipleship

1. Introduction: ecumenical dialogue and charismatic Christianity

Since the 1970’s, global Christianity has been increasingly shaped by its relation to movements that emphasise ecstatic experience.¹ These movements fall into three broad categories. First, there are Pentecostal Christian congregations gathered into denominations or networks – old or new – which actively participate in broader ecumenical councils. Second,

1 On the growth and overall demographics of Pentecostal Christianity. See Allan Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013).

there is the rise of independent Pentecostal congregations, meetings, or ministries – some small enough to fit in a narrow storefront, others filling entire city blocks – which exist at the fringe or beneath the concern of ecumenical bodies. Third, there is the increasing trend toward Pentecostal styles of worship and practice within the ecclesial structures of traditional mainline denominations. While respecting the immense plurality of voices and agendas captured within these categories, taken together they suggest a widespread interest in various forms of charismatic spiritual experience. This article begins with the assumption that twenty first century theology must seriously engage this “outburst of Pentecost” sweeping the Global South.²

Such engagement requires more of the Christian theologian than simply adding another datum to the ongoing interdisciplinary project of describing neo-Pentecostalism as a phenomenon. Instead, the task is to find conceptual room to take charismatic Christians seriously as partners in ecumenical conversation, affirming the places where they contribute to Christian witness while challenging excesses and errors. By its nature, such an ecumenical conversation uses theological language; it requires “doctrinal reflection [to] indicate where the tensions lie and perhaps also where bridges... may be constructed.”³ Taking charismatic Christians seriously as partners requires taking the self-description of their praxis seriously, permitting their words to mean what they intend them to mean. Immediately, however, contemporary academic theology stammers when it tries to use the very words needed for such a conversation – words like “prophecy” and “anointing,” “miracle” and “exorcism,” “powers” and “deliverance.” To the extent that contemporary theology in the Western sphere of thought still uses such words, it rarely uses them in the same way that they are regularly used in charismatic congregations around the world. Yet, to engage in ecumenical theology is to find a common basis which addresses charismatic Christian worship on its own terms without

2 Ogbe Uke Kalu, “Constructing a Global Pentecost Discourse: An African Example.” In *African Pentecostalism: Global Discourses, Migrations, Exchanges and Connections*, eds. Wilhelmina J. Kalu, Nimi Wariboko, and Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2010), 37.

3 Ernst M. Conradie, “Ecumenical Perspectives on Pentecostal Pneumatology,” *Missionalia* 43 (2015): 67.

necessarily surrendering to its presuppositions. This means reinvigorating a vocabulary needed in order to speak theologically about the nature and reality of charismatic spirituality as it is experienced by its practitioners, and to speak about such experiences directly, without diverting the conversation to some other, safer common ground.

For someone who is systematic, what appears necessary in order to ground such a conversation is a more comprehensive account of ecstatic experience – perhaps even human spirituality *in toto* – and its relation to Christian theology. In this light, a charismatic theological vocabulary requires renewed, holistic attentiveness to individual faith as the “distinct formation of God-consciousness” in Schleiermacher’s sense.⁴ In this approach, charismatic experiences are read in parallel to other aspects of Christian life which share some categorical similarity, thus locating their proper position in a theological system. Perhaps, for instance, charismatic experience can best be understood theologically if it is placed under the broader rubric of an existential longing for divine union. Perhaps charismatic experience can best be understood and engaged if it is seen as simply another manifestation of enacted liturgical performance. Perhaps charismatic experience presses upon us an epistemological conundrum which must be addressed by a more robust account of spiritual sensoria in the vein of Karl Rahner or, more recently, Sarah Coakley in her work on embodiment.⁵

While there are exciting possibilities in creating a comprehensive theological account of spiritual experience in its sociological, philosophical, and anthropological dimensions, there is also a danger that such approaches divert our attention towards the form of charisms and away from their content. The spiritual source of the healing, the truthfulness of the prophetic utterances, or the meaning of the ecstatic swoon matter less than the fact that they happen, or at least are perceived to happen

4 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, Third ed., rev. trans. by Terrence N. Tice (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1.

5 For example, see Sarah Coakley, “Introduction”, in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 1-12. For more on her re-appropriation of Rahner, see Paul L. Gavriluyuk and Sarah Coakley, “Introduction.” In *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, eds. Paul L. Gavriluyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012) 1-19.

in Christian communities. This, however, again fails to take charismatic Christians with sufficient seriousness. For the practitioners of charismatic faith, it is precisely the content and meaning of their experiences which theology must address, rather than the categorical implications of ecstatic spirituality as one aspect of human existence.

Perhaps, then, the systematician's task is to take on this concern directly by focusing more narrowly on doctrinal categories. Perhaps charismatic experience must merely be examined under a dogmatic light, measuring the degree of a particular manifestation's convergence with orthodoxy. Indeed, across a variety of churches, this has typically been the theologian's mandate, "to show the nature and signs of the gracious operations of God's Spirit, by which they are to be distinguished from all things whatsoever which are not of a saving nature," as Jonathan Edwards wrote in his own attempt to systematise spiritual experience.⁶ In this view, a theological engagement with charismatic experience is necessary only to the extent that it provides criteria by which the apocalyptic visionary, the mystical hermit, or the self-appointed apostle can be granted or denied a *nihil obstat* from the theological magisters. Rather than locating charismatic experience along the spectrum of human experience, it locates the charism along the spectrum of orthodox confession.

Both approaches, however, share the preoccupations of contemporary Western theology. Because it often sees secular counterparts as its primary interlocutors, contemporary Western theology cannot extricate itself from the desire to justify the existence or authenticity of ecstatic charisms. Consequently, the engagement with charismatic experience typically appears as more of an assessment – whether by scientific, epistemological, or doctrinal standards – than a genuine conversation. For Christians in many contexts across the Global South, however – whether they are Pentecostal or not – the existence of charismatic experience requires no justification. It is simply a fact of ordinary Christian life. Given this fact, what is needed is not a way to assess the validity of charismatic experience, but a way for Christians to orient this experience towards the work and

6 Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections." In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, rev. and corr. by Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 235.

mission of the gospel. Evaluation of the claims of charismatic experience is not inappropriate, so long as it can first take them seriously, and thus engage both their form and content for the sake of an ecumenical witness to the kingdom of God. Rather than seeking a systematic vocabulary for discussing either the form or content of charismatic experience, I want to propose a more concrete, localised grounds for ecumenical conversation with the various forms of charismatic Christian praxis.

My aim is to enlist Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an unlikely contributor in this endeavour. Contemporary neo-Pentecostalism could hardly be more removed from Bonhoeffer's context in 1930's and 1940's Germany. Although Bonhoeffer was perpetually open to and even fascinated by forms of religious praxis outside Europe, his actual exposure to the diversity of Christian experience was limited.⁷ To the extent that he developed a theology of spirituality, the manifestations of spiritual experience most familiar to him were less charismatic ecstasies than medieval mysticism and the spiritual regeneration movements of German pietism. Nonetheless, his Christocentric approach to thinking about even these forms of spirituality provides a compelling point of entry into real ecumenical dialogue with charismatic expression. What Bonhoeffer offers, I propose, is a grammar of discipleship which uniquely frames a common language for conversation about spiritual experience.

2. Bonhoeffer on the limits of experience

At first glance, Bonhoeffer appears to be an unlikely contributor to a discussion of spiritual experience, in part because he is persistently suspicious of its claims. He inherits this suspicion from Karl Barth, rejecting the assumption that human experience of any kind can be taken

7 Bonhoeffer travelled fairly often compared with many of his contemporaries, and did encounter forms of Christian faith beyond German Protestantism. Some of these experiences appeared to leave a lasting impression on him, particularly a 1924 trip to Rome, his ministry as a licentiate in Barcelona during 1928, and his exposure to Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church while in New York in 1930. (For more on the legacy of this last experience, see Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014].) Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer had virtually no first-hand knowledge of Christianity in what could today be called the Global South, although he did spend brief holidays in Cuba, Mexico, and north Africa.

as prolegomenon to theology. In an essay he wrote for a course offered by Reinhold Niebuhr while at Union Seminary in late 1930, Bonhoeffer established the basic position towards spiritual experience that he would occupy for the whole of his life. Religious experience, he argues, either becomes “nomistic” or else “antinomian,” that is to say, it either inspires the enthusiast to establish rules and codes which are assumed to be God-given, or it gives the enthusiast a special self-regard, a sense that the enthusiast is specially favoured and therefore beyond all commands and divine boundaries.⁸ In Bonhoeffer’s terminology, the first kind of enthusiasm leads to “asceticism,” the second kind to “libertinism and quietism.”⁹ What is required, in Bonhoeffer’s mind, is a Lutheran critique: both the nomist and the antinomian are guilty of establishing a new law, contrary to the gospel. The nomist attempts to create a new law in the most obvious sense but, counter-intuitively, the antinomian is equally guilty of creating a new law by turning grace into an absolute principle.¹⁰ The attempt to universalise a gospel ethic across situations and contexts actually undermines the free grace of the gospel itself. What is needed is a foundation which shatters and then recasts all of our definitions, a foundation that is not a new principle, but a new person. Grace is given in the revelation of God in Christ, and grace “condemns all human effort to reach God as the attempt of man to be like God”.¹¹

Applied to spiritual experience broadly, this critique suggests, enthusiasts are constantly at risk of law-making, extrapolating from personal faith towards an absolute which governs even the gospel, thus grounding truth on the sincerity or intensity of inward experience rather than on the revelation of God in Christ. For Bonhoeffer, this constant referral to one’s own experience is the very condition of sin, the first symptom of the isolated, self-absorbed human, terminally curved in upon herself. In this respect, he remains a relentless critic of enthusiasm, pietism, and mysticism for his entire life. This same sensibility, for example, backgrounds his later critique in the prison letters of pastors, existential philosophers, and

8 *DBWE* 10, 446.

9 *Ibid.*, 447.

10 *DBWE* 10, 448.

11 *Ibid.*, 449.

psychotherapists who all convince humans to turn inward, to become absorbed in the articulation of their own experience, to either diagnose their problem or find their god “in the very last, secret place that is left.”¹²

Although Bonhoeffer’s critique is not aimed at neo-Pentecostalism per se, it does establish a kind of theological limit, a criterion for discerning at what point charismatic experience has ceased to be a variant of Christian praxis and has become self-serving idolatry. Taking charismatic experience seriously does not mean embracing all of its manifestations wholeheartedly. As Candy Gunther Brown points out, there is undoubtedly a “significant” albeit “complex” relationship between contemporary neo-Pentecostalism and the so-called prosperity gospel.¹³ Charismatic movements are easily as prone to a self-aggrandising, self-satisfied, self-seeking inwardness as any of the movements with which Bonhoeffer was familiar. What passes for charismatic praxis may at times be cultural norms or personal ambitions sanctified and absolutized by a “patently pre-critical” appeal to experience.¹⁴ Rosinah Gabaitse has written effectively about these “unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics” which are assumed as true within communities, though they make reference to no standard beyond themselves.¹⁵

For Bonhoeffer, the revelation of God in Christ necessarily imposes a standard from beyond ourselves, one exterior to human experience. The charismatic leader offers the congregation an experience which purports to be the very arrival of God in the sanctuary, the sudden in-breaking of ultimate reality into human experience. Bonhoeffer’s caution reminds us, however, that human experience, no matter how startling or surreal, always belongs firmly to the penultimate. Even spiritual ecstasies remain very human, *sarkisch* experiences, wrapped up in our fragile creatureliness, awaiting an eschatological explanation which they cannot give themselves. Prophecies and tongues will come to an end, 1 Corinthians 13 reminds

12 *DBWE* 8, 456.

13 Candy Gunther Brown, “Introduction: Pentecostalism and the Globalization of Illness and Healing.” In *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 17.

14 Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Marginalisation of Women,” *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion, and Theology in Southern Africa* 114 (2015): 4.

15 Gabaitse, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” 4.

us, precisely because “when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”¹⁶ Pietism and enthusiasm are problematic, in Bonhoeffer’s mind, not because they are excessively spiritual, but because they are not nearly spiritual enough. Instead, they are at risk of becoming a deeply private, deeply inward self-obsession with one’s own emotional state and psychological experience. All of which is entirely characteristic of humans when they live at their greatest distance from God.

3. Bonhoeffer’s openness to spiritual experience

Despite his relentless suspicion of experiential knowledge’s captivity to the self-serving ego, Bonhoeffer at times exhibited a curious openness to even the most charismatic expressions of Christian faith. At least three factors contributed to this openness. First, there is the simple fact that healings, tongues, and exorcisms are mentioned in Scripture, and this alone prevented Bonhoeffer from dismissing them. Second, Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ’s personal alterity opened him to the possibility that the radically other God might be more available in the strangeness of previously unknown experiences than we might expect. Third, and most concretely, Bonhoeffer’s openness can be explained as a simple, pastoral compassion for the spirituality of ordinary Christians. While in Barcelona, he admired the piety he saw in some of his parishioners and admitted that it was precisely his studies at the feet of Barth which had “blunted my sense for this.”¹⁷ “Theology constantly runs the risk,” he writes, “of restricting [piety] by forcing it into specific rules.”¹⁸ This might be necessary, he continues, “if there is an excess that must be reined in – otherwise it’s dangerous.”¹⁹ Just as enthusiasts cannot impose a self-serving law upon the gospel, so others cannot impose a law which excludes a particular form of charism.

Bonhoeffer’s interest in spirituality became more pronounced in the 1930’s as he contemplated the shape of radical discipleship. At this stage of his thinking, spiritual experience was one aspect of the broader task of

16 1 Cor 13:10, NRSV.

17 *DBWE* 10, 87.

18 *DBWE* 10, 87.

19 *Ibid.*

formation. The quasi-monastic practices associated with his time as the director of Finkenwalde – the set times of prayer and meditation, the regular disciplines of worship, communion, and private confession – encouraged spirituality in the broadest sense, as a secondary matter to the task of personal and corporate spiritual formation.²⁰ As late as 1941, he wrote in a circular letter that “[Meditation] also serves the Most High, in that it opens for God a space of discipline and quiet, of healing order and contentment” – a sentence which would not look out of place in the Rule of St. Benedict.²¹ It is for this reason that Barth gently criticised the whiff “of monastic eros and pathos” surrounding Finkenwalde.²² Bonhoeffer’s interest in meditation and spiritual disciplines gradually but necessarily incorporated a greater interest in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, culminating in a series of lectures which touched lightly upon “wonders and signs” in the church-community.²³ In these lectures you will find Bonhoeffer speaking briefly – in careful but nonetheless approving tones – about the gift of tongues, about miracles, about prophecy,²⁴ about the famous nineteenth century revivalist and faith healer Christoph Blumhardt,²⁵ and generally about those “charismata in which the Spirit becomes visible.”²⁶ I mention these examples not because they are representative of Bonhoeffer’s main interests, but because they are simply suggestive of Bonhoeffer’s measured openness to the experiential side of Christian life insofar as it contributes to a life lived before God. As we shall see, the same Christocentricism in his thought which calls into question the centrality of the human subject also creates the possibility that a word from Christ will appear in the most unexpected places.

20 For more on the practices and disciplines of the community at Finkenwalde, see the recollections of Bonhoeffer’s students collected in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences of his Friends*, eds. Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald G. Smith, trans. Kathe G. Smith (London: Collins, 1966).

21 *DBWE* 16, 254.

22 *DBWE* 14, 268.

23 *Ibid.*, 719.

24 See especially Bonhoeffer’s lecture series, “The Visible Church in the New Testament,” in *DBWE* 14, 434–76.

25 *DBWE* 14, 758.

26 *Ibid.*, 466.

4. Discipleship as the condition for true speech

Bonhoeffer never engaged more explicitly with a theology of spiritual experience than in the aforementioned essay from his time at Union Seminary and his lectures from Finkenwalde. Nonetheless, in the space between his suspicion of the individual epistemological ego and his openness to Christ in the otherness of the stranger's experience, a habit emerges in his work of resolving theological thought in the priority of discipleship. This habit creates the grammar for a unique kind of theological language, a language in which the actual content of speech is secondary to speech as the act of a disciple, as an obedient conformity to the present work of Christ. An ecumenical conversation with charismatic Christians can use this language – rooted in the priority of discipleship – to explore the limits and uses of ecstatic experience.

Writing in *Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer alludes to a passage from Kierkegaard's later journals in which Kierkegaard considers Faust as an exemplar of doubt. Bonhoeffer paraphrases Kierkegaard's own writing thusly:

When Faust says at the end of his life seeking knowledge, "I see that we can know nothing," then that is a conclusion, a result. It is something entirely different than when a student repeats this statement in the first semester to justify his laziness. Used as a conclusion, the sentence is true; as a presupposition, it is self-deception.²⁷

This example is worth careful consideration. In the language of analytic philosophy, we might say, for the sake of argument, that this first-year student has a true belief: "we can know nothing." But this student does not have a justified true belief; he does not have sufficient reason to merit believing, even if it turns out that what he believes is – accidentally – true. But even this analysis is not sufficient, because the student in his first year might actually be justified in his belief on the basis of having already done a great deal of study. Perhaps the student is precocious, perhaps in one semester he has read all the books and absorbed all the arguments and thus concluded, "we can know nothing." The point is that, for both Kierkegaard

²⁷ DBWE 4, 51.

and Bonhoeffer, the student's mere knowledge is not enough to justify his conclusion, "we can know nothing." He cannot speak those words truly unless, like Faust, he has walked the breadth of existence, unless he has reached that conclusion at the end of an arduous journey, having known hope and despair, having exhausted every alternative and finally, with his last breath, admitting, "we can know nothing." Until then, the student is deceiving himself, however right he may be. "Knowledge," Bonhoeffer concludes from this allegory, "cannot be separated from the existence in which it was acquired."²⁸ In the context of *Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer translates this into a lesson about law and grace. The young Christian may know, on the basis of study, that she is no longer under law. But to treat this final word as the first word is self-deception. It is impossible to truly know what it means to receive grace unless one has known the weight of the law. One cannot say, "sin boldly," without having first entered the monastery, without having surrendered all things for the sake of righteousness, without having then endured the ruthless captivity of sin. In Bonhoeffer's words, "Only those who in following Christ leave everything they have can stand and say that they are justified solely by grace."²⁹

This logic suggests a rather counter-intuitive understanding of truth in theological discourse. What Bonhoeffer is suggesting here is that we may indeed know the ultimate truth in the present. Our theological statements may be entirely accurate with respect to this ultimate truth. We may even be justified in believing these statements insofar as that justification rests on the validity of the statements' contents. But to act under the certainty of this truth, as if we already possess it, is self-deception. Truth, it turns out, is not principally true in virtue of its content, as we typically assume, but in virtue of its relatedness to Reality, which is to say, its relatedness to Christ, "the Real One."³⁰ We may speak words that are semantically true, but if they are not the words for us and for our moment, if they are not yet the words of Reality, they are in fact false.

Bonhoeffer explores this logic further in his 1940's era writings on ethical life. "We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or

28 Ibid.

29 *DBWE* 4, 51.

30 *DBWE* 6, 263.

should be for each and every time,” he writes in the *Ethics* manuscript, “but about how Christ may take form among us today and here.”³¹ The task set before the disciple is not a systematic accounting of the justified forms of action. Instead, the disciple is called to act, and to do so “in accordance with the reality of Jesus Christ.”³² Any broader analysis to be used either in theological discourse or apologetics is suspended, however, since “we cannot know with ultimate certainty” the extent to which “a human action serves the divine goal of history.”³³ Thus, returning to the language of *Cost of Discipleship*, disciples find that their righteousness is perpetually “hidden from themselves.”³⁴

In a fragment of unfinished writing from his time in prison, Bonhoeffer briefly expands on the implications of discipleship’s priority when it comes to speaking about truth. “Cynics,” he writes, “want to make their word true by always expressing the particular thing they think they understand without regard for reality as a whole.”³⁵ Whether true or not, the words of these “cynics” intend to express a final summation which is not yet given, and is thus not the obedient act for the moment. In their haste, “they utterly destroy the real, and their word becomes untrue, even if it maintains the superficial appearance of correctness.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer sweeps aside normal debates concerning the connection between reality and the semantic content of our propositions. What determines the truthfulness of a statement is not the link between its words and their referents, but whether or not the statement conforms to the reality of Christ’s action. Is this statement a part of God’s purposes; is it “the truthful speech I own to God?”³⁷ Conversely, the untruth is not found “in the contradiction between thought and speech” but in “the negation, denial, and deliberate and wilful destruction of reality as it is created by God and exists in God to the extent that it takes place through words and silence.”³⁸ Is our speech Christ’s own

31 *Ibid.*, 99.

32 *Ibid.*, 228.

33 *Ibid.*, 227.

34 *DBWE* 4, 149.

35 *DBWE* 16, 607.

36 *Ibid.*, 607-8.

37 *Ibid.*, 602.

38 *Ibid.*, 607.

speech for the moment? If so, it is true. If not, it is a self-deception, no matter how accurately its content may refer to some ultimate reality.

Bonhoeffer's claim that some statements can only be justified by a lived discipleship arises indirectly in his thought long before his explicit writings on ethics. For example, in a 1932 sermon on Colossians 3:3 – “you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God”³⁹ – Bonhoeffer speaks to our desire to immediately interrogate the second half of this sentence.⁴⁰ We ask, what are the implications of the fact that our lives are hidden with Christ in God? In asking this question, we try ineffectively to bypass what Bonhoeffer calls the “cherub with a flaming sword,”⁴¹ which is the first half of the verse, “you have died.” We cannot really speak of our life being hidden in God until we have “died in the midst of life.”⁴² Death forms what Bonhoeffer calls “an impassable boundary.”⁴³ We can speak about death, now, we can even speak accurately about death, now, on the basis of Christ having gone ahead of us. In Christ, we can affirm that our life is hidden in God. But to speak those words prior to our own death, before we have crossed that boundary, is actually to deceive ourselves. The final word can only mean what it means if it follows the first word. We are perpetually tempted to leap ahead to the final word without justification. If misused in this way, Bonhoeffer argues in the sermon, Col. 3:3 “must be suspected of tempting us to betray the earth, of lulling us into a false sense of being protected in God... allowing us to be at rest in the midst of the most screaming injustice in the world.”⁴⁴ Used properly, by implication, these words press us into action for the sake of the world, even to the point of death, confident in the final embrace of life. Until they are spoken in imitation of Christ's own disposition to be for the world, however, they tempt us into untruth, no matter how carefully we exegete them.

The underlying logic of discipleship's relation to true statements – as so often happens for Bonhoeffer – is Christological. As our vicarious representative,

39 Col 3:3, *NRSV*.

40 *DBWE* 11, 461.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

Christ has surpassed a boundary on our behalf, not only between life and death but – as Bonhoeffer says in the 1933 Christology lectures – between “my old self and my new self.”⁴⁵ In this sense, standing with my new self, Christ is the centre of my existence. And yet, nonetheless, standing on the other side of “a boundary that I cannot cross,” Christ is also the limit of my existence, speaking out of a mystery not immediately available to me.⁴⁶ This limit, precisely because it is a limit of my very knowledge, is not a limit I can even speak truthfully about until it is also behind me. In Bonhoeffer’s words, “As boundary, the boundary can only be seen from its other side, outside the limit.”⁴⁷ It is only because of God’s revelation in Christ that we have any inkling that a barrier exists. But we cannot speak truly about it until we have crossed it. Again, our words are not true in virtue of their semantic reference to actuality, but in virtue of their being conformed to Reality, which is necessarily the concretion of Christ present for us, at the time and place in which we speak.

5. Conclusion: Bonhoeffer and the conversation with charismatic Christianity

Across Africa and the Global South, prophetic speech is frequently appealed to and occasionally sought, but rarely defined. Some prophets speak of hope and healing, some prophets speak a warning to oppressors, and some self-appointed prophets speak of wealth and unnamed powers. An ecumenical theology must seek ways to differentiate, embrace, and critique this language. In this paper, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s appropriation of Kierkegaard’s metaphor points to a recurring motif in his theology. The appeal to discipleship as a grounds for true speech serves as a meta-linguistic critique of our typical assumptions about semantic meaning and truth, and thus opens up a new basis for thinking about the language of charismatic experience.

What Bonhoeffer sets before us is a new grammar for theological language, the boundaries of a space within which our assertions can both be true and

45 *DBWE* 12, 324.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

be understood truly. Applied to the immediate challenge of ecumenical dialogue with charismatic Christianity, it opens up a new way of talking theologically with others about spiritual experience, without either dismissing their claims or accepting their presuppositions as true. It does not press our conversation to take up a particular topic so much as it presses those who converse to take up a particular action in conformity with Christ. In doing so, it initially redirects ecumenical conversation away from the attempt to resolve conflicting theological claims while also revealing the underlying truth-in-discipleship which makes it possible to speak the same language across divisions thus, finally, permitting the very possibility of finding potential unity in disparate claims.

Bonhoeffer's impact here is twofold. First, his approach allows that we can take seriously the content of charismatic experience, and even assess it on its own merits. We are able to speak of a prophetic word as God's word, of a healing as God's healing, of a deliverance as God's liberation. We might even make these claims accurately. We might say that this healing comes from God and we might be right, not accidentally, but precisely in virtue of this action's content. In terms of content, this particular healing can be exactly the kind of thing which would be done by the God who will use the last words to heal all things. With Christ having surpassed the boundary separating penultimate from ultimate, we can at least acknowledge the potential truth of these statements and engage them in light of what Christ has revealed.

This first application, however, is quickly revealed to be an entirely secondary matter. What is far more primary is Bonhoeffer's warning that it is not enough to be right in terms of content. We must be right with respect to the Christ-Reality. We don't need generally true propositions, we need the truth of who Christ is for us today. A Bonhoeffer approach ought to redirect us away from a "positivism of spirituality" – the attempt to interrogate experience with questions it was never intended to answer. Bonhoeffer's logic of truth subordinate to discipleship allows us to affirm the experiences of charismatic Christians while immediately reminding us that the individual ego is tempted to enslave these experiences to its own desires, and therefore to seek ultimate knowledge from them. Even these experiences, however, are penultimate, provisional, given for the purpose of shaping and motivating a Christ-conformity which is for the sake of the

world. “The visibility of the Holy Spirit,” Bonhoeffer reminds his students at Finkenwalde, is always manifest in a “being-there-for-one-another... never in the ‘being-for-oneself’ of an individual, in the holiness of an individual.”⁴⁸ Discipleship serves as the necessary and sufficient condition for true speech, and thus as the grounds for a properly ecumenical dialogue.

For the purposes of theological discourse, then, even if we know the final word, we cannot speak it while we are still in the middle of the sentence. It is like a secret which we know and yet must keep hidden from ourselves, precisely because it is not yet fully realised for us. This necessarily demands a total re-orientation with respect to spiritual experience, even to the extent that we practice or encourage it. What will determine the truth of any experience is not its content, but the extent to which it provokes us to act in accord with Reality. This can be the only standard, and yet it is not a standard we fully possess. We may not know the shape of the Christ-Reality until we have passed through existence. But it is this Christ-Reality we seek, and this should immediately refocus our concerns. But there is an opportunity as well, to use even this penultimate experience for the sake of the ultimate, to affirm religious experience insofar as it motivates and encourages us to ask, how might we follow Christ in this time and place?

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48 DBWE 14, 465-6.

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