

## The Christology of *Life Together*

Dr. Jeffrey A. Stivason

---

Professor of New Testament Studies  
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

---

*Life Together* was written in a four-week stretch in 1938 after the Gestapo shut down the seminary of the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde where Bonhoeffer was teaching.<sup>45</sup> However, to interpret *Life Together* as a hastily written volume to establish a Lutheran monasticism<sup>46</sup> or a “how to do church” manual is to misunderstand Bonhoeffer. For Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* was Christology in praxis. Christian community meant community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> This slim volume is the outworking of his belief that Christ actually exists as the church, a theme that occupied two of his earliest works, *Sanctorum Communio*, his doctoral dissertation, and *Act and Being*, his second Berlin dissertation. *Life Together* was the vital and necessary application of Bonhoeffer’s theological thought.

The majority of *Life Together* is concerned with the presence of Jesus Christ in the Christian Church. Chapter one, however, is our present concern: the Christology that underpins the Christian Church. This was a serious theological and pastoral concern for Bonhoeffer, who had been exposed to the theological poverty of the German Church, after having entered the liberal university at age seventeen.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer’s experiment in ecclesiology and practical Christology was meant to replace the lifelessness of the early twentieth century German Church which had supplanted the gospel of God revealed in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, this was not to be any easy task for Bonhoeffer, for within the early twentieth century church in Germany there was no small controversy over theology proper. In fact, less than fifty years earlier, Nietzsche, had made the astute observation that God has “bled to death under our knives,”<sup>50</sup> in this case, no less than theological knives. And perhaps it could be said that theology,

---

<sup>45</sup> This extract is a chapter from Dr. Stivason’s 2004 STM thesis, “The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*” (STM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (St. James Place, London: Collins, 1966), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer a Biography*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (St. James Place, London: Collins, 1965), 183. Bonhoeffer records that a serious German once told him that the church was dead and all one could do was give it a funeral. To which he replied, “Faith in the living church of Christ only breaks through where one sees most clearly the dying of the church in the world, the process of ever new collapse, where one knows that the world, if it is honest, cannot say anything but ‘the church is dead’, that the world cannot understand our action here as anything but the funeral preparations—and where, in spite of, contrary to, against everything, one hears how the New Testament proclaims life to the dying and how death and life come into contact in the cross of Christ and how life conquers death—only when one sees that does one believe in the church under the cross.”

<sup>50</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche; Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 97.

from Kant, the philosopher of Protestantism, to the present, was nothing more than trying to “wipe this blood off us.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, Bonhoeffer felt it incumbent upon himself to help the church in Germany escape Kant’s transcendentalism, which could only enable us to grasp at an unknowable God, and establish her once again on the God who is ontologically knowable in the person of Jesus Christ. This would be no miniscule task, since God had been murdered philosophically over one hundred years before.

Therefore, this chapter will examine the philosophical and theological backdrop against which Bonhoeffer developed his thought, as well as the Christology that underpins *Life Together*.

### **Kant and the Demolition of Theology**

An earthquake struck philosophy and theology the year Kant read Hume.<sup>52</sup> Kant fanned Hume’s work into a philosophical flame that would ignite a “Copernican” revolution in philosophy. Kant was roused from his dogmatic slumbers. The revolution he ignited was really a reversal. Philosophers prior to Kant thought that knowledge was possible only when the mind adapted to the world.<sup>53</sup> Kant reversed the order. He said that knowledge is possible when the world adapts to the mind.

Moreover, Kant blazed a trail beyond rationalism and empiricism by making knowledge a combination of two contingencies, form and content. The content is accrued by sense experience. Yet, even though knowledge begins with sense experience, not all knowledge arises from sense experience. In other words, sense experience is necessary for human knowledge in the sense that no one would have knowledge without it, nevertheless, sense experience is not a sufficient condition for knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Thus, sense experience must be categorized by principles existing within us *a priori*,<sup>55</sup> namely, space and time.

Consequently, Kant’s transcendentalism applied to metaphysics had deadly implications. The German philosopher emphatically stated that we “cannot have knowledge of any object, as a thing by itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensuous intuition, that is, a phenomenon.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, since our knowledge is always governed by the *a priori* principles of the mind we can only know the phenomenal world. Therefore, since God exists in the noumenal world that is

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., the final phrase in Nietzsche’s quote.

<sup>52</sup> Kant’s thought in relation to David Hume has been the topic of much scholarly reflection. However, Kant readily acknowledged his debt to Hume when he wrote, “I openly confess my recollection of David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigation in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction.” Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950), 8. Moreover, the manuscript of Hamann’s translation of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* caught Kant’s attention in 1780 (i.e. the year following their first appearance) and he incorporated Hume’s arguments in his discussion of the teleological argument. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1947), 30.

<sup>53</sup> In Kant’s words, “Hitherto it has been supposed that all our knowledge must conform to the objects; but under that supposition, all attempts to establish anything about them *a priori*, by means of concepts, and thus to enlarge our knowledge, have come to nothing. The experiment therefore ought to be made, whether we should not succeed better with the problem of metaphysics, by assuming that the objects must conform to our mode of cognition...” Kant, Introduction to the Second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, F. Max Muller translation (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), xxxiii.

<sup>54</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1982), 26.

<sup>55</sup> Kant, 23. Kant calls these principles “sensuous intuition” or Anschauung in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., xxxvii.

unknowable by sense experience, knowledge of God is impossible.<sup>57</sup> Kant's God is both unknowable and unknown. Obviously, it is not unreasonable to say that Kant was one of the assassins, if not *the* assassin, that Nietzsche had in mind.

Consequently, the verity of Kant's revolution leads to the demolition of the ontological argument.<sup>58</sup> To illustrate, the Supreme Being of the ontological argument is known entirely *a priori*,

While our consciousness of every kind of existence, whether immediately by perception, or by conclusions which connect something with perception, belongs entirely to the unity of experience, and any existence outside that field, though it cannot be declared to be absolutely impossible, is a presupposition that cannot be justified by anything.<sup>59</sup>

According to Kant, the concept of a Supreme Being may be, in many respects, a salutary idea, but being only an idea it cannot be verified or known. Natural theology or, as Kant often calls it, "transcendental theology"<sup>60</sup> is therefore worthless as an attempt to demonstrate God's existence by means of transcendental ideas or of theoretical principles which have no application outside of experience.<sup>61</sup> For instance, you can define a mermaid and you can define God but definition does not make either one exist. For Kant, you can only get to existence through the senses.

Consequently, all theology has had to deal with Kant's philosophy by asking if there is any relationship between knowledge (reason) and faith, or whether knowledge must be removed to make room for faith. Realizing that he had created a platonic dualism between the phenomenal and noumenal realm, Kant said that matters of faith, such as, the soul, God, freedom and morality are matters we can think about but we cannot know them because they are non-sensuous. We are deadlocked over these terms. Recognizing the need for the noumenal dimension Kant added that although these things are heuristic fictions we should believe them.

However, not all theologians believed Kant to be the final authority in noumenal matters, and rejected theology that seemed to yield to Kant. Bonhoeffer was among them. Early he claimed that twentieth century German dialectical theology was a system of thought rooted epistemologically in Neo-Kantian transcendentalism.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, Kant was lurking behind the theological landscape of the day, and he was correct.<sup>63</sup> For example, Barth, in Bonhoeffer's thought, had genuflected to Kant and was grasping for the unknowable God in the noumenal realm, that is, a God who is wholly other.

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., xxxix. "I am not allowed therefore even to *assume*, for the sake of the necessary practical employment of my reason, *God, freedom, and immortality*, if I cannot *deprive* speculative reasons of its pretensions to transcendent insights, because reason, in order to arrive at these, must use principles which are intended originally for the objects of possible experience only, and which, if in spite of this, they are applied to what cannot be an objective experience, really changes this into a phenomenon, thus rendering all *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I had therefore to remove *knowledge*, in order to make room for *belief*" (emphasis his).

<sup>58</sup> Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy, vol.6, Modern Philosophy part II Kant* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964), 93. "God's existence cannot be proved without the use of the ontological, and this is fallacious. All three proofs, therefore, have some fallacies in common; and each has also its own fallacies."

<sup>59</sup> Kant, 403.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>61</sup> Implicit in Kant's refutation of the physico-theological argument is a rejection of knowledge via analogia entis. Thus, Kant razes the idea that we can know God through creation or self.

<sup>62</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, trans. Bernard Noble (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 43.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

But for Bonhoeffer it was a simple question of the objectivity of God. In other words, can God legitimately be thought of ontologically, or must he be explained in terms of transcendental categories? Bonhoeffer accused Barth of capitulating to the latter, a conclusion he believed was erroneous.<sup>64</sup>

In *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer dismissed any theological attempt to use Neo-Kantianism as an epistemological category for understanding God:

The gospel of mind finding itself in God and God in itself was preached too seductively by idealism for theology to resist its blandishments, and all too readily it reasoned thus: if being is essentially consciousness, God must “be” in religious experiences, and the reborn I must find God in reflexion [sic] on itself. Where else could God be found but in my consciousness? Even if I can never pass beyond it, it must be what constitutes being in general. God, then, is the God of my consciousness. He “is” only in my religious consciousness.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, ontological questions are illegitimate in the construct of Kant’s idealism primarily because existence is not an attribute. Thus, genuine Neo-Kantian theological transcendentalism is the reference of thought to something transcendental without having that something at its disposal.<sup>66</sup> However, Bonhoeffer’s constant desire for concrete theology would not allow him to follow a system of thought that defined God as abstract, or worse, as unknowable.

Thus, as Bonhoeffer saw it, for Barth, the empirical actions of man in believing and obedience are merely a transcendental reference to a God that cannot be referenced. These actions are at best a witness to God’s activity but do not in themselves involve the participation of God. Bonhoeffer rejected this conclusion. For him God was personal, and not a formal construct. Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

The whole situation impels one to ask whether a formalistic understanding of God’s freedom in contingent revelation, conceived wholly in terms of act, is really the proper groundwork for theology. In revelation it is a question less of God’s freedom on the far side from us, i.e. his eternal isolation and aseity, than of his forth-proceeding, his *given* Word, his bond in which he has bound himself, of his freedom as it is most strongly attested in his having freely bound himself to historical man, having placed himself at man’s disposal. God is not free *of* man but *for* man. Christ is the Word of his freedom. God *is there*, which is to say: not in eternal non-objectivity but (looking ahead for the moment) “haveable” graspable in his Word within the church.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, through faith, God ontologically revealed himself to the Church in the person of Jesus Christ. That, inevitably, brings us to the question of the Christology that underpins Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*. Simply, Bonhoeffer believed that Christological dogmatics came to bear on ecclesiology. In other words, Christology functions as a context for the communal life of the Church. For Bonhoeffer this required the complete synthesis of three interrelated aspects: 1) the historical Christ of faith, 2) the transcendent Christ, and 3) Christ *pro me*.

---

<sup>64</sup> John A. Phillips, *Christ for us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (NY: Harper Row, 1967), 65.

Phillips points out the fact that there is no visible difference between Bonhoeffer and Barth and even asks, “Where does Bonhoeffer distinguish his own view from that of Barth?”

<sup>65</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 90.

## The Historical Christ of Faith

Bonhoeffer's struggle to know the Christ who is present in the Church originates in the historical realm. Because of Bonhoeffer's early reading and training, the critical historical questions could not be avoided. He had struggled with Troeltsch for too long to be glib concerning them.<sup>68</sup>

Bonhoeffer scholar Charles Marsh's assertion that Bonhoeffer had lost interest in Troeltsch sometime after 1925 is true enough if "interest" be defined solely in terms of reading material.<sup>69</sup> However, if Marsh means to imply that Bonhoeffer was no longer affected by Troeltsch's philosophical theology, we must dissent. For instance, Phillips, another Bonhoeffer scholar, ably demonstrates that the teachings of Troeltsch lingered in the air at Berlin and determined the subject of Bonhoeffer's student dissertation.<sup>70</sup> Phillips also adds that it was not until the writing of *Ethics* and his imprisonment that Bonhoeffer ultimately attempted to come to terms with the questions Troeltsch had raised.<sup>71</sup> Bethge also notes that, while in prison, his one-time professor read Kurt Leese's, *Protestantism in Modern Times*, because Leese had attempted to understand and come to terms with the thought of Ritschl and Troeltsch in light of recent intellectual history.<sup>72</sup> As will be demonstrated, Bonhoeffer did not simply lose interest in Troeltsch. Quite the contrary, Bonhoeffer continued to be intrigued and influenced by him.

Troeltsch himself had been deeply affected by other thinkers, namely, Hegel and Lessing.<sup>73</sup> Hegel believed that although religious faith grew out of history its truth was not dependent on history. Similarly, Lessing thought that the contingent facts of history could not have absolute meaning. This teaching has often been summarized as "Lessing's ugly broad ditch".

Thus, combining the two, Troeltsch took a relativistic posture toward history. For him, because the historical element in the incarnation is nothing more than the means of introducing the Christian idea into history, which can intrinsically stand on its own, we may hand the historical facts over to textual criticism.<sup>74</sup>

Consequently, for Troeltsch, Christianity asked what history could not provide. In *Protestantism and Progress*, Troeltsch clearly states that "absolutes" are unobtainable and therefore divine revelation, embodied in the Church, is no longer tenable:

In the one case as in the other, however, it is no longer a question of *a posteriori* historical general conceptions which exhibit the real state of the case as a whole, but of ideal conceptions which, attaching themselves to the real, emphasise [sic] one or the other element in it, and thereby seek to justify, their formula as giving its "essence" or "fundamental tendency."<sup>75</sup>

Nor, in Troeltsch's opinion, did the traditional dogma of the church have any binding authority in the present:

If the absolute authority has fallen which, in its absoluteness, made the antithesis of the divine and human equally absolute, if in man an autonomous principle is

---

<sup>68</sup> Bethge, 78. According to Bethge Bonhoeffer had been thinking about Troeltsch since he was eighteen. However, not until his school days under Harnack had he been awakened to the historical problems raised by Troeltsch. It was then that he decided to deal with the questions he had raised.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer The Promise of His Theology* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>70</sup> See also Bethge, 83.

<sup>71</sup> Phillips, 39.

<sup>72</sup> Bethge, 910.

<sup>73</sup> Phillips, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 34.

recognized as the source of truth and moral conduct, then all conceptions of the world which were specially designed to maintain that gulf between human and divine, fall along with it. With it falls the doctrine of the absolute corruption of mankind through original sin, and the transference of the ends of life to the heavenly world in which there will be deliverance from this corruption. In consequence, all the factors of this present life acquire an enhanced value and a higher impressiveness, and the ends of life fall more and more within the realm of the present world with its ideal of transformation.<sup>76</sup>

The “conceptions of the world which were especially designed to maintain that gulf between the human and the divine” seem to include a certain picture of divinity itself.<sup>77</sup> And according to Troeltsch, this divinity is an unknowable relic of the past. It seems that Troeltsch trained with Kant’s scalpel.

What is more, Bonhoeffer, who had read and even attacked Troeltsch, was not fully able to disentangle himself from the conclusions of his fellow German. When Bonhoeffer asked, in his 1933 lectures on Christology, how the church can be sure of the historical fact of Jesus Christ, his answer mirrored the thought of Troeltsch and was not promising.<sup>78</sup> In those same lectures, he wrote that “absolute certainty about an historical fact is in itself never attainable” and “there is no way from history to the absolute.”<sup>79</sup> Clearly, at this point, Bonhoeffer was standing at the edge of Lessing’s ugly ditch and, with Troeltsch, saw no way of crossing.

But Bonhoeffer did not think that the historical approach to the Jesus of history was binding for the believer<sup>80</sup>, even while he continued to believe that the Jesus of history remained essential for the existence of the church—especially a church facing imminent extinction at the hands of the Nazis. For Bonhoeffer, the certainty of historiography does not bring us into unity with Jesus and therefore is no valid foundation for the church. History’s inability to provide certainty, and our need for certainty regarding the Jesus of history, stands as a paradox.

Faced with this paradox, Bonhoeffer attempted to go beyond Troeltsch and jump Lessing’s ditch. Knowing that history cannot bear dogmatic theological statements and if forced history could, at best, only be regarded as *historia sacra*, Bonhoeffer asked a different question: Upon what basis can faith be certain of the uncertain?<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, rather than undertake a seemingly futile justification for the unknowable historical Jesus, Bonhoeffer sought the Jesus of the present. In so doing, Bonhoeffer strove to transcend Troeltsch. If absolute certainty about an historical fact is never attainable and yet remains essential for the church, that means that, for the church, the historical fact is not in the past, but in the present.<sup>82</sup> For Bonhoeffer, “when we have Christ witnessing to himself in the present, any historical affirmation is irrelevant.”<sup>83</sup> As a result, the Jesus of history cannot be grasped by history but can only be known in and by the church’s present faith. What is more, according to Bonhoeffer,

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>77</sup> Philips, 36.

<sup>78</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* trans. Edwin H. Robertson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 72-73.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. It is interesting to note that Bonhoeffer, in this context, says that, “Verbal inspiration is a poor substitute for the resurrection. It amounts to a denial of the unique presence of the risen one. It gives history an eternal value instead of seeing history and knowing it from the point of view of God’s eternity (p. 73). He continues, “The Bible remains a book like other books. One must be ready to accept the concealment within history and therefore let historical criticism run its course” (p. 73-74).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 73.

the witness of the risen Christ to himself is only manifest in the Church, which bears witness to Christ in history. The obvious circularity leaves Bonhoeffer with *fideism*.

However, this raises another question: Can the person of Christ, who can only be known by the church in the present, be known apart from his historical soteriological work in the past, on the cross? Put systematically, the question would be, does the work interpret the person or the person the work?<sup>84</sup>

In the Bible we continually encounter the unity of Christ's person *and* work. The Gospel writers seem to want us to understand both who Christ is and, at the same time, what he did. To not know his person is to not understand his work, and to not know his work is to not understand his person.

Following Luther, Bonhoeffer thought that an endeavor to understand the person from the work is doomed to failure because of the ambiguity of the work.<sup>85</sup> This reasoning inescapably bears witness to the effect Troeltsch exerted over Bonhoeffer. It also raises two important caveats concerning our ability to know Christ from Scripture.

First, according to Bonhoeffer, we may know Christ only through what is concealed about him in the Bible. Since the Bible, with all its flaws, is a book like other books, says Bonhoeffer, one must be ready to accept this concealment. Perhaps Bonhoeffer might have answered with Troeltsch that Scripture, in and of itself, cannot be a reliable witness in regard to our knowing the work of Christ because the authenticity of the biblical text has been destroyed by historical research.

Second, Bonhoeffer seems also to agree with Troeltsch in regard to the non-absoluteness of Scripture when he writes, "Verbal inspiration is a poor substitute for the resurrection."<sup>86</sup> In other words, the historical record of the work cannot replace or even communicate the reality found in the person.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer affirms that in the Bible, Christ encounters us.<sup>88</sup> In other words, the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God, concealed by the errors and flaws of Scripture, reveals himself to the reader by faith. Presumably, God, the Holy Spirit, overcomes the deficiencies of Scripture so that the reader might believe what the Bible teaches about God. However, if the written word of Scripture is, in fact, historical and therefore unable to communicate absolutes, how can God give us certainty through that which is by its very nature uncertain?

What is more, this position places the faith of the Church (and therefore objective knowledge about Christ) in a precarious position. The Church has traditionally maintained that faith has three aspects that must coincide if there is to be true faith: 1) *notitia* (knowledge), 2) *assensus* (assent) and, 3) *fiducia* (trust). Because assent and trust must have an object, knowledge is essential. Therefore, a fundamental aspect of faith is *notitia*. Further, it is assumed that this *notitia* must be worthy of belief. However, if Bonhoeffer, following Lessing, maintains that no historical truth can be confirmed, then neither can it be used to prove anything. Thus, there is a "big ugly ditch" between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. Therefore if, as we already pointed out, one cannot confirm any aspect of Christ's work for certain, how may we have a basis for belief? Is *notitia* possible?

Bonhoeffer apparently sees the difficulty in his Christological lectures when he says,

The person cannot, however, be known by us, only by God. "The Lord knows his own" (2 Timothy 2:19). There is then no access to the work, except through the

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 73. Bonhoeffer makes a similar comment in *Creation and Fall* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 30, concerning Genesis 1 when he writes, "The idea of verbal inspiration will not do."

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

person; and access to the person is barred to us by the mystery of God's predestination. The attempt to understand the person from the work is doomed to failure because of the ambiguity of the work. There is no access to the man unless he reveals himself of his own accord.<sup>89</sup>

He continues,

There is no point in the life of Jesus of which one could say with unambiguous conviction that here we see the Son of God, proved to be such by one of his works. He does his work rather in the incognito of history, in the flesh. The incognito of the Incarnation makes it doubly impossible to recognize the Person by his Works.<sup>90</sup>

So, according to Bonhoeffer, one cannot have access to the historical work of Christ because of Lessing's ugly ditch nor, seemingly, can one have access to the person of Christ because one cannot have *assensus* and *fiducia* without the historical *notitia* of Christ. To attempt such a thing leads one to say that theology arises from and is the subject of experience. This reconstruction of theology is merely a reversal of the past. Therefore, what Bonhoeffer appears to be saying is that experience, rather than arising from theology, is the subject of theology.

Thus, Bonhoeffer sees only one way in which Jesus Christ may be known, in his unrestrained self-revelation.<sup>91</sup> Only as Christ freely reveals himself may we know his person and his work. Therefore, knowledge of Christ, rather than being based on history or Scripture, is based on an existential encounter with the living Christ of the present. Once again we find Troeltsch behind Bonhoeffer's rationale.

Troeltsch understood the sixteenth century Reformation to be primarily concerned with the question of assurance of salvation.<sup>92</sup> Whereas the late medieval church dealt with issues of assurance by pointing to the hierarchic redemptive organization of the church and its priesthood and to the *opus operatum* of the sacraments, the Protestants, according to Troeltsch, dealt with the same question in radically personal terms.<sup>93</sup>

The difference between the two answers could be described in this way, for the late medieval church assurance was granted and known externally, whereas for the Protestants, it was received and known internally. The means by which one experienced this internal assurance was through faith in Christ alone, *sola fides*. Thus, as interpreted by Troeltsch, Protestantism moved the question of assurance of salvation—a question by necessity involving the existence of God and cosmology—from the empirical and substantial sphere to the psychological and existential sphere.

Therefore, according to Troeltsch, Luther's reformation of *fiducia specialis* unwittingly became the religion of the search for God in one's own feeling, experience, thought, and will, by the concentration of all personal convictions on one point.<sup>94</sup> It seems that Bonhoeffer is unable to escape from the conclusions developed by Troeltsch.

Therefore, Bonhoeffer's dilemma is apparent. If Troeltsch is correct then there can be no valid historical knowledge of Jesus Christ, then Bonhoeffer must argue for a Christ of the present. However, if Kant is correct, then there can be no Christological ontology. Consequently Bonhoeffer must argue for a sociological Christology, which affords the ontological concreteness that the theological philosophy of Lessing, Troeltsch and Kant had denied.

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>92</sup> Troeltsch, 42.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 98.

*Excursus: Critical Questions Concerning Justification*

According to Bonhoeffer, the individual is a sinner in need of an alien righteousness, another righteousness besides their own, because their own is not righteous enough. God alone is righteous and his moral character is the standard by which all are measured. “Thus”, says Bonhoeffer, “the only way we can be righteous in the sight of God is by recognizing that he only is righteous, and we ourselves sinners in the totality of our being.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, Bonhoeffer continues, we must all “repent and confess that all our righteousnesses (sic) are as filthy rags.”<sup>96</sup> Obviously, Bonhoeffer is echoing the words of Isaiah the prophet (64:6). Thus, Bonhoeffer admits that in comparison to the holiness of God even our most righteous works are sin.<sup>97</sup>

Surely, when a person is asked, says Bonhoeffer, “Where is your salvation, your blessedness, your righteousness?”, we may never point to ourselves, knowing the destitute nature of our original condition.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, God’s anger toward humanity is the natural consequence of our fallen condition.<sup>99</sup> Thus, separation from God is the sad conclusion of humanity’s condition.<sup>100</sup>

Having established the pervasive sinfulness of humanity, Bonhoeffer’s concern in *Life Together* is the instrumentation of the fellow Christian in the work of justification, hence his point, the Christian’s need for others on behalf of Jesus Christ.

For Bonhoeffer, the Christian is essential to the justification of another. If anyone is to experience redemption, the Christian must act on behalf of Christ toward others. How so, you may ask? Simply, God’s word is put into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others.<sup>101</sup> Thus, my fellow Christian speaks God’s word to me, pronounces me justified and forgiven. That Christian is Christ *pro me*. Therefore, through fellow Christians I must experience the alien righteousness of God, a righteousness that comes *extra nos*.

Theologically Bonhoeffer is speaking of the sphere in which justification occurs. The basic distinction when speaking of the “where” of justification is twofold—the objective and the subjective spheres. Here Bonhoeffer seems to rest all his focus on the subjective sphere, that which takes place in the heart or conscience of the sinner.<sup>102</sup>

For example, Bonhoeffer is dealing with the person who seeks salvation, deliverance, and justification within themselves.<sup>103</sup> As he later states, perhaps that is why so many are afraid to confess their little sins before their neighbor and yet willing to confess their most heinous atrocities before the holy God. He presses his point further by suggesting that those who have made confession to God alone have really only confessed to themselves and forgiven themselves.<sup>104</sup> Pressing this point further, he proposes this as the reason why so many Christians fail to walk in integrity. Thus, he concludes that the Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the

---

<sup>95</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (NY: Collier Books, 1963), 309.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 38.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>101</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 32. Notice the phrases Bonhoeffer uses to demonstrate his point, “They live entirely out of God’s word pronounced to them....” And “[C]hristians are dependent on the Word of God spoken to them.” More, “God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others...Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them. And “they need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation.”

<sup>102</sup> By contrast in *Letters and Papers* (p. 286) Bonhoeffer speaks against thinking of salvation in personal terms.

<sup>103</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

Christ in the word of other Christians, and so Christians are in need of God's word pronounced to them.<sup>105</sup>

Consequently, Bonhoeffer seems to neglect (if not discard) justification in the objective sense, that is, justification in the most fundamental sense of the word. The objective sense consists in a declaration, which God makes respecting the sinner. The sinner is declared righteous in view of the fact that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him or her. This objective aspect logically precedes subjective justification.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer would posit that the subjective and the objective transpire simultaneously in the confession and absolution that takes places between two Christians. In fact, Bonhoeffer must make that assertion because his contention is that "in another Christian's presence I am permitted to be the sinner that I am, *for there alone in all the world* the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ rule" (emphasis mine).<sup>106</sup> Consequently, when I go to another believer to confess I am going to God, says Bonhoeffer.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, Bonhoeffer's understanding of "alien righteousness", a righteousness that comes *extra nos*, is not a forensic declaration originating from the tribunal of God, rather it is alien in that it comes from the lips of my neighbor. Thus, community, for Bonhoeffer, is built on *this* alien righteousness.<sup>108</sup>

However, if justification in its objective sense is a judicial act of God, in which he declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, that all the claims of the law are satisfied in regard to the sinner, and this declaration is *extra nos*, in the tribunal of God, then how can the objective and subjective take place simultaneously in the pronouncement of my fellow Christian?

What is more, based upon Bonhoeffer's above statements, one must wonder if there is an objective transcendent pronouncement that provides authority and credibility for the proclamation of my fellow Christian. Perhaps there is not, considering Bonhoeffer's statement that "God gives us this assurance through one another,"<sup>109</sup> and that this assurance is "fully certain to me *only* when it is spoken by another believer as God commands and in God's name" (emphasis mine).<sup>110</sup> Or consider what Bonhoeffer penned while in prison in regard to an individualistic doctrine of salvation:

It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the Gospel, intended to exist *for* this world; I mean that, not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystic pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>111</sup>

But if we are not concerned with the transcendent or the "beyond," the objective pronouncement of God, can we possess or know the subjective? Is it possible? Apparently this question does not interest Bonhoeffer, for to speak of the transcendence of God in traditional language reduces him to a *deus ex machina*.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, to dismiss the objective, forensic, transcendent declaration of God is to lose the basis for the legitimate subjective declaration of my fellow Christian.

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>106</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 109.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 286.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 282.

Thus, it appears that Bonhoeffer's view of justification stresses the subjective aspect which is controlled by a psychological and existential framework rather than an objective transcendent declaration.

### **The Transcendent Christ**

For Bonhoeffer, in their loneliness the prisoner, the sick, and the downtrodden "recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body."<sup>113</sup> What is more, "the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."<sup>114</sup> These statements from *Life Together* suggest that there is a deeper Christological undercurrent flowing through *Life Together* that is felt more than explained.

Without doubt, Bonhoeffer did not set out in this slender volume to develop a Christology. For him, this work was an explanation of what Christology looks like in action, rather than an ontological argument for its existence. But what is unmistakable, at least for Bonhoeffer, is that "the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer" because the fellow believer is the concrete presence of the transcendent Christ.<sup>115</sup> This was Bonhoeffer's dogmatic proclamation of the doctrine of Christ's transcendence.<sup>116</sup> However, even though Bonhoeffer does not develop the doctrine of Christ's transcendence within the pages of *Life Together*, it clearly undergirds the entire work, and he plainly assumes it and establishes it on the basis of his previous works.

#### *Bonhoeffer's Challenge to Traditional Transcendence*

When speaking of transcendence, Bonhoeffer is not using traditional categories of transcendence as "a divine reality beyond natural, social, and cultural realities."<sup>117</sup> Rather, Bonhoeffer understands traditional ideas of immanence and transcendence to be always in opposition.<sup>118</sup> For him, "Our relation to God is not a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence..."<sup>119</sup> Nor, says Bonhoeffer, does the transcendence of God have anything to do with the transcendence of epistemological theory.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, according to Mayer and others, Bonhoeffer rules out the idea of a spatial beyond as well as the metaphysical idea of transcendence, declaring them to be false.<sup>121</sup>

Historically, Christian theologians, though retaining the colloquial opposition between the words, have used them not as contraries but as sub-contraries. Thus, they can say that God is both immanent and transcendent. His transcendence calls our attention to the fact that he is different

---

<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 29.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Communio Sanctorum*, trans. Richard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 55-56.

<sup>116</sup> The doctrine of Christ's transcendence manifest in the life of the believer is clearly discerned in his *Spiritual Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 45. "The evangelical pastor shows through a visit that Christ wishes to come to this house."

<sup>117</sup> Rainer Mayer, "Christology: The Genuine Form of Transcendence[sic]" in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 179.

<sup>118</sup> Mayer is not the only interpreter to read Bonhoeffer this way. In his *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), James W. Woelfel states, "To Bonhoeffer...the biblical and theological understanding of transcendence has nothing to do with epistemological and metaphysical concepts of transcendence" (p. 61-62).

<sup>119</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (NY: The Macmillan Co., 1971), 381.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>121</sup> Klassen, 181.

from us; he is the Creator and we are his creatures.<sup>122</sup> Consequently, even his personality is different from ours, for his is original and ours is derivative. God is wholly personal and in no way depends on the impersonal, while we are dependent on impersonal matter and external forces.

Despite Bonhoeffer's apparent rejection of traditional categories, he does not seem to be able to extricate himself totally from them. From his earliest thinking, "God is the supramundane reality transcending consciousness, the *lord* and *creator*" (emphasis mine).<sup>123</sup> Moreover, for Bonhoeffer, "God transcends his transcendence, giving himself to man as the Holy Spirit."<sup>124</sup> Therefore, God's role as Creator and his transcendence of his transcendence, in Bonhoeffer's thought, once again raises the possible reality of spatial and epistemological categories, which he earlier seemingly denied.

However, Bonhoeffer's rejection of transcendence, as traditionally understood, led him to supplant it with a sociological understanding, in which the definition of person would obviously define the community of the corporate person.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer's early attempt to define the church, he deliberates on the various philosophic definitions of personhood. Not surprisingly, having been dissatisfied by the alternatives, Bonhoeffer offers a Christian definition. However, early in his thesis he established one essential criteria for his doctrine, that "every concept of community is essentially related to a concept of person."<sup>126</sup> Accordingly, after having found other definitions wanting, Bonhoeffer writes, "for the individual to exist, 'others' must necessarily be there."<sup>127</sup> In other words, Bonhoeffer defines personhood in terms of the ethical. Thus, only someone who is engaged in responsibility can grasp the Christian concept of person:

If the objection is raised that the other is also a content of my consciousness, immanent to my mind, then what was said above about the distinctive spheres was not understood; *the transcendence of the You says nothing at all about epistemological transcendence*. This is purely ethical transcendence, experienced only by those facing a decision; it can never be demonstrated to someone on the outside. Thus everything that can be said about the Christian concept of person can only be grasped directly by the person who is facing responsibility.<sup>128</sup>

The thought Bonhoeffer develops in *Act and Being* is no different:

Reality is "experienced" in the contingent fact of the claim of "others." Only what comes from "outside" can show man the way to his reality, his existence. In "sustaining" the "claim of my neighbor" I exist in reality, I act ethically; that is the sense of an ethics not of timeless truths but of the "present."<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 56ff.

<sup>123</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 45.

<sup>124</sup> Klassen, 190. Mayer quotes from *Gesammelte Schriften*, v. III (Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1958-1961), 107. Strikingly, in his *Communio Sanctorum*, trans. Richard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). Bonhoeffer states, "In order to build the church as the community-of-God [Gemeinde Gottes] in time, God reveals God's own self as *Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is the will of God that gathers individuals together to be the church-community, maintains it, and is at work only within it" (p. 143).

<sup>125</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Communio Sanctorum*, 34. "Every concept of community is essentially related to a concept of person."

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>129</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 86.

This same line of thinking is still present in his “Outline for a Book” in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*:

The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach in any given situation. God in human form—not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying, nor in the conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc., nor yet in Greek divine-human form of ‘man in himself’, but ‘the man for others’, and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.<sup>130</sup>

Thus, being for Christ and man is what Bonhoeffer called “being for others.” This definition essentially transplanted a metaphysical and epistemological understanding of transcendence with an ethical one. As a result Bonhoeffer could speak about a sensorially present Jesus Christ in me for my neighbor and vice versa and in doing so meet and challenge the Kantian ontological dilemma.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, as Bonhoeffer already said, if I am Jesus to my neighbor and he is the same to me there is no need to prove the historical events of our faith, because Jesus exists in the present.<sup>132</sup>

### *The New Transcendence and Personalism*

However, the philosophies of Kant and Troeltsch were not the only influences that had provoked Bonhoeffer to struggle with a traditional understanding of transcendence and immanence. There were other influences as well, and we do not have to look far to find them. During Bonhoeffer’s early years as a theologian, he was engaged in vigorous dialogue with existential philosophy and theology.<sup>133</sup> Personalism, also called dialogical philosophy or “the philosophy of I and Thou”, was a smaller dimension of this theological and philosophical method that centered in the phenomenological analysis of human existence and in ontologies based on such analysis.<sup>134</sup> Having read and attacked these philosophers convinced him that theology could stand on its own.<sup>135</sup>

Consequently, existentialism, and specifically personalism, is essential to understanding Bonhoeffer’s thought on transcendence. For him “ultimate reality” is personhood—“I”—and through his word the divine person creates other persons to share in this life. Therefore, ontology, for Bonhoeffer, is simply the obedient theological witness to personalism as developed in Scripture rather than an independent definition of “being” which can never really escape the human ego.<sup>136</sup> Consequently, he believed that pure philosophical personalism divorced from theology only led to egocentricity. Therefore, theology was to be controlled, not by personalism, but personalism was to be controlled by the object of theology, the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>137</sup>

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, philosophical personalism has two sides: the theological, and the social. The divine gives rise to the theological framework of sociological personalism. In fact, the human “I” only exists in relation to the divine person which transcends him. The human person is not

---

<sup>130</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 381-382.

<sup>131</sup> For Kant, as has been shown, God cannot be proven and therefore known, so he must be postulated based on the practical notion there must be a being who can hold one accountable to law. However, if, as Bonhoeffer contends, Christ is present in the church in the I/Thou relationship then he is ontologically present.

<sup>132</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 72.

<sup>133</sup> Woelfel, 54.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>135</sup> Bethge, *Biography*, 133.

<sup>136</sup> Woelfel, 56.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

autonomous. What is more, the true limit of personhood is the absolute distinction between man and God. Here again Bonhoeffer is unable untangle himself from using the traditional distinction between transcendence and immanence. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer maintains that Christ “is the absolute extrinsicality for my existence.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, Christ is not absorbed into the human I/Thou relationship but rather is *extra nos*.

However, we must now consider the human side of Bonhoeffer’s theological personalism. As he has already said, the “extrinsicality of Christ” means that he is essentially transcendent of existence,<sup>139</sup> yet it is in its action regarding human existence.<sup>140</sup> For as Bonhoeffer claims,

If the I as person suffers the impact of the person of Christ in judgment or in the process of incorporation into the communion, it cannot conceive that this having-to-suffer is derived from itself but must recognize that it comes from outside. Herein lies the peculiarity of the theo-sociological category.<sup>141</sup>

Mayer claims that this statement, and others similar, provides the context for correctly understanding Bonhoeffer’s notes on transcendence in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (the last portion already quoted), where he writes,

‘Jesus is there only for others’. His ‘being there for others’ is the experience of the transcendence. It is only this ‘being there for others’, maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable – that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through participation in Jesus. The transcendence is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach in any given situation. God in human form—not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying, nor in conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc., nor yet in the Greek divine human form of ‘man in himself’, but ‘the man for others’, and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.<sup>142</sup>

Mayer correctly notes that this passage clearly binds ethical and personal transcendence to the person of the living Christ.<sup>143</sup> However, Mayer is also quick to point out that Bonhoeffer always moves “From God to reality, not from reality to God.”<sup>144</sup>

Here we meet what Bonhoeffer calls the “first theological problem: if Christ is present, not only as power, but in his person, how are we to think of this presence so that it does not violate this person?”<sup>145</sup>

### *The “Who” and the “How” of Transcendence*

Bonhoeffer, in his 1933 lectures on Christology at the University of Berlin, approached the same theological matter from another unique angle. In these lectures he states the issue as the difference between the question of “who” and “how?” The question of “who” is the question of

---

<sup>138</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 141.

<sup>139</sup> Klassen, 188.

<sup>140</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 138.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

<sup>142</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 381-382.

<sup>143</sup> Klassen, 188.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 45.

transcendence. The question of how is a question of immanence.<sup>146</sup> In other words, as has already been demonstrated, the problem of transcendence is properly a question of ethics, not of epistemological or metaphysical speculations. For Bonhoeffer the Christological question “who” was *the* theological question and therefore not even the Thou of the neighbor in itself but the theological Thou of God confronting me in the ethical claim of the neighbor is authentic transcendence.<sup>147</sup>

The question “who?”, expresses the strangeness and the otherness of the one encountered and at the same time it is shown to be the question concerning the very existence of the questioner. He is asking about the being which is strange to his being, about the boundaries of his own existence. Transcendence places his own being in question. With the answer that his logos has reached its boundary he faces the boundary of his own existence. So the question of transcendence is the question of existence, and the question of existence is the question of transcendence. In theological terms: it is only from God that man knows who he is.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, questions of transcendence and of existence become questions concerning the person. However, the boundaries or limits of existence can only be experienced insofar as my neighbor and I are moral participants in the sphere of the ethical community, a relationship Bonhoeffer sets in contrast to the egocentric communities of humanity in general, when he writes,

Perhaps the contrast between spiritual and emotional, self-centered reality can be made most clear in the following observation. Within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, an “immediate” relationship of one to another. However, in the self-centered community there exists a profound, elemental emotional desire for community, for immediate contact with other human souls, just as in the flesh there is a yearning for immediate union with other flesh. This desire of the human soul seeks the complete intimate fusion of I and You, whether this occurs in the union of love or—what from this self-centered perspective is after all the same thing—in forcing the other into one’s own sphere of power and influence.<sup>149</sup>

Therefore, for Bonhoeffer, Christ is mediator not only between God and man but also between my neighbor and me, thus nullifying the human desire to seek the immediate fusion of the “I and Thou.” Once again, the divine “I” creates other persons to share in this life. But what is more, the objective reality of Jesus establishes both the possibility and limits of I/Thou knowledge.<sup>150</sup> Consequently, as Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together*, “[w]ithout Christ we would not know other Christians around us; nor could we approach them. The way to them is blocked by one’s own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to one another.”<sup>151</sup> And so, the transcendence of my neighbor’s “Thou” is not only established in the transcendence of the divine “Thou” but its limits are fixed so that I may be assured of my own freedom and he may be assured of his. But more than fixing limits, Jesus Christ the mediator calls upon me to act in an ethical manner toward him who is Christ to me. In a moving passage in *Life Together* Bonhoeffer explains this mediate relationship:

---

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>147</sup> Woelfel, 62.

<sup>148</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 30, 31.

<sup>149</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 41.

<sup>150</sup> Woelfel, 64.

<sup>151</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 33.

Therefore, spiritual love will prove successful insofar as it commends Christ to the other in all that it says and does. It will not seek to agitate another by exerting all too personal, direct influence or by crudely interfering in one's life. It will not take pleasure in pious, emotional fervor and excitement. Rather, it will counter the other with the clear word of God and be prepared to leave the other alone with this word for a long time. It will be willing to release others again so that Christ may deal with them. It will respect the other as the boundary that Christ establishes between us; and it will find full community with the other in the Christ who alone binds us together.<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, Bonhoeffer seems to have bound his concept of transcendence to the ethical sociological reality of the community. However, for Bonhoeffer, Christ is both transcendent and sociological. He maintains his own separate existence while existing as the Church. The Church does not absorb the Christ, nor does he exist apart from it.

### **Christ *pro me***

Consequently, if the Christ person is not absorbed into the community and yet he exists only in relation to me<sup>153</sup>, where does he stand? Bonhoeffer's answer is emphatic: "He stands *pro me*."<sup>154</sup> Bonhoeffer asserts that Christ *pro me* involves the question of "who" (transcendence) and avoids the theological and philosophical entanglements of "how" (immanence) with which traditional theology has always mistakenly wrestled.

According to Bonhoeffer, traditional Christology has always left theologians speculating on how to fuse a metaphysical transcendent God with a finite and immanent man. Instead, Bonhoeffer shifts the Christological question from the "how" by asking "who". What is more, no longer must theology seek to combine a remote God with an isolated man, but instead, the question of who seeks to forge a relationship of an already existent God-man to the likeness of man.

Bonhoeffer places the Christ person both within my grasp as well as beyond me. Therefore, Christ stands in my place, where I stand, but also on the boundary of my existence and even beyond it.<sup>155</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer is eager to speak about the "who" of Christ because it is this "who" that stands *pro me*. I need not be concerned to ask about the how of the hypostatic union, but about modes of existence. So, "who" is this Christ that stands *pro me*?

### *Christological Incognito*

For Bonhoeffer, the only way to approach the hypostatic union was in terms of mystery. Moreover, in Bonhoeffer's thinking, the aim of Christology is not to make this relationship transparent, but rather to point out the incomprehensibility of the revelation of God in the hiddenness of the flesh. This obviously becomes significant when we attempt to discuss the revelational significance of the Christ person.

Bonhoeffer's basic thesis seems to be that the incarnation of Christ is contrary to the traditional idea that God is always known "immediately." In the traditional framework, the transcendent deity appears, as in the incarnation, and, by this act, is directly knowable. However, Bonhoeffer would argue that God is quite different and uses another mode altogether. His revelation to man is always concealment. What is more, Bonhoeffer, following Kierkegaard, criticizes traditional

---

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>153</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 47.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

theology believing that if a person wishes to be incognito, one wrongs him by saying, “I have both seen you and seen through you.”<sup>156</sup>

For Bonhoeffer the great mystery is the word made flesh, and in the flesh is manifest absolute humility. Bonhoeffer sees this in the phrase, “*homoïoma sarkos*.” The concealment of the divine in the non-divine, according to Bonhoeffer, is God’s self-revelation. In other words, God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, but does so in the complete hiddenness of the flesh.

Consequently, Bonhoeffer’s view of the Christ person who is wholly God supports a dialectical relationship between self-disclosure and concealment. Concealment is a strong motif in Bonhoeffer’s Christology which appears in his discussion concerning Paul’s phrase “in the likeness of the flesh” (Romans 8:3), and the idea of his being “without sin.”<sup>157</sup> But it is the concealment that ultimately creates the stumbling block. According to Bonhoeffer, this form of the stumbling block makes faith in Christ possible.<sup>158</sup> If I believe based on evidence I remain faithless and unchanged. Nevertheless, if I believe despite the veil, the incognito has already been lifted and I am blessed.

However, even though Bonhoeffer’s Christology is a mystery, he elucidates further what it is not. When attempting to define Christ *pro me* in his *Christology* Bonhoeffer offers two points of denial, the second of which concerns us. He writes, “We do not mean that the statement, ‘This man is God’, adds anything to his humanity.”<sup>159</sup> In other words, Bonhoeffer denies that the Christ person is a fusion of two natures, divine and human. This is a standard Lutheran objection to the Reformed understanding of the hypostatic union. However, Bonhoeffer clarifies his objection even further by rejecting the notion that Jesus Christ is God by the possession of a divine *ousia*.<sup>160</sup> In fact, according to Bonhoeffer, there is no such thing as a divine being, which is really the nature of God, existing in the Christ person. To look at the human nature and then beyond it to another divine nature is wholly wrong. Instead, we must accept the one man as wholly God. In fact, Bonhoeffer seems to be moving away from Lutheranism and sliding close to Socinianism, especially when he writes that Jesus is God by virtue of “a statement which comes upon this man from above.”<sup>161</sup>

Nor must the Christ person be thought of as a representative idea of God. Instead, we must think of his weakness, for to think of the Christ person as God’s representative is to reduce him to an abstract God. Thus, we are driven away from questions concerning his deity to questions concerning his humanity. For the humanity of God in the Christ person is the only glorifying of God.

#### *Some Critical Questions Concerning the “homoïoma sarkos” and Community*

For, Bonhoeffer the self-revelation and concealment of the *homoïomo sarkos* of Christ is the central problem of Christology, and yet it is also indispensable to his understanding of the Christological community. It is problematic because it raises the question of the impeccability of Christ. In other words, has Jesus as the humiliated God-man entered fully into human sin? Was he sinful as we are? If not, has he really become man? If not, can he really help? If not, can he be the ultimate foundation of Christian community?

If nothing else, Bonhoeffer’s questions reveal his thoughtful consideration of this difficult subject. But these same questions also indicate that he is standing at a crossroads. There are two apparent

---

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 103.

possibilities, either Christ is the obedient Son of God or he is disobedient and therefore unable to represent us before God's judicial bar. However, unwilling or unable to accept this "either/or" claim, Bonhoeffer posits a possible third way.

Bonhoeffer readily admits that the *sarx* of Christ is our *sarx*. According to him, there is no difference at all.<sup>162</sup> However, for Bonhoeffer this means that not only was he tempted to sin, he actually sinned.<sup>163</sup> At the same time, Bonhoeffer, with equal vitality affirmed the sinlessness of Christ. For Bonhoeffer this was a point of dialectical tension, two points that must be allowed to stand irreconcilable.

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer could not allow them to stand without offering some explanation. Thus, he said, "Without trying to balance, we have to say, it is *he*, not the *homoioomo sarkos*, who is without sin—but he will not be separated from this *homoioomo sarkos*."<sup>164</sup> Therefore, in Christ's *homoioomo sarkos* he was a sinner but *he* was sinless.

Evidently, Bonhoeffer understands the theological tension surrounding this statement, for to suggest that *he* does not sin but the *homoioomo sarkos* does seems to invite the charge of Nestorianism. Surely this is the reason for his affirming the unity of the natures. But what about the *communicatio idiomatum* and Bonhoeffer's affirmation that the "body of Jesus, as the body of the God-Man, had taken upon itself divine properties through its *communicatio* with the divine nature"?<sup>165</sup> How then can the *homoioomo sarkos*, which enjoys communion with divine properties, do anything but righteous acts?

Thus it appears, contrary to his own words,<sup>166</sup> that Bonhoeffer is guilty of separating, or at least distinguishing between the two natures. But can this particular distinction be allowed to stand? Does it hold theological weight?

Bonhoeffer's position obviously led him to reject the impeccability of Christ on the basis of his deeds, for Christ was a sinner in deed. Bonhoeffer affirms that

He is man as we are, he is tempted in all points like as we are, yet much more dangerously than we are. Also in his flesh was the law which is contrary to God's will. He was not the perfect good. At all times he stood in conflict. He did things which, at least from the outside, looked like sin. He became angry, he was harsh to his mother, he escaped from his enemies, he broke the law of his people, he stirred up revolt against the rulers and religious men of his country. He must have appeared a sinner in the eyes of men. Beyond recognition, he stepped into man's sinful way of existence.<sup>167</sup>

Now, the traditional understanding of the impeccability of Christ could be defended even in these instances. For example, Christ was accused of breaking the first and fourth commandment but there was never any evidence that held water. The accusation of his desecrating the Sabbath was based on an incorrect legalistic interpretation of the Law of Moses. Nevertheless, we must keep focused on Bonhoeffer's Christology.

For Bonhoeffer, this was nothing more than the Christological incognito at its pinnacle. The more God revealed himself, the more hidden he had to become. Thus, not only did God refuse to give evidence of his self-revelation in the sinlessness of Christ, but he also hid himself in Christ's sinfulness. However, Bonhoeffer says that, instead of being a stumbling block, the sinfulness of

---

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 108.

Christ ought to be understood as God coming near in hiddenness. What is more, if Christ desires to remain incognito in sinful human flesh, we wrong him by attempting to see beyond what he has revealed—or more accurately, what he has hidden.

Earlier, Bonhoeffer, contemplating a sinless Christ, asked what help he could really be. But perhaps the greatest question is, can a sinful Christ help us? Can a sinful Messiah deliver anyone from the judgement of God let alone himself? It is difficult to see how Bonhoeffer has not left us without hope.

Consider, since humanity sinned, it was necessary that the penalty should be borne by humanity. Moreover, man in body and soul must render payment for this sin. Therefore, it was necessary that Christ should assume the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3). This means that Christ assumed human nature with all its essential properties and all its infirmities to which it is liable after the Fall. With this Bonhoeffer is in agreement.

However, in order to redeem fallen humanity Christ also had to be sinless. What could a sinful Messiah accomplish? For a man, who was himself a sinner, could not atone for anyone, this was the lesson of the Old Testament sacrifices and priesthood (cf. Hebrews 5:1-3 and 7:26). He too would need a savior.

What Bonhoeffer does not seem to realize is that the apparent sinfulness of Christ is, upon closer examination, no sinfulness at all. Consider the story of the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-51). Jesus remained in Jerusalem even after his parents departed for home. His parents obviously believed that they had been wronged at his hands and asked, “Son, why have you treated us like this?” This, as Bonhoeffer sees it, is sin.

But consider Barth’s treatment of this passage. Far from disobedience, he finds honor both in what he had done and said to them. But what of Jesus’ apparent evasion of authority and his apparent harshness toward his parents, don’t those things constitute disobedience? Barth does not think so. The principle of Acts 5:29 applies here as well, people must obey God rather than men. So, Barth surmises that “Jesus did not seek to evade the authority of his parents. It is simply that He took it seriously—more seriously than they themselves could realize or understand.”<sup>168</sup>

Furthermore, Barth understands a principle that Bonhoeffer apparently does not—the necessity of this obedience for our salvation:

What we have described is not the fulfillment of the command in which a man can stand before God as justified by his deeds. In this sense Jesus Christ is the only One who has fulfilled this command too. And He has done it for our justification—He, the obedient Son of the true heavenly Father, and therefore the obedient Son of His true earthly parents.<sup>169</sup>

Thus, Barth sees no sin in Christ’s actions. Rather, he sees them as God honoring, and he sees beyond the apparent disobedience to the obedience which we ourselves do not often comprehend. Consequently, what Bonhoeffer understands as disobedience and sin is nothing more than obedience to the commandments of God.

What is more, contrary to Bonhoeffer’s assertions, Christ’s bearing our *homo iomo sarkos* does not necessitate sinfulness. It merely allows for the possibility of temptation, which could lead to sin. However, temptation is not sin and therefore Christ was tempted in every way, just as we

---

<sup>168</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol.3, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 250.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

are—yet he was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Therefore, there is no need to make a distinction between him and his *homo iomo sarkos*, which Bonhoeffer does.<sup>170</sup>

In addition, Bonhoeffer seems to glory in this paradox. He believes that this incongruity provides the correct atmosphere for faith to flourish. For Bonhoeffer, real faith is when a person surrenders himself or herself to the humiliated God-man “against all sense.”<sup>171</sup> Faith, says Bonhoeffer, is “when the search for certainty out of visible evidence is given up.”<sup>172</sup> According to Bonhoeffer belief based on visible evidence such as miracles is not faith, since nothing happens to me.

Therefore, Bonhoeffer believes that true faith only comes through the Word itself, which comes to me through Christ. But *what* comes to me in the Word through Christ? Is it the words of absolution that come from my neighbor, who is really God for me? If so, then that faith is still assurance based on evidence. In fact, according to Bonhoeffer, my neighbor provides me with full certainty.<sup>173</sup> But if this assurance is not to be had through my neighbor, then Bonhoeffer has destroyed his concrete Christology. Yet, if I can receive faith and assurance through my neighbor, then his definition of faith is deficient.<sup>174</sup>

### Conclusion

In his Christ *pro me* Bonhoeffer faces the knottiest of Christological problems, the historicity of Christ. And we must remember his prior conclusion concerning historical scholarship and its inability to demonstrate its reliability:

Historical research can never absolutely deny, because it can never absolutely affirm. Absolute denial or absolute affirmation make history into *historia sacra*. So the existence of Jesus Christ cannot be absolutely denied. Historical study can only put it in doubt or make it improbable. As a subject for historical investigation, Jesus Christ remains an uncertain phenomenon; his historicity can neither be affirmed or denied with the necessary absolute certainty.<sup>175</sup>

Moreover, Bonhoeffer responds to himself when he asks if the tomb was really empty by saying,

Is it the visible evidence, penetrating the incognito, of the Sonship of Jesus, open to everyone and therefore making faith superfluous? If it was not empty, is then Christ not risen and our faith futile? It looks as though our faith in the resurrection were bound up with the news of the empty tomb. Is our faith then ultimately only faith in the empty tomb? ... Empty or not it remains a mystery. We cannot be sure of its historicity.<sup>176</sup>

Thus, agreeing with Troeltsch, Bonhoeffer can see no dogmatic value in bringing the facts of history to bear on our faith. Consequently, only in faith can we leap over Lessing’s “ugly broad ditch” and affirm the paradox that a particular event of history has absolute significance.<sup>177</sup>

Furthermore, faith receives its sufficient reason directly through the Risen One through which the church bears witness to him as the Historical One. By the miracle of his presence in the church he

---

<sup>170</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 109.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 113.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>177</sup> Woelfel, 149.

bears witness to himself here and now as the one who was the historical then.<sup>178</sup> Thus, the confirmation of the historical is irrelevant because of the self-attestation of Christ in the present.<sup>179</sup>

However, the question remains, can this interchange exist? Can it be so that Christ stands *pro me* in the present and, if so, how? Bonhoeffer answers,

Christ is Christ, not just for himself, but in relation to me. His being Christ is his being for me, *pro me*. This being *pro me* is not to be understood as an effect emanating from him, nor as an accident; but it is to be understood as the essence, the being of the person himself. The core of the person himself is *pro me*. That Christ is *pro me* is not an historical, nor an ontic statement, but an ontological one.<sup>180</sup>

Thus, we return to the idea of “being there for others” as an ontological ground for Bonhoeffer. It is the essence of his Christology and, for him, to conceive of Christ any other way is simply godless. This is the Christology that undergirds *Life Together*.

---

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 72.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 47.