Community and Christology
in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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In the lead article for this edition of St Mark’s Review, Keith Clements provides a vivid description of Bonhoeffer’s vision of Christian community—of the ‘genuinely communal life’ that Bonhoeffer believed ‘crucial to the renewal of his church,’ and to resisting Nazi efforts to impose a deeply corrupt ‘Aryan’ form of Christianity on the German people.1 Clements draws particularly on the account of Christian community offered by Bonhoeffer in the book Life Together, written in 1937 shortly after his ‘illegal’ seminary, which provided much of the material for the book, was closed by the Gestapo.

This article also focuses on Bonhoeffer, but it takes a different approach. It traces the evolution of Bonhoeffer’s Christology from its academic beginnings in Tubingen and Berlin to the pastor and theologian’s last months in Tegel prison. I hope in this way to sketch the development of a consistent, though progressively more inclusive, christocentric vision of authentic community—of new life in God, lived in free, self-giving relationship with others.

The person and nature of Jesus Christ

The key to Bonhoeffer’s theology lies in his approach to Jesus Christ. Andreas Pangritz describes him as part of ‘the movement towards Christological concentration inaugurated by Karl Barth and dialectical theology after the
First World War,’ and argues that the question ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ is ‘the cantus firmus of Bonhoeffer’s theological development from the beginning to the end.’

Christ as community

Notions of Christ and community come together early in Bonhoeffer’s theology. Already in his first published work, Sanctorum Communio, a doctoral dissertation on the nature of Christian community, Bonhoeffer finds in the church the very ‘presence of Christ’ and describes the church as ‘Christ existing as church-community’ in conformity with ‘Paul’s indicative, “you are the body of Christ”’. The unity of the church has nothing to do with the intentionality of its members—’it is not ideal, but real’. All are one in Christ.

In Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer offers ‘a fundamental refutation of individualistic social atomism’. The Christian concept of person is innately ethical and social. We are shaped, defined and confirmed in the encounter between self and other. Indeed, the person ‘as conscious being is created [and constantly re-created] in the moment of being moved—in the situation of responsibility, passionate ethical struggle, confrontation by an overwhelming claim.’

Here, too, in the concept of ‘vicarious representative action’ (Stellvertretung), Christ assumes the burden of our sins and is punished for them, while the Christian finds life and purpose in a church-community which consists in the ‘being-for-each-other of its members.’ Christ thus draws us back into lost community with God. ‘While the old humanity consists of countless isolated units—each one an Adam … the new humanity is entirely concentrated in the one single historical point, Jesus Christ.’ In him we find all of human history encompassed in a single life.

Freedom for others

A very particular idea of freedom, with profound implications for grasping the true nature and responsibilities of Christian community, also comes to expression in Bonhoeffer’s early theology. In his post-doctoral thesis, Act and Being, Bonhoeffer claims that the strongest evidence we have for the freedom of God is God’s own free decision ‘to be bound to historical human beings … God is free not from human beings but for them’, and ‘Christ is the word of God’s freedom’.
The concept of freedom-in-relationship also features prominently in Bonhoeffer’s 1932–33 winter semester lectures on Genesis 1–3, which subsequently appeared in book form as Creation and Fall. Here Bonhoeffer ‘reflects on the self-recognition of God in creation,’ and concludes that, for the free Creator ‘to create the Creator’s own image ... the Creator must create it free.’ This is the source of our freedom, as Imago Dei, in God's creating word. Freedom, however, ‘is not something that people have for themselves but something they have for others.’ Freedom is a relation; not an object, or a quality. We know this through Jesus Christ, because the Gospel speaks of God as ‘the one who in Christ attests to God's “being for humankind”’. And as God is free not from but for human beings, so is my freedom a freedom only for the other. ‘Only by being in relation with the other am I free.’

Fully human, wholly God

Bonhoeffer begins the lectures on Christology he gave at the University of Berlin in the summer of 1933 by emphasising the paradoxical nature of his inquiry. The divine Logos appears to us in the shape of a human being whose transcendence is grounded firmly in ‘presupposition and not subject to proof.’ Thus, teaching about Christ begins most appropriately in humble silence. ‘The silence of the Church is silence before the Word. In so far as the Church proclaims the Word, it falls down silently before the inexpressible.

For Bonhoeffer the issue is not how we are to understand the incarnation, and why it happened. It is rather ‘the question “who” the church claims Christ to be.’ And this is a question which can only be asked by and in the church, ‘where the basic presupposition, that Christ claims to be the Logos of God, is accepted.’ The question ‘Who?’ can only really be asked by people who already know Christ, by those who ‘seek what has already been found.’ It is thus essentially a question put to Christ by those who believe in him, ‘the question of faith: “Who are you? Are you God himself?”

Bonhoeffer emphasises the wholeness of the historical Jesus. Jesus is God ‘who became man, as we became man.’ As such he is fully human and ‘lacks nothing belonging to man.’ He is also fully God, but this is neither an addition to nor a continuance of his humanity. It is rather ‘the judgement and Word of God on ... the one man Jesus Christ,’ of whom we say, in faith: ““This is God for us.” All knowledge of God comes through God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, but Jesus himself is no theological abstraction. He has his
own ‘human, individual hypostasis [distinct personal identity] and his own human mode of existence’. He is not to be associated with abstract ideas of transcendence and divinity. We must not speak of Jesus’ omnipotence and omniscience, but rather ‘of his weakness, his manger, his cross’. Indeed, in his humiliation on the cross, ‘we see a man doubting God as he dies’. And still we say of this person, ‘This is God’.  

Jesus Christ is present to the church, in space and time, in ‘the one whole person of the God-Man’. No other explanation of Christ’s contemporary presence is possible. We are separated from the historical Jesus by the passage of time, and from God by God’s timelessness. The two cannot exist for us in isolation. They are inseparable. ‘God in timeless eternity is not God; Jesus limited by time is not Jesus. Rather we may say that in the man Jesus, God is God.’

Discipleship  
The years spent as director of an underground seminary near Finkenwalde (1935–37) inspired two of Bonhoeffer’s most popular written works, Discipleship and Life Together. The first advances his claim that the whole Gospel is effectively a call to discipleship, while the second is a portrayal of Christian community lived in sedulous obedience to the will of Christ.

Bonhoeffer finds the nature of true discipleship in Mark’s brief account of Levi’s decision to follow Christ (Mark 2:14). ‘[I]t is the obedient deed’. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, calls, and Levi follows. ‘Follow me, walk behind me! That is all … The bridges are torn down, and the followers simply move ahead’. There is no ‘specific content’ and no ‘program’. ‘There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it’. And why should it be otherwise? Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God. ‘In him God has created anew the divine image on earth.’

It is, however, an image quite different from the forfeit original.

It is the image of one who places himself in the very midst of the world of sin and death … who humbly submits to God’s wrath and judgment over sinners, who remains obedient to God’s will in suffering and death … and who, on the cross, was rejected and abandoned by God and human beings—this is God in human form, this is the human being who is the new image of God.'
And it is this ‘very image of God, the [total] form of Christ [the incarnate, the crucified, and the transfigured one] which seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19).’ This, after all, is why he came. Christ became like us so that we could be like him. In Christ, our essential purpose is restored, which is to be—‘with our whole existence and as living creatures’—the image of God on earth.29 We are saved thereby from the isolating effects of sin, and find ourselves a part of the larger whole, as ‘brothers and sisters of all human beings.’30

It is the cross, the symbol of the crucified Christ, that most clearly defines the form of Jesus Christ on earth, and it is ‘a life in the image and likeness of Christ’s death’ that Jesus’ disciples are, in their various ways, called to endure. For Bonhoeffer, in the midst of the ‘kirchenkampf’ (church struggle) and already a firm opponent of Nazism, it is time to remind Christians that it is by being ‘publicly disgraced, having to suffer and being put to death for the sake of Christ, that Christ himself attains visible form within his community.’ Those who stay the course, however, will share not only in Christ’s passion but also in his glorification. ‘The image of the risen one will transform those who look at it in the same way as the image of the crucified one,’ and, as they grow in understanding, the divine image of Christ will become ever more clearly and profoundly manifest in them.31

Life Together was written some three years after Bonhoeffer was obliged, by the deteriorating situation in Germany, to abandon plans to visit India, where he had hoped to learn from Gandhi’s experience of faithful life in community. The book is based on an experiment in Christian community among seminarians at Finkenwalde. From the outset, however, Bonhoeffer is clear that he is ‘not dealing with a concern of some private circles but with a mission entrusted to the church’. He wants the experience of Christian community to be available to every follower of Christ. But the potential forms of such community are many, and the assistance of the whole church is required to secure better than ‘haphazard individual solutions to a problem.’32

Christian community is possible only through and in Jesus Christ.33 The more profound and sincere—the more unfeigned and artless—the experience of community becomes, ‘the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive between us.’34 In Life Together, we again find Christ the mediator, without whom we would remain cut off from God and one another by the isolating grip of the
Christ draws us out of ourselves. He liberates me for life with others, and from the desire to construct for the other a form of my own making.

Because Christ stands between me and an other, I must not long for unmediated community with that person. As only Christ was able to speak to me in such a way that I was helped, so others too can only be helped by Christ alone. However, this means that I must release others from all my attempts to control, coerce, and dominate them with my love ... I must allow them the freedom to be Christ’s.

By leaving God to do God’s work in others, we give others freedom to be themselves. This is a sign of faith, of confidence in the undiscriminating and inclusive nature of God’s grace. It is accepting that ‘God did not make others as I would have made them.’

One reality

In Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, which was in draft form at the time of his arrest and never completed, we find further evidence of what Charles Marsh calls Bonhoeffer’s ‘sweeping, uncompromising christocentrism.’

In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of this world are answered at the same time is characterised solely by the name: Jesus Christ ... From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ.

The redemptive work of Christ, ‘who as true God and true human reconciles God and world in himself,’ makes redundant our former way of conceiving reality as composed of two antagonistic realms.

There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ, we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world ... Hence there are not two realms, but only the one realm of the Christ-reality ... in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united.
Bonhoeffer is nonetheless careful not to press the one reality image to such an extreme as to lose all sense of difference between God and the world. Christian and worldly preoccupations, the supernatural and the natural, the holy and the profane, revelation and reason, are each very different from the other, but they cannot stand in isolation. ‘[T]hey behave toward each other polemically, and precisely therein witness to their common reality, their unity in the Christ-reality.’ In Christ we are privileged to share one reality with God, and this shared reality, ‘mediated by Christ alone,’ insulates us against our own ‘self-mediated’ conceptions of what reality should be.

If we are properly to understand the all-embracing nature of this Christ-reality, we must look to the body of Jesus Christ, to ‘the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen,’ wherein all human beings, without exception, are reconciled and united with God.

There is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God. Whoever perceives the body of Jesus Christ in faith can no longer speak of the world as if it were lost, as if it were separated from God ... The world belongs to Christ, and only in Christ is the world what it is ... Everything would be spoiled if we were to reserve Christ for the church ... Christ has died for the world, and Christ is Christ only in the midst of the world.

Bonhoeffer here favours us with an exceptionally clear, simple and yet comprehensive account of the place occupied by Jesus Christ in the Christian universe. The world belongs to Christ, and Christ to the world. Through him all creation is reconciled to God. No-one and nothing is lost. No-one is excluded from Christ’s all-inclusive work of redemption.

The new theology

Letters and papers from prison

Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo in April 1943 on suspicion of involvement in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was executed two years later, just weeks before the German surrender. What came to be known as the ‘theological’ letters were addressed to his close friend and confidant Eberhard Bethge, and smuggled out of Tegel military prison over a four
month period between the end of April and late August 1944. Bethge traces the roots of Bonhoeffer’s ‘new theology’ all the way back to his ‘Berlin beginnings’ in Sanctorum Communio and Act and Being, but nonetheless believes there is much evidence to suggest ‘a decisive new beginning in April 1944 ... Bonhoeffer himself thought he was pursuing a completely new path. In the collapse of the “Christian West” he was seized by a belief in a changed face of Christianity that would be viable.’

The new path is captured in the famous expression, the ‘non-religious interpretation of biblical terms in a world come of age,’ and the now familiar question: ‘[W]hat is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?’ The main driver of the theological letters is, once again, Christology, now understood as Christ’s claim on a world that in Bonhoeffer’s view shows little sign of any obvious need of him.

Christianity in a ‘world come of age’

In a letter of 8 June 1944, Bonhoeffer seeks to describe, from a historical perspective, the situation in which Christianity now finds itself:

> The movement toward human autonomy (by which I mean discovery of the laws by which the world lives and manages its affairs in science, in society and government, in art, ethics, and religion), which began around the thirteenth century ... has reached a certain completeness in our age. Human beings have learned to manage all important issues by themselves, without recourse to ‘Working hypothesis: God.’

Bonhoeffer saw this as evidence not of humanity’s ethical progress—the state of the world as he knew it could hardly support such a conclusion!—but of a more straightforward process of ‘growing up,’ and of the responsibilities which come with it.

The world is what it is, and honesty demands that we live in it

> etsi deus non daretur [as if God were not given] ... God would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God. The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34!). The same God who makes us to 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 consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross: God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us.52

As Peter Selby observes, by insisting on both an historically-driven and a Gospel-led ‘impetus to autonomy,’ Bonhoeffer replaces the deus ex machina (and the religious outlook which finds meaning and comfort only in God’s omnipotence) with a God who understands and feels our pain in an entirely human way.53

Non-religious interpretation

Bonhoeffer celebrates Karl Barth’s achievement in leading ‘the God of Jesus Christ forward to battle against religion.’54 But whereas Barth believed religion to be unavoidable, Bonhoeffer had come to see it as a passing historical phenomenon and thus, inexplicably, as perhaps a uniquely Western one that, once gone, would not return.55

For Bonhoeffer, however, the ‘age of religion’ and the ‘age of Jesus’ are two very different things. Religion simply fails to understand Jesus Christ, who is everything it is not. Unlike religion, Jesus repudiates power and privilege. He expects much of his followers and is often disappointed; but he is also utterly frank, unpretentious, undogmatic and vulnerable in very human ways. As such, he frees us for the exercise of personal responsibility ‘through his own powerlessness, which shames and utterly convinces us.’56

We must learn to speak in a non-religious way because it is not the next world that matters now, but this one. The redemption that Christians hope for in the risen Christ is essentially historical—it lies ‘this side of the bounds of death.’57 There is no escape for human beings from earthly tasks and responsibilities. Like Christ, they must ‘drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and only when they do this is the Crucified and Risen One with them, and they are crucified and resurrected with Christ.’58

Bonhoeffer did not live long enough to develop ‘the non-religious interpretation of biblical terms’ he believed necessary to secure the future of Christianity. Nor did he underestimate the difficulty of the task. ‘I am more able’, he remarked, ‘to see what needs to be done than how I can actually do it.’59 He was sure, however, that the key lay in the understanding of God that
distinguishes Christianity from ‘all religions’—the conviction that ‘only the suffering God can help.’ Thus, our coming of age ‘has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God [as deus ex machina, and freed] us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless.’

Christ the centre

In the ‘Outline for a Book,’ which Bethge dates to 3 August 1944, we have a concise summary of Bonhoeffer’s later Christology. Again the question ‘Who?’ (namely ‘Who is God?’) to which he replies: ‘Encounter with Jesus Christ.’ In this encounter—in the knowledge that Jesus ‘is there only for others’—human existence is transformed. This is ‘the experience of transcendence! Only through this liberation from self … do omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence come into being.’

Faith is then understood as participation in the ‘being of Jesus,’ and it is this—rather than a false “‘religious’ relationship to some highest, most powerful and best being imaginable”—that defines our new life in God, in ‘being there for others.’ Transcendence is no longer identified with the infinite and the unattainable, but rather with the encounter with Christ in the world, and ‘the neighbour within reach in any given situation.’ We learn to have faith only by embracing life in its fullness, and thus by coming progressively to understand the need to put aside our personal preoccupations and instead to take seriously only ‘the suffering of God in the world.’

The church, too, is naturally ‘church only when it is there for others.’ Bonhoeffer challenges the church to unburden itself of its possessions. The church’s responsibility is to serve. Its ‘word gains weight and power not through concepts but by example.’

Thus, in his last months at Tegel, Bonhoeffer, without departing significantly from his earlier Christology, assigns a new title to Jesus, calling him ‘the man for others’. In doing so, he speaks clearly of the innately social nature and purpose of human existence, and of ‘an ethical impulse [which] prevents both the religious flight from the world and clerical domination, and finally praises Jesus with words that are soaked in experience.’

Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

In one of the last of the ‘theological’ letters, Bonhoeffer wrote:
Again and again in these turbulent times, we lose sight of why life is really worth living. We think that our own life has meaning because this or that other person exists. In truth, however, it is like this: If the earth was deemed worthy to bear the human being Jesus Christ, if a human being like Jesus lived, then and only then does our life as human beings have meaning. Had Jesus not lived, then our life would be meaningless, despite all the other people we know, respect, and love.67

In the mystery of God’s self-revelation; in the wholly human and wholly divine person of Jesus Christ, who is ‘the same yesterday and today and forever’ (Heb. 13:8); in the all-encompassing Christ-reality, we are in the presence of God. In Jesus Christ, God becomes world, and it is in the midst of the world, and only here, that the encounter with God incarnate takes place. In this encounter lies our purpose, our abiding joy, and our freedom, in self-giving relationship, for the other. In this encounter we discover the real meaning of transcendence, a worldly, social transcendence of both self and other that is nonetheless firmly rooted in God.

In Christ, then, we are drawn not to the *deus ex machina*, but rather to ‘the depth and hiddenness of a man who ended on the cross’;68 The all-powerful, all-knowing God of religion is not the God who is revealed in Christ. Omnipotence will always appear strained, arbitrary, inconsistent and sometimes cruel, but the crucified and humiliated one, who sustains and makes us whole by assuming the burdens of a godless and sinful world, will never disappoint us; and it is this understanding of God that distinguishes Christianity from ‘all religions’—the conviction that ‘only the suffering God can help’.69

In Bonhoeffer’s Christology we find a profoundly christocentric and christomorphic vision of community. But this, to borrow a little Bonhoeffer from Keith Clements, is no ‘spiritual sanatorium’ for people who are simply ‘fleeing from themselves’.70 ‘The members of this community must live lives fuelled by faith, and doubt—*etsi deus non daretur*. God is to be found not in the places of authority, but among the weak and powerless; in the worldly encounter with Jesus Christ, whose disciples include many who do not know him at all, but whose life, ministry, death and resurrection are all we can hope to know of God, and whose selfless example we are expected to follow.
Building and sustaining community in contemporary Australia

Bonhoeffer wrote for a dwindling Christian audience in a (Western) world that, as he saw it, had come to believe it had no further need of God. Today’s world is very different from Bonhoeffer’s, and from the world he expected would emerge from the ashes of war. Secularity, as Tom Greggs observes, is not a ‘global phenomenon’.\(^7\) Even in the West, and particularly in the United States, secularism has not come to define the nation state in quite the way Bonhoeffer thought it would, although it is certainly ‘present in many assumptions of and about contemporary society,’ especially in the public and professional spheres.\(^7\) Religion, and this is certainly true of twenty-first century Australia, is now essentially a private matter.

So what might a determinedly Christ-centred German theologian, murdered seventy years ago in the last days of a catastrophic global conflict, have to say to contemporary Australians about building and sustaining community? For some, it will be more than enough that Bonhoeffer gives as clear an account of the unswervingly social orientation of Christ’s ethical teachings as we are likely to find in contemporary theology. But for those who prefer a different approach—and who are perhaps more inclined to take their cue from sociology than from theology—there is much to be said for the critique of ‘individualistic social atomism’ underlying Bonhoeffer’s concept of person. Human beings, as we have seen, are innately social creatures, forged in the encounter between self and other. They live in community with other human beings because they must.

But life in community comes with ethical strings attached. We are created free and, as such, are finally responsible for our actions (no matter how often we may seek refuge in the thought that we did only what we had to do). But because God chose to be free for, rather than from, human beings, we—who are made in God’s image—are truly free only when we choose to act for the benefit of others. We are responsible, personally and collectively, for the well-being of every member of the community. Indeed, true Christian community ‘is constituted by the complete self-forgetfulness of love,’\(^7\) by loving the neighbour ‘instead of ourselves’.\(^7\) Moreover, as members of a community—whether church, neighbourhood, or nation—we affirm community life in general. ‘Humanity is the comprehensive community ... that embraces all communities.’\(^7\) Community knows no rigid boundaries; nor does our responsibility for others. Perhaps never before in human history has this been more true than it is now.
Some will no doubt contest these assumptions, but, at least as far as Bonhoeffer is concerned, Christians should not be among them. The church, after all, is ‘church only when it is there for others’. For Bonhoeffer the Christian life is a journey that forces us across the frontiers of our isolated selves into relationship with all humanity in the one God-centred Christ-reality. The Christian is defined not by the performance of any religious act or ritual, but rather by a resolute willingness to share in ‘God’s suffering in the worldly life’. This is true faith. We live in a ‘godless world’ and must not try ‘to cover up its godlessness somehow with religion’.76 Jesus calls us not to religion, but to life. He invites us to ‘rediscover redemption in the centre of life, not beyond it’.77

Bonhoeffer clearly expects a great deal of us, but then so does Jesus. This is Bonhoeffer’s point. Consider, for example, an especially troubling example of what most Australian politicians currently believe to be an expression of the will of the Australian community—our ‘turn back the boats’ and immigration detention policies. I am sure that Bonhoeffer, a theologian with a profound sense of historical context, would unhesitatingly condemn these as inhuman and deeply un-Christian. He would suspect us of confusing the fear of strangers, and a grim determination to preserve an unsustainable lifestyle in a world that is buckling under the strain, with the humanitarian values we publicly profess and proclaim. Would he be wrong?

Endnotes

Community and Christology in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

16. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 27.
18. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 32.
34. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 34.


42. Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 58.

43. Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 59.

44. Marsh, Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 106.


46. Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p. 67.


64. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 486.


Community and Christology in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

68. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 62.
70. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 82, quoted in Clements, ‘“Life Together”.
75. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 120.