

DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

BONHOEFFER'S NON-RELIGIOUS, CONCRETE, WORLDLY ECCLESIOLOGY:
MAKING SENSE OF *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON* IN LIGHT OF THE REST OF
BONHOEFFER'S WORK

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TWO MISREADINGS OF BONHOEFFER'S ECCLESIOLOGY

1. Disillusioned Dietrich: Bonhoeffer the Atheist

It is easy to become confused when reading *Letters and Papers from Prison* when Dietrich Bonhoeffer caustically criticizes religion and urges Christians to embrace worldliness. There is a group of people who argue Bonhoeffer became completely disillusioned with Christianity and in his despair flailed around grasping for other actions that might be more effective.¹ Did a year in prison cause him to lose his passion for the church? Did he renounce everything he had stood for—his Christian faith, his church-work, his theology? Did he begin to think that involvement in government policy, social issues, and civil rights are what Christians should really be focused on instead of Word, sacrament and community? We will call that the “Disillusioned Dietrich” hypothesis. It posits a massive break in Bonhoeffer’s thinking.

As we will see, on the contrary, when Bonhoeffer’s constellation of terms related to religion and worldliness is explored throughout his writings, the continuity between what he said in prison and what he had said earlier emerges. Bonhoeffer continues to be a Christian theologian whose primary passion is the church of Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer himself downplays the impression that his latest insights during his time in prison constitute a major shift in his thinking.

When you say that my time here will be very important for my practical work, and that you’re very much looking forward to what I shall have to tell you later, and to what I’ve

¹ William Hamilton, “A Secular Theology for a World Come of Age,” *Theology Today* 18 (Jan 62): 435-459. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963). Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: MacMillan, 1963). Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: MacMillan, 1965). All cited by Craig L. Nesson, “The American Reception: Introduction to Bonhoeffer’s Christ the Center,” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who is Christ for Us?* (ed. Craig L. Nesson and Renate Wind; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002): 20-30.

written, you mustn't indulge in any illusions about me. I've certainly learnt a great deal, but I don't think I have changed very much.²

For example, his 1937 book *Discipleship* has a not-altogether-unfounded reputation for being “against the world.”³ But in a letter from prison in 1944, Bonhoeffer affirms the “the profound this-worldliness of Christianity”⁴ and then immediately goes on to affirm *Discipleship*, “Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote.”⁵

Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's biographer and best friend, vehemently denies that Bonhoeffer somehow repudiated his earlier Christian convictions while in prison. Furthermore, he affirms a firm continuity in Bonhoeffer's Christology and ecclesiology. “Our primary interest is in the fact that there is a certain continuity here. This is also true of the elements of his ecclesiology, even though the latter caused him great difficulty.”⁶ Though the prison letters employ a somewhat new set of terms, Bonhoeffer's reflections are not those of a disillusioned person setting off in a new direction but rather further reflections in the same direction.

2. Reluctant Dietrich: Bonhoeffer the Apocalyptic

But there is a second misperception that is more subtle. The people in this camp believe Bonhoeffer was not wholly disillusioned with Christianity but he was disillusioned enough by the church to be reluctant to discuss its forms and practices. Do Bonhoeffer's reflections in

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; New York: Touchstone, 1997), 275.

³ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (vol. 4 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 244-252.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 369.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 369.

⁶ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 856.

prison reflect a disintegration of ecclesiology in favor of Christology? Does Bonhoeffer believe that it is impossible to articulate what forms faithful church practice might take in light of the overwhelming apocalyptic reality of Jesus Christ? Does Bonhoeffer believe that we can do little more than assert that Jesus Christ has called us to love—to be “for others?” We will call that set of questions the “Reluctant Dietrich” hypothesis. It posits that Bonhoeffer was reluctant to get too specific about church forms and practices because of the apocalyptic Christ. Though not talking about Bonhoeffer, Nathan Kerr articulates this perspective.

A dispossessed sociality. A sociality of dispossession. This is what the liturgy of Christian mission commits us to. And yet, there is no way theoretically to anticipate what this sociality will look like.⁷

On the contrary, Bonhoeffer does have concrete ideas about what faithful ecclesiology to Jesus Christ might look like. In fact, as we will see at the very end of this paper, he cites “the importance of human example”⁸ and I argue that the Bonhoeffer corpus precisely intends to give examples—most obviously in *Life Together*. The reader who asserts that Bonhoeffer is flummoxed by a high Christology ignores a constant theme in Bonhoeffer’s work that Christology be made concrete—be embodied—in ecclesiology.

In one of his last letters to his best friend and future biographer Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sketched an outline for a future book. This is how he envisioned the beginning of the conclusion to the book. “The church is the church only when it exists for others.”⁹ His first book

⁷ Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 195.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 382.

*Sanctorum Communio*¹⁰ had dealt with the church and here at the end, he hoped that he might write something that “may be of some help for the church’s future.”¹¹

But under the section title “Unfinished Ecclesiology” in his biography of Bonhoeffer, Bethge reflects sadly that this book was never published. “It is a disturbing thing for the church that, at the end of his theological activity, Bonhoeffer did not give a completed ecclesiology that we could hold on to.”¹² Bethge is correct to say that “It is impossible for us to complete the fragment” but Bethge overstates the case when he says,

But Bonhoeffer failed not only in terms of practical ecclesiology, that is, with regard to the structure of the church after 1945 [because he did not finish the book he intended to write and the German church changed little after the war], but also in his theological treatise on the doctrine of the church, with which he began his theological career so passionately and which ended with unsettled questions. At the end Bonhoeffer arrived at a stage that was highly critical of the church. His ecclesiology seemed entirely absorbed within the *theologia crucis*. Once his thinking had begun ecclesiologically; then this ecclesiology yielded to Christology, but during the period of *Discipleship* and the church struggle it once more aroused quite distinct connotations. Now he entered a phase where it was once again being called into question by Christology . . .¹³

In any case, ecclesiology dominated Bonhoeffer’s theology in its early stages, absorbing the Christology. Later the reverse became true.¹⁴

Bethge goes on to slightly qualify these conclusions but the damage is done. By emphasizing the division between Christology and ecclesiology in a way that Bonhoeffer never did, Bethge contributes to the interpretation that Bonhoeffer’s earlier works were merely stages in his development that carry less importance than his final reflections. *Life Together* and *Discipleship*

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (vol. 1 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383.

¹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 887.

¹³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 887.

¹⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 84.

can be relegated to pre-prison naiveté. Here is Bethge's partial-qualification of his statement above.

but it would be wrong to conclude from this situation that Bonhoeffer was not interested in ecclesiology. For him everything depended on the *theologia crucis*, but the only form in which he knew this was in its urging us toward the concrete fellowship of those who share Christ's sufferings in the world. It is impossible for us to complete the fragment. This perhaps also a reflection of the situation, in that there can be no systematically complete conclusion in the movement between Christology and ecclesiology. In fact, everything was left very open at the end.¹⁵

Bethge unfortunately still fuels the misunderstanding that Bonhoeffer was so flummoxed by apocalyptic Christ and he was reluctant to articulate specifics about the church's practices.

Stanley Hauerwas states it better when he says, "From the beginning to the end of his work Bonhoeffer relentlessly explores and searches for what it means for the church to faithfully manifest God's visibility."¹⁶ If Hauerwas is correct, then the concrete examples in *Life Together* and *Discipleship* may actually complement and illuminate rather than conflict with Bonhoeffer's reflections in *Letters and Papers in Prison*. This essay intends to make exactly that point.

CLARIFYING THE CONFUSING CONSTELLATION OF "NEW" TERMS IN *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON*

After being in prison for a year, in 1944, Bonhoeffer unveiled to his friend Bethge a somewhat new set of terms to describe the relationship between the church and the world: "world come of age," "religious," "non-religious," "secular," "worldly," "godless," "powerless," "concrete" and "for others." These terms are almost exclusively found in nine letters from April 30 to August 3,

¹⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 887-888.

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 231.

1944.¹⁷ At the end of the analysis that follows I will summarize how Bonhoeffer uses each of these terms. Readers of *Letters and Papers from Prison* can become totally confused about Bonhoeffer's stance toward the church and the world if they do not understand these terms in their (a) literary, (b) historical and (c) theological context. (a) Many of these terms Bonhoeffer himself had used in his earlier writings. (b) Bonhoeffer was addressing a historical situation in which the church was in chaos. All of these "controversial" statements were written in smuggled personal letters to Bonhoeffer's best friend Bethge. Bonhoeffer gave disclaimer after disclaimer that his reflections were rough drafts badly in need of discussion and debate. (c) Many of these terms were key terms in theological discourse of the time. Issues related to literary, historical and theological context will recur repeatedly in my analysis below.

Of all the unique terms Bonhoeffer uses, his theology turns upon three of them, which I will take up in the next three sub-sections. First, he with Barth opposes the Schleiermachiian/Troeltschian view of "religion"—casting his approach as "non-religious" to distinguish it from theirs. Second, Bonhoeffer quibbles with Barth over whether his theology is sufficiently "concrete"—lumping Barth in with the positivism of Kant. Third, Bonhoeffer distinguishes his perspective from both Schleiermacher and Kant by talking of a Christian "worldliness."

1. Bonhoeffer, drawing on Barth, supports "non-religious interpretation" as opposed to the "religion" of Schleiermacher and Troeltsch.

Bonhoeffer's willingness to dispense with "religion" can easily be misunderstood as a willingness to dispense with the church because in our current terminology "organized religion"

¹⁷ See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, April 30, 1944, 279-282; May 5, 1944, 285-287; June 8, 1944, 325-329; June 30, 1944, 341; July 8, 1944, 344-346; July 16, 1944, 359-361; July 18, 1944, 361-2; July 21, 1944, 369; August 3, 1944, 378-383.

is most often associated with attending worship services at a church. In contrast, Bonhoeffer was critical of “religion” from *Sanctorum Communio* onwards but he always wanted renewed engagement by the church in concrete practices.

For Bonhoeffer as well as Karl Barth, “religious” and “religion” almost always imply criticism of Schleiermacher. For example, Bonhoeffer writes in *Sanctorum Communio*,

God established the reality of the church, of humanity pardoned in Jesus Christ—not religion, but revelation, *not religious community, but church*. This is what the reality of Jesus Christ means.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer’s dissertation advisor Reinhold Seeberg noted about *Sanctorum Communio*, “here and there one finds references to Barth.”¹⁹ Clifford Green writes,

But Bonhoeffer’s alignment with Barth was much stronger than Seeberg recognized—the dissertation displays not mere allusions to Barth but rather a fundamental commitment to the method of a theology of revelation.²⁰

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer chides Schleiermacher for beginning with the religious spirit of the individual and deriving a religious community. Rather, for Bonhoeffer the Holy Spirit establishes the church whether people “sense” the Holy Spirit is moving or not. The church is not correctly understood theologically as “a group of people who feel religious.”

Schleiermacher’s concept of unity is not theological, but psychological, and therefore profoundly mistaken. It is based on an identification of ‘religious community’ and ‘church.’ The unity of the former is psychological; that of the church transcends psychological categories, it is divinely established, objective. Had Schleiermacher understood this basic difference, he never would have thought of identifying the Holy Spirit with the consciousness of the species. The former is present in principle only in the church. The latter is part of any community as such. True, when viewed from the

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 153.

¹⁹ Reinhold Seeberg, “Report on Bonhoeffer’s proposed Licentiate dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* in July 1927,” in Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 8.

²⁰ Clifford J. Green, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 8.

outside, the church is a religious community, but this is precisely an untheological perspective.²¹

Bonhoeffer also takes issue with Ernst Troeltsch who took this sense of individual religious experience and derived sociological categories from it.

Even in the greatest theological work using sociological method, we find the proposition that the saints are connected only in God, and are thus only indirectly connected with one another. See Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, 56. ‘It (the Christian idea of community) consists ultimately in the fact that those who sanctify themselves for God, meet in the common goal, that is in God.’²²

Another quote by Troeltsch shows his fundamental commitment to religion being the religious feeling of the individual.

With the emphasis on the Church the principle of love seems to come very much to the fore, and in the Gospel of John love constitutes the whole content of the Christian ethic. This, however, is a false impression; this love rests upon a religious individualistic foundation, and religious individualism is and remains the root idea.²³

Given Bonhoeffer’s consistent denial of this presupposition from the time of *Sanctorum Communio* in 1927 onwards, it is not surprising that he should return to this theme in the wake of the disintegration of the church based on this “religious individualistic foundation” in war-time Germany in 1944. It seemed to Bonhoeffer that the time was ripe to pronounce dead not God but the Schleiermachiian-Troeltschian description of the church—that was not only lacking theologially, but this foundation had also been exposed as inadequate to the challenges of National Socialism in Germany.

The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 196.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 177.

²³ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (trans. O. Wynon; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 70.

time of religion in general. We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.²⁴

Bonhoeffer had criticized Schleiermacher for his non-theological perspective. For Bonhoeffer, Barth exemplifies the theological perspective. Clearly Bonhoeffer's critique of Schleiermacher and religion in 1927 follows along the lines of Barth in his second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* published in 1921. Faith cannot be reduced to "religious experience" or analyzed as a psychological phenomenon. Barth writes,

We have seen in ch.iii. 21, 27-30 that, contrasted with the visible concreteness of religion, the righteousness of faith is peculiar, new and strange. In its pure other-worldliness we have found it to be the beginning and truth of all religion. We are no longer permitted either to regard it as a thing in history or to subject it, as though it could be identified with religious experience, to psychological analysis.²⁵

Barth's focus is on the "other-worldliness" of faith in contrast to religion.

2. Bonhoeffer argues for "concrete ethics" against the "positivism" of Barth and Kant.

One more quote from Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* will illustrate that Bonhoeffer's denunciation of religion is not original but will also reveal the points at which Bonhoeffer wants to diverge from him. Barth is emphatic that religion is not a rarified sphere that somehow floats above the human world avoiding the tainting of sin. Note too Barth's insistence that human behavior is not characterized by divine feelings but rather "godlessness" (also translated as "ungodliness"). Barth writes in 1921,

No religion is capable of altering the fact that the behavior of men is a behavior apart from God. All that religion can do is to expose the complete godlessness of human behavior. As a concrete human being and having and doing, religion is—flesh: it shares,

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 279.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 126.

that is to say, in the profligacy and essential worldliness of everything human, and is in fact the crown and perfection of human achievement. Religion neither overcomes human worldliness nor transfigures it; not even the religion of Primitive Christianity or of Isaiah or of the Reformers can rid itself of this limitation.²⁶

Barth in the above quote uses four of the constellation of terms that confuse people so much in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*: religion, godlessness, concrete, worldliness. As we will see Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth about all four words at the "ultimate" level but wants to explore if their might not be a Christian way of being concrete and worldly at the "penultimate" level.

Barth, who is the only one to have started along this line of thought, did not carry it to completion, but arrived at a positivism of revelation . . . Does the secret discipline, or alternatively the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between penultimate and ultimate, take on new importance here?²⁷

In his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer repeatedly credits Barth for showing that the church cannot be reduced to the religious experience of Schleiermacher.

Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion, and that remains his really great merit; but he put in its place a positivist doctrine of revelation . . . In the place of religion there now stands the church—that is in itself biblical—but the world is in some degree made to depend on itself and left to its own devices, and that's the mistake.²⁸

In the quote above, Bonhoeffer exhibits what was a decades-long mutually-edifying disagreement with Barth over "the world." Bonhoeffer longed for Barth to build more "concretely" upon the foundation of revelation.

Earlier in *Ethics*, not speaking specifically about Barth, Bonhoeffer writes,

²⁶ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 276.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 281. Cf. Bonhoeffer, "Ultimate and Penultimate Things" in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (vol. 6 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 146-170.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 286.

It is clear that positivistic rationale is on shaky ground, since at any particular point it has no criterion beyond the given reality, which could always change . . . Positivism is thus unable to provide a rationale for the ethical.²⁹

In especially Barth's earlier writings such as the *Epistle to the Romans*, his dialectical distinction between God and human beings overshadowed his other emphasis on Christ's Lordship over all areas of life (that is, Christ's Lordship over all areas of the world). Barth was in fact sincerely surprised that under National Socialism the Confessing church rarely took political action. He wrote in 1942,

Their struggle was confined to the specific question whether the Church could remain the Church . . . Up to the year 1934, while I was in Germany, I myself thought that I could relegate my political opposition to the background and work only along that line.³⁰

But growing up in Berlin and being steeped in the two kingdom theology of the Lutheran church, Bonhoeffer was aware of the unfortunate chasm between the church and the ordinary, the earthy, the suffering, the bodily. This crack was begun by Luther's two kingdom theology and exacerbated by Schleiermacher's concept of religion.

In 1932-33, Bonhoeffer commented, "The Barthian view of ethics as 'demonstration' rules out all concrete ethics and ethical principles."³¹ In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer writes, "because of the form of Christ the form of the real human being is preserved . . . we are turned away from any abstract ethic and toward a concrete ethic."³² For Barth, "demonstration" is an eschatological term.

Theology is a totally unpractical and non-religious undertaking; and it is so, because it is concerned with the most practical of all human desires, because it is concerned with

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 376.

³⁰ Karl Barth, *The Church and the War* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1944), 8.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt: 1931-1932* (DBW 11), 212-213 quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 184. English version not yet available: *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932* (DBW 11).

³² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 99.

meaning—the ‘further’ meaning—of all religion. Filled with inexhaustible purpose and certain of final success, theology must appear on the scene without any purpose and acknowledging no success as such. Itself the final venture of men, it is bound to perceive that every human adventure can be no more than a *demonstration* and a parable.³³

So when Bonhoeffer says, “The Barthian view of ethics as ‘demonstration’ rules out all concrete ethics and ethical principles,”³⁴ Bonhoeffer raises an objection to Barth’s eschatology—that it is not sufficiently immanent.

Bonhoeffer concludes *Sanctorum Communio* with a section called, “Church and Eschatology.” Though he agrees with Barth’s dialectical emphasis on *divine revelation* against *human experience* (the ultimate), Bonhoeffer describes history (the penultimate) in terms of *God’s community* against *human sin*.

Within history there are two basic conflicting tendencies, both of which will continue to gain strength and momentum. One is the impulse of the *sanctorum communio* to permeate the life of all communities and societies. However, it would not be correct to define the empirical church and the world as ultimate opposites. Rather, the rift goes right through the empirical church, and within itself the struggle between good and evil must erupt. There will never be a pure church, just as there never has been one. *Sanctorum Communio* and *Antichrist* will remain the ultimate opposites in history.³⁵

Bonhoeffer insists that human beings are more than just a “demonstration.” The incarnation has dignified the body. “In the Christian person soul and body are bound together in an indissoluble unity. Concrete community is possible only because human beings are equipped with a body.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer comes very close to equating Christ and the church. In his final summary,

³³ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 531. Italics added.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt: 1931-1932* (DBW 11), 212-213 quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 184. English version not yet available: *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932* (DBW 11).

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 282-3. He does not use the term “ultimate” in this quote the way he will later in *Ethics*.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 286.

Bonhoeffer concludes with his theological description of the church as opposed to those of Schleiermacher.

Now the objective spirit of the church really has become the *Holy Spirit*, the experience of the ‘religious’ community now really is the *experience of the church*, and the collective person of the church now really is ‘*Christ existing as church-community*.’³⁷

Bethge writes,

His [Bonhoeffer’s] critics contend that this led Bonhoeffer, in the power of his discovery, to let the difference between Christ and community disappear to the point that the two were identified with one another.³⁸

According to Joachim von Soosten, “We can presume that, at the time, Bonhoeffer’s view of the church as a revelational reality established in Christ could only have been interpreted by Barth as ‘being homesick’ for Roman Catholicism.”³⁹

If Barth probably detected too much “realism” in Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer pushed back that he detects an “idealist” streak in Barth⁴⁰—hence his comment about “neo-Kantian egg-shells.”

Barth was the first to realize the mistake that all these attempts (which were all, in fact, still sailing, though unintentionally, in the channel of liberal theology) were making in leaving clear a space for religion in the world or against the world. He brought in against religion the God of Jesus Christ, ‘*pneuma* against *sarx*.’ That remains his greatest service (his *Epistle to the Romans*, second edition, in spite of all the neo-Kantian egg-shells). Through his later dogmatics, he enabled the church to effect this distinction, in principle, all along the line. It was not in ethics, as is often said, that he subsequently failed—his ethical observations, as far as they exist, are just as important as his dogmatic ones—; it was that in the non-religious interpretation of theological concepts he gave no concrete

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 288.

³⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 84.

³⁹ Joachim von Soosten, “Editor’s Afterword to the German Edition,” in Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 293.

⁴⁰ Barth refuses to be categorized as either idealist or realist in Karl Barth, “Fate and Idea in Theology: Lectures delivered at the Hochschulinstitut in Dortmund, February-March, 1929. Translation of ‘Schicksal and Idee’ in *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*,” in *The way of theology in Karl Barth: essays and comments* (ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt; Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1986): 25-61.

guidance, either in dogmatics or in ethics. There lies his limitation, and because of it his theology of revelation has become positivist, a ‘positivism of revelation,’ as I put it.⁴¹

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer had critiqued Kant’s idealism that precluded “a single collective person without obliterating their either singularity or the community of persons . . . The issue here is basically the same as in Schleiermacher, Fichte, Hegel, and also in Kant.”⁴² Later, in prison he concludes, “since Kant he [God] has been relegated to a realm beyond the world of experience.”⁴³ “In the last resort, Kant is a deist, and Fichte and Hegel are pantheists.”⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer is not accusing Barth of being a deist but he is criticizing Barth for failing to offer enough “concrete guidance.” Barth’s writing *style* is too idealistic. Hauerwas nicely expresses this idea,

Barth’s *Dogmatics* is a performance, a witness, through which we learn the skills to go on in a way no doubt different from Barth. For there is no way to be faithful to Barth without being different from Barth. That is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer, exactly because he followed Barth in his own way, witnesses to the power of Barth’s performance.⁴⁵

This also coincides nicely with Bonhoeffer’s comments about meeting Barth. “Barth was even better than his books . . . I have been impressed even more by discussions with him than by his writings and lectures.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Bonhoeffer’s criticism of Barth might be called eschatological (of Barth’s discounting the immanent) or philosophical (of Barth’s residual idealism).

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 328.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 193.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 341. Interestingly, in this quote Bonhoeffer uses the word “experience” positively as a synonym for the adjective “concrete.”

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 359.

⁴⁵ Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 25.

⁴⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (rev. ed.; ed. G.B. Kelly and F. B. Nelson; New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 383. See German DBW 11:19. English DBW 11 not yet available.

3. Bonhoeffer employs the term “worldliness” against both the religion of Schleiermacher and the positivism of Kant.

Bonhoeffer is not entirely original in wanting to recover the “worldly.” Bonhoeffer parried repeatedly with Albrecht Ritschl in *Sanctorum Communio*. In 1900, Ritschl pointed out that the psychological and experiential focus of Schleiermacher’s “religion” resulted in the distancing of religion from most of “the world.” Note especially the italicized sentences.

For since Schleiermacher raised the problem of the peculiar psychological character of religion German theology has never grown weary of occupying itself with it afresh. Nobody indeed has been able to maintain the conception of feeling in the sense asserted by Schleiermacher as the function of absolute dependence upon God; on the contrary psychological investigation has always been led on to other lines. In one respect, however, Schleiermacher’s precedent dominates all subsequent attempts namely in the fact that religion is always represented simply as a relation to God but not at the same time as a relation or attitude of man to the world. Schleiermacher was able to disregard this latter requirement because his dialectic led him to include in the idea of God neutrality towards the world the indifference of undivided unity towards the manifold of existence. Certainly he satisfied that requirement in so far as he taught that the feeling of dependence on God fills up a moment of time only when it is combined with an act of sensuous feeling or with acts of ideation or volition which relate to the world. *But this view has had no effect upon his followers who in spite of their proposed alteration of psychological theory have regarded the contents of religion only as related to God and never at the same time as related to the world though the historical appearance of all religions actually demands the latter view. People reflect on the relation of religion especially the Christian religion to the world only when they want to determine the way in which moral conduct is related to religious faith.* But as in doing so care has to be taken not to confound the two; their attention is never drawn to the fact that there is another relation of man to the world the regulation of which must be directly provided for in the idea of religion. I mean that in Christianity we are not religiously dependent upon the supramundane God without at the same time experiencing our religious freedom relatively to the world and actively manifesting our religious dominion over it in our view of the world and our personal tone of feeling.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine* (ed. H. R. Mackintosh, A. B. Macaulay; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 587-588. Italics added.

Ritschl complains that Schleiermacher only carves out a small space for religion in the world. For Schleiermacher, “religion” only occurs when one has a “sensuous feeling” or when one is reflecting on “moral conduct.” Ritschl says that there is more to engaging the world than that. An adequate religion will address the constant encounter with the world, not just the momentary sensation. Bonhoeffer says something very similar,

The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure at least in the sphere of the ‘personal,’ the ‘inner,’ and the ‘private.’ And as every man still has a private sphere somewhere, that is where he was thought to be the most vulnerable.⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer however moves far beyond Ritschl’s pointing out of the privatization of religion under Schleiermacher. Bonhoeffer writes in detail about the space the church occupies in the world “The Visible Church-Community” in *Discipleship* written in 1937 and in his essay “Christ, Reality and Good” in *Ethics* written in 1940-41. In *Discipleship* he writes, “the New Testament is unambiguous. It holds that the church-community claims a physical space here on earth not only for its worship and its order, but also for the daily life of its members.”⁴⁹ He affirms this in *Ethics*. “It would be dangerous to overlook this, to deny the visibility of the church, and thus to devalue it into a purely spiritual entity.”⁵⁰ But more than that, Bonhoeffer declares that church declares all space godless in need of Jesus Christ.

When God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world . . . God embraces the whole reality of the world in this narrow space and reveals its ultimate foundation. So also the church of Jesus Christ is the place—that is the space—in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed . . . The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, that God so loved the world that God gave his Son for it. The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 344.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 232.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God.⁵¹

In one sense, this is typical Lutheran preaching. The person must recognize their godlessness in order to see Christ's love. What is different is that Bonhoeffer is emphasizing that this is a message to the world—not just the individual. The world's foundations must be exposed as faulty.

In his letter on July 18, 1944 he wonders whether global circumstances may have made clear that the world is the world—that it is not getting more and more Christian day-by-day as more and more people get in touch with their religious feelings. The language of Schleiermacher must be excised from the common tongue. Reducing God to the one's private emotions must be repudiated.

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion (Feuerbach!). For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated . . . And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God.⁵²

Similarly, then Bonhoeffer (like Barth) skewers the idea that God is the plaything for human beings. The deistic God is not the God of the Bible and people are better off realizing that.

God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360.

it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.⁵³

The church must proclaim this God who cannot be counted on to get things done but rather demands one's worship and attention. The church is called to free itself of Schleiermacherian verbage and expose the world as naked.

When we speak of God in a 'non-religious' way, we must speak of him in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed, but rather revealed, and thus exposed to an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age.⁵⁴

Perhaps now that it has come of age—had its naiveté assaulted by the carnage of war—it is ready to fall on his knees before the God of the Bible.

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machine*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with the false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our 'secular interpretation.'⁵⁵

Even the language of "secular" is not radically new. Barth wrote in 1932,

One is not to think of the secularity of the Word of God as a kind of fatal accident or an inconvenience which will some day be set aside either totally or at least in part. This secularity, this twofold indirectness, is in fact an authentic and inalienable attribute of the Word of God itself. Revelation means the incarnation of the Word of God. But incarnation means entry into this secularity. We are in this world and are through and through secular. If God did not speak to us in secular form, He would not speak to us at all. To evade the secularity of His Word is to evade Christ.⁵⁶

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360-1.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 362.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 361.

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics*. Volume I/1.5. (ed. G. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. G. Bromiley. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 168.

Repeatedly, Bonhoeffer insists that God does not exist in order to solve human problems. “The kind of thinking that starts out with human problems, and then looks for solutions from that vantage point, has to be overcome—it is unbiblical.”⁵⁷ Rather, human beings are addressed by God. He cites the example of Jesus addressing his disciples.

Jesus asked in Gethsemane, ‘Could you not watch with me one hour?’ That is the reversal of what the religious man expects from God. Man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world. He must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. He must live a ‘secular’ life, and thereby share in God’s sufferings.⁵⁸

Again, this is expressed in more conventional language as “witness to the world” in his essay “Christ, Reality and Good” in *Ethics*.

So the first task given to those who belong to the church of God is not to be something for themselves, for example, by creating a religious organization or leading a pious life, but to be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world. For this the Holy Spirit equips those to whom the Spirit comes. Of course, it is presupposed that such a witness to the world can only happen in the right way when it comes out of sanctified life in God’s church-community. Nevertheless, true sanctified life in the church-community of God is distinguished from any pious imitation by the fact that it leads the believer at the same time into witness to the world. Where that witness has become silent it is a sign of inner decay in the church-community, just as failure to bear fruit is a sign that a tree is dying.⁵⁹

He goes on in the essay to dispense with the boundaries that divide secular (marriage, work and government) from the sacred (church). “It will not do to depreciate the first three mandates as ‘worldly,’ over against the last.”⁶⁰ For Christians to think that it is beneath them to engage in these areas as if Christ is not relevant is “nothing but unbelief.”⁶¹ He began to think of

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 356.

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 361.

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 64.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 69.

⁶¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67.

this witnessing as expressing solidarity with the world. “A life of genuine worldliness is possible only through the proclamation of the crucified Christ.”⁶²

Bonhoeffer’s constellation of polemical phrases taper off after the failed attempt on Hitler’s life on 20 July 1944. Bonhoeffer seems to sense that each letter he sends to Bethge may be his last. The day after the failed attempt he wrote a less polemical description of what it means to be worldly.

During the last year or so [in prison] I’ve come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man—in contrast, shall we say, to John the Baptist. I don’t mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense . . . I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I supposed I wrote *Discipleship* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote. I discovered later, and I’m still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith . . . By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That I think is faith; that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer. 45!). How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God’s sufferings through a life of this kind?⁶³

Bonhoeffer calls for unflinching engagement with humanity, with the bodily, with the suffering, with the world. Bonhoeffer here follows his own program that he anticipated in *Ethics*: “Christianity must be used polemically today against the worldly in the name of a better worldliness.”⁶⁴

His constellation of phrases that some have taken to imply the death of God and the abandonment of institutional religion have instead seared through the false barriers erected that

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 400.

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 369.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 60.

separate the God of the universe and the messiness of human life: “the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ. History moves only from this center and toward this center.”⁶⁵

4. Summarizing Bonhoeffer’s constellation of terms in *Letters and Papers from Prison*

This constellation of provocative phrases from the nine prison letters can now be more clearly described. “The world come of age” is the world that has lost its innocence through the horrors of war and is less gullible that there is a warm happy religious feeling in all human beings that must merely be stoked. The “world come of age” are people who are no longer under the illusion that human ingenuity can solve the world’s problems and that God will fill in the gaps. They have experienced *metanoia*⁶⁶ (repentance). “Religion” represents those who continue to wander around in denial that evil exists and that vague sentimental feelings adequately represent God. “Godless” or “ungodly” is the accurate state of human beings and the world which people should recognize; then they may be hungry for revelation—to find out from the Bible who God really is. God is indeed “powerless” or “impotent” in the world in the sense that he is not the great clockmaker who merely pushes the wheels in motion—making sure the trains run on time—and ignoring those caught in the cogs of history. He is “powerless” in the sense that he does not exist as the plaything, the butler, the vending machine that exists for the whims and sentimental feelings of human beings. God cannot be trifled with. God cannot be used and thus in that sense is useless. Therefore, it is a good thing to be “non-religious” or “secular” or “worldly” because these all represent true appraisals of the desperate straits human beings are in

⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 58.

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 361.

without God and recognize the “suffering” of others. “Speaking of God in a ‘non-religious’ way,”⁶⁷ “non-religious interpretation,”⁶⁸ or “secular interpretation”⁶⁹ means Bonhoeffer wants the revelation of the God of the Bible to be stated in “concrete” or “penultimate” terms.

BONHOEFFER’S PRIMARY INTEREST WAS APPLYING HIS NON-RELIGIOUS, CONCRETE, WORLDLY THEOLOGY TO THE PRACTICES OF THE CHURCH

Tracing Bonhoeffer’s use of his constellation of “new” terms in *Letters and Papers from Prison* reveals that Bonhoeffer has not become disillusioned with the Christian faith in favor of secular alternatives. Rather, he continues to probe and reflect on a number of theological concepts that he employed in his earlier work and appeared in the work of his theological contemporaries.

Nor is he reluctant to attempt to articulate what the church should look like going forward. Ecclesiology has not been absorbed into Christology. Rather, Bonhoeffer’s whole project in the prison letters is to affirm again the importance of the visibility of the church.

It is imperative that the reader of the prison letters take seriously Bonhoeffer’s proposed book. Here is how he envisioned the conclusion:

Conclusions: The church is the church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the vices of *hubris*, power-worship, envy and humbug, as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, discipline, humility, contentment and modesty. It must not under-estimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul’s teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power. (I hope to

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 362.

⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 344.

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 346, 361.

take up later this subject of ‘example’ and its place in the New Testament; it is something that we have almost entirely forgotten.) Further: the question of revising the creeds (the Apostles’ Creed); revision of Christian apologetics; reform of the training for the ministry and the pattern of clerical life.⁷⁰

Note again Bonhoeffer’s thoughts are not on forms of democracy or government policy; nor is he speechless at the ineffable apocalyptic Jesus Christ. Rather, he suggests ways the church as an organization could be restructured, renewed, honed.

He suggests that church buildings are overrated and that government salaries for clergy should be abolished.⁷¹ This was exactly how Bonhoeffer and the preachers’ seminaries were forced to operate during the church struggle—seeking out temporary lodging and soliciting funds from sympathetic donors. One fundraising letter sent out from Finkenwalde included this memorable line, “This poem, then, is admonition. Even theologians need nutrition!”⁷²

Bonhoeffer then mentions that some preachers may need to have a secular occupation.⁷³ At the Dahlem Confessing synod on October 19-20, 1934, the Dahlem resolution was passed in which “the Confessing church declared itself the only legal church in Germany.”⁷⁴ Because many were strict about not taking up legal clergy appointments, they were drafted into the army.⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer received a position in Military Intelligence or he would have been drafted as

⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383. The oddest thing in this list is “revising the creeds” but Bonhoeffer has explained in the preceding paragraph what he means. Right belief is not sufficient. Nor should our problem as Christians primarily be with other Christians. “The problem of the Apostles’ Creed? ‘What *must* I believe?’ is the wrong question; antiquated controversies, especially those between the different sects; the Lutheran versus Reformed, and to some extent the Roman Catholic versus Protestant, are now unreal. They may at any time be revived with passion, but they no longer carry conviction. There is no proof of this, and we must simply take it that it is so. All that we can prove is that faith of the Bible and Christianity does not stand or fall by these issues.” Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 382.

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383.

⁷² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 427.

⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383.

⁷⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 391.

⁷⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 589.

well. To Bonhoeffer and the illegal pastors (as they were called) non-clergy responsibilities were preferable to functioning as a clergy member who helped prop up the godless edifice of National Socialism by condoning its takeover of the churches.⁷⁶ Others publicly challenged National Socialism and were sent to concentration camps. To be sure, these were all abhorrent alternatives. But this merely illustrates that Bonhoeffer had already seen examples of “tent-making” pastors who like the apostle Paul had a secular occupation. This raised for Bonhoeffer a viable non-religious, concrete, worldly alternative to membership in a tainted clerical guild.

All of Bonhoeffer’s ideas here regarding ecclesiology had been tested in the church struggle. They were all “concrete”—acknowledging that the world had come of age and would rarely give special treatment to “religion” anymore. Bonhoeffer envisioned churches that would be bound less tightly to the state. Bethge writes,

he had a fairly clear idea that the church should get rid of many things after the catastrophe of 1945⁷⁷ and find new constructions . . . He hardly assumed that the *Volkskirche* that had become so discredited during the Nazi era could simply survive . . . He did not imagine that the financial and organizational structures would emerge little changed.⁷⁸

Bonhoeffer goes on to mention “reform of the training for the ministry and the pattern of clerical life”⁷⁹ which indeed is what he had tried to pioneer in the preachers’ seminaries and chronicle in *Life Together*. He hoped that *Life Together* would prove to be a catalyst to local

⁷⁶ “The claim of the church-community that it is building up the world with Christian principles ends . . . in the complete collapse of the church into the world . . . The godlessness remains concealed.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 127.

⁷⁷ By “1945” Bethge means the time period from the 1930’s to 1945 of the whole National Socialist experiment.

⁷⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 887.

⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383.

churches as well. He notes both audiences in this aside, “When a community living together includes children, it needs a different sort of daily worship than a community of seminarians.”⁸⁰

Throughout his work, Bonhoeffer is interested in the concrete practices of the church. What is preaching? What are baptism and the Lord’s supper? How should the community function?—these are his primary questions. This outline of a book emphatically makes clear that his emphasis on the non-religious, concrete and worldly was not inconsistent with the essential practices of the church.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXAMPLE FOR BONHOEFFER’S NON-RELIGIOUS, CONCRETE, WORLDLY ECCLESIOLOGY

Stanley Hauerwas writes, “My ire is not against liberalism, but against Christians who have confused Christianity with liberalism. As a result Christians have little to offer to a world dying for examples.”⁸¹ Bonhoeffer thought liberal theology had been exposed as bankrupt by the horrors of the times. He therefore felt that his teetering society must be given examples and concrete direction regarding what the Christian church should really look like. At the end of the sketch about his proposed book, he highlights the “importance of human example” and the virtues that he hopes the church will cultivate. It is “example that gives its [the church’s] word emphasis and power.”⁸²

The issue of example is the final clarifying point. *Dietrich is not disillusioned.*

Bonhoeffer has not jettisoned the Christian tradition for something more effective. Rather he has

⁸⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (vol. 5 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 52.

⁸¹ Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 232.

⁸² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 383.

decided to follow the example of Jesus in participating in the powerlessness of God in the world. He continues to pursue discipleship.

Nor is *Dietrich reluctant* to get concrete about what it might mean to be a church for others. Christology does not absorb ecclesiology. Rather, it challenges and fuels it. “The body of the exalted Lord is likewise a visible body, taking the form of the church-community.”⁸³ In turn the church is formed by Christ. “Formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁴ This is a “concrete ethic.”⁸⁵

Already in *Sanctorum Communio* he writes,

We must now ask what these concrete acts are in which the community of saints acts as a community of love . . . being structurally ‘with-each-other’ . . . and . . . ‘being-for-each-other’ and . . . to advocate vicariously for the other in everyday matters, to give up possessions, honor, even our whole lives.⁸⁶

Bonhoeffer always wanted Barth to be more concrete in his theology. Barth’s occasional writings often contain more “examples” that might have placated Bonhoeffer if he had known about them.

But Bonhoeffer’s keen interest in “human example” explains the general subject matter of his major works: the sociology of the church in *Sanctorum Communio*, the practice of disciple-making in *Discipleship*, the practices of the Christian community in *Life Together*, the lived realities of *Ethics*, and the hoped-for fresh church practices after the Nazis in *Letters and Papers in Prison*. In each case Bonhoeffer wanted to share examples of the visibility of the church with others. Hauerwas’s quote is worth repeating, “From the beginning to the end of his

⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 226.

⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 99.

⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 178, 184.

work Bonhoeffer relentlessly explores and searches for what it means for the church to faithfully manifest God's visibility.⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer's life's work was to contribute to the building of a non-religious, concrete, worldly church. The mostly unknown preface to *Life Together* ends this way,

The variety of new ecclesial forms of community makes it necessary to enlist the vigilant cooperation of every responsible party. The following remarks are intended to provide only one individual contribution toward answering the extensive questions that have been raised thereby. As much as possible, may these comments help to clarify this experience and put it into practice.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 231.

⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 25.

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