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Bonhoeffer and the *Basis of Union*

Peter Walker

The story is told of how, upon hearing in 1953 of the publication in English of a selection of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letters and papers from prison, Rev Dr Davis McCaughey, then Chair of New Testament studies in Ormond College at the University of Melbourne, was so seized by the significance of the event that he told his students they should all buy a copy, even if it meant selling their own beds in order to cover the cost.¹ Davis McCaughey went on to become a leading member of the Joint Commission on Church Union and, in 1977, the first President of the Uniting Church in Australia. How interesting it is to ponder the thought that Dr McCaughey's admiration for Dietrich Bonhoeffer may have been a factor in securing an influence for Bonhoeffer's theology within the work of the Joint Commission, and within the *Basis of Union* itself. Here we will discuss the presence of that influence, and ask if there is something still to be gained for the Uniting Church from Bonhoeffer's writings, particularly his reflections on obedience and worldliness.

The work of the Joint Commission on Church Union, 1957-71

The Joint Commission on Church Union (1957-71), comprising seven members from each of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, produced three substantial documents for discussion by the negotiating churches along the way toward union.

¹ H Wardlaw, "J Davis McCaughey", in P Matheson & C Mostert, *Fresh Words and Deeds. The McCaughey Papers*, (Melbourne, David Lovell Publishing, 2004), p xvii.

The first two, *The Faith of the Church* (1959) and *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering* (1963) established a theological framework for the preparation of the Commission's final offering, a *Basis of Union* (1971). That *Basis* was supported in 1973 by the Congregational Union of Australia and, in 1974, by the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia. Thus it became the founding document of the Uniting Church in Australia, which was inaugurated in 1977 by formal resolution and the experience of grace. The *Basis of Union* remains the primary statement of the faith, mission, structure and identity of the Uniting Church.

Just as it is consistently acknowledged that some church leaders made an especially significant contribution to the discussions and debates, the meetings and the hours of drafting committee work that led to the completion of the *Basis of Union*, it has also been commonplace to recognise within the *Basis* the special imprint of certain leading theologians of the time, mediated through McCaughey and other key architects of the document. The most often named is Karl Barth, and not for want of good reasons.² Karl Barth was chief among the giants of Protestant theology in the twentieth century, if not the century's greatest theologian.³ A number of Barth's trademark themes are unmistakably evident in the two reports of the Joint Commission and the *Basis of Union*. They include his focus on the three-fold revelation of the Word of God (in Jesus Christ, Scripture and the preaching of the Church), the turn to Christology as the sole platform on which to build ecclesiology, and the resurrection of eschatology as a central Christian teaching. The following observation by Rev Dr Michael Owen, a Presbyterian alternate member of the Joint Commission from 1967, gives an indication of Barth's pivotal influence:

² There were many layers to Barth's influence; his own writings, his initiating role in the movement known as Biblical Theology, his lead authorship of the Barmen Declaration, and the influence of his theology on the Faith and Order movement. There is not space to discuss these matters in detail.

³ R Jenson, "Karl Barth", in D Ford (ed), *The Modern Theologians*, Vol 1, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), p 25.

After some suggestions on wording for what was to become the first two paragraphs of the *Basis of Union*, the draft attempts the centring of the whole *Basis* on Jesus Christ in the way now achieved in Paragraph 3. We had agreement in the Commission that we should work with the concept of the Word of God, in the manner of Barth and Barmen.⁴

So Barth was undoubtedly important. Yet there were other influences at work. Michael Owen has here mentioned "Barmen", the shorthand description for the Barmen Declaration, by which the Confessing Church was founded in Germany in May 1934. The Confessing Church was formed in Barmen by a breakaway synod in opposition to the newly established Reich Church, which had given itself over nearly completely to the 1930's nationalist fervour of Nazism. The Declaration was widely admired then, and remains so to this day, not only for pointing Christians back to Jesus Christ (and none other, including the Fuhrer) as their Lord, but also for the courageous Christian stand it represented in the face of a rising tide of evil. Bearing in mind its honoured place, it is interesting to know that Barmen had its impact on the Australian union negotiations. Davis McCaughey wrote in 1965:

She [the Uniting Church] is—as the first Report emphasized (to the surprise of many European observers, drawing on the language and experience of Barmen)—to be a confessing rather than a confessional Church.⁵

The mid-century energy of the world-wide ecumenical endeavour, and the Faith and Order movement in particular, was another factor in the drive toward Christian unity. "It cannot be denied that we shared in the new impetus and new hope which came into Faith and Order discussions between Lund and

⁴ M Owen, *Back to Basics. Studies on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*, (Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1996), p 75. For further discussion of Barth's theology and its influence on the work of the Joint Commission on Church Union, see also pp 20-24, 56-60.

⁵ J D McCaughey, "Church Union in Australia", *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol XVII, Jan-Dec 1965, p 41.

Montreal.⁶ That shared impetus was not only found in the desire to be part of the movement for unity. The Joint Commission also took its bearings from the theological direction Faith and Order was advocating for the achievement of unity, namely, a return to a Christological basis for the Church's life.⁷ This orientation was to prove for the Australian church, as in so many other settings, decisive.

While movements such as Faith and Order were important, these corporate endeavours give form to the ideas, initiatives and proposals of individuals. And while Victor Hugo famously wrote of there being no army as mighty as the power "of an idea whose time has come", someone must first come up with the idea. So this is the point to which we will now return, namely, the role of key individual theologians. The atmosphere surrounding the laymen⁸, Ministers and theologians who were members of the Joint Commission on Church Union during the 1950's and 1960's was filled with the theological heavy-weights of their day. People like Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Ernst Kasemann and last, but by no means least, the Lutheran Pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were all widely read and admired at that time. They filled the theological air our ecumenical leaders were breathing. The mark made by these theologians on a small group of Australians toiling toward a better expression of their unity in Christ is intriguing.

For the remainder of this article we will focus on one of these figures, because his mark is sometimes missed and yet, unquestionably, the *Basis* is seasoned with his salt. We speak of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. If we take Davis McCaughey's delight at the publication of the *Letters and Papers from Prison* as our measure, and keep in mind his now widely acknowledged key role in the drafting work, we might assume that McCaughey would not only have been

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 41.

⁷ Here Barth's influence can be sensed again, for his theological turn to Christ as the ground of ecclesiology is regarded as significant to many ecumenical projects of the twentieth century. See W A Visser't Hooft, "Karl Barth and the Ecumenical Movement, *The Ecumenical Review*, 1980, p 130-132; and, for interest, K Barth, *The Church and the Churches: Lecture to the 1937 Edinburgh World Conference on Faith and Order*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005).

⁸ They were all men.

pleased with the influence of Bonhoeffer's theology upon the *Basis*, he may even have had a hand in bringing it about.

The first report of the Joint Commission, *The Faith of the Church*⁹, is taken up almost exclusively with the doctrine of the Church, and doctrinal standards. It also contains, after the fashion of the Barmen Declaration, a suggested act of confession and commitment. The Joint Commission's second report, *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*¹⁰, which will be the focus of our attention, shows that six years into this ecumenical journey major pieces of the Uniting Church puzzle were being put into place. That second report is in two parts. Part Two is an initial attempt at the *Basis of Union*. As things turned out, it was an attempt not warmly received. It was modified before being presented again, in 1971, for a final vote. Part One sets out the theological substance of the Commission's deliberations in preparing that draft *Basis*. Within it there is a discussion on 'The Time and Form of Mission'. With the benefit of hindsight, and in light of the final shape of the *Basis of Union*, this three-page statement looks to be of great importance, axiomatic to much of what the Uniting Church now affirms about the nature and purpose of Christian community. Just as a prospector will sift through many trays of riverbed sand before stumbling upon the big one, this nugget of gold lying in the riverbed of the second report is remembered as being influenced by the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To that question we will return later. For the moment, let us summarise the statement itself.¹¹

'The Time and Form of Mission' sets out many of the Joint Commission's conclusions about what it will mean to become a new church in this new time and new place. Its emphasis falls on how we can be the Church *now*. The Church, we are told, is called to be at

⁹ *The Faith of the Church*, Joint Commission on Church Union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia, the Presbyterian Church Of Australia, (1959).

¹⁰ *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, Joint Commission on Church Union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia, the Presbyterian Church Of Australia, (1963).

¹¹ 'The Time and Form of Mission' is a long section and therefore not quoted in full. Readers are nonetheless encouraged to look at it for themselves in *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, pp 25-27.

mission *in and for the sake of the world*. We exist only in order to fulfil that mission, which is a call to proclamation, healing and servanthood. Just as God sent the Son and the Holy Spirit into the world, the Church is also sent to be a servant people. Our model in that mission is Christ. He exercised his Lordship "through the way of humble condescension" and "chose to reveal His Lordship through becoming a servant". His way must become the way of the Church.

His greatest glory is seen in His stooping, His Lordship in the love that serves. So also the Church must carry out her mission by assuming this servant form and as Christ wore the garb, spoke the language and lived within the social patterns of first-century Israel, so the Church must take on relevant forms in the particular circumstances of every age.

It is the phrase "relevant forms" that is the drum-beat of the statement. With regard to ministry, the times call for a new flexibility and a new inclusiveness. The Church's ministry is therefore to be the ministry of the whole people of God, and the ordering of our ministry may need to change from time to time and from place to place. Further, if the Church is to engage the real world, and "the structures of daily life", "we must take seriously the particular setting in which the Australian Church finds itself". In describing that setting, the Joint Commissioners gave particular attention to rapid urbanisation, the growth of suburbia, the emergence of highly institutionalised forms of life, the mass media, and our relationship with Asia and the Pacific. To fulfil our mission, the Church must be willing to receive a shape and form that is appropriate to the new and ever-changing circumstances we inhabit. Even forty years after their publication, these words remain strikingly relevant.

Does 'The Time and Form of Mission' reflect the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

Long before Thomas Bandy and other church growth commentators, the Joint Commission on Church Union saw, in 1963,

the need for a mission-oriented church, with flexible leadership, and a structure designed to serve its mission in the world of today. But who was it that helped the Joint Commission to see this? As we will note below, the two most comprehensive analyses of the Commission's work, Andrew Dutney's *Manifesto for Renewal* and Michael Owen's *Back to Basics*, both point to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as the guiding influence on this section of the second report. Along with that evidence, a brief word about some key themes from Bonhoeffer's theology will bring out the touches of his work.

For Bonhoeffer, the essence of the offence caused by Jesus Christ – the *scandal* and particularity of Christianity – was not Christ's incarnation, but his humiliation. This was central to his theology, and to his understanding of the nature and purpose of Christian community. The Church, for Bonhoeffer, is the body of Christ, and Christ attains his concrete presence in the world through the Christian community. Therefore, the Church should never wish itself to be exalted above Christ, the one who came to serve. "It is with this humiliated one that the Church goes its own way of humiliation".¹² It is also emblematic of Bonhoeffer's writings that he is actively engaged by the needs of today, and what Christianity can offer to "a world come of age".¹³ "What is bothering me incessantly", he wrote in a prison letter in April 1944, "is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today".¹⁴ In fact, as far back as his 1932 lectures on 'The Nature of the Church' he is found reflecting on the fact that the secularity of the Church must necessarily follow from the incarnation of Christ: "The Church, like Christ, has become world... For the sake of real people, the Church must be thoroughly worldly".¹⁵ Bonhoeffer's theology is so often found addressing this three-fold focus of Christ, the Church as the body of Christ, and the worldliness of our mission. Christ is the motive and inspiration for the church opening its horizons to the world, in all its concrete

¹² D Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Centre*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1978), p 113

¹³ D Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York, Touchstone, 1997), p 381

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 279

¹⁵ Quoted in A Pangritz, 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?', in J de Gruchy (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Cambridge, CUP, 1999), p 139.

reality, because this was and is Christ's way. "The church is the church only when it exists for others," he once wrote, because Jesus Christ is the man who is "there for others".¹⁶

As was mentioned, two major publications on the *Basis of Union* confirm the influence of Bonhoeffer's writings on 'The Time and Form of Mission'. Tucked away in a footnote at the conclusion of Andrew Dutney's chapter dealing with this material, he writes, "This section (pp 25-27) reflects the influence of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer."¹⁷ Michael Owen agrees. Although he joined negotiations after the publication of the second report, Owen writes with the authority of one who followed the deliberations closely.

The initial, and probably greatest continuing, influence of Bonhoeffer in the English-speaking world stems from his latest writings; and it is probably above all their influence that Andrew Dutney establishes in a section of the Second Report.... So [also] a general influence of Bonhoeffer through Barth and others has to be allowed for, apart from the direct influence it may be possible to identify at certain points.¹⁸

It is intriguing that Owen writes of the possibility of Bonhoeffer's influence on the Second Report through Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer certainly had his impact on Barth¹⁹, and vice versa, and Christian theology is always an amalgam of different resources and writings. We have not the space here to explore Bonhoeffer's influence as it came to bear, in a second-hand way, through other theologians. We have been able to affirm, however, the direct influence of his writings on this pivotal portion of the Second Report.

'The Time and Form of Mission' is carried forward into the 'Basis of Union'

It is impressive to find Bonhoeffer's imprint on the preliminary documents. The question which should now be answered, to be

¹⁶ D Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p 381.

¹⁷ A Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal*, (Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1986), p 34ff, note 12.

¹⁸ M Owen, *op cit*, p 59-60.

¹⁹ Of particular interest here is *Church Dogmatics* 4:1, paragraph 59.

confident in asserting Bonhoeffer's legacy to the Uniting Church is: Was there found a place for the key themes from 'The Time and Form of Mission' within the *Basis of Union*? I believe it is possible to locate eleven separate instances where a key idea is reflected in the *Basis*, sometimes in more than one paragraph. Therefore, that nugget of gold embedded in the Second Report was very important, for a substantial portion of its theological cargo was lifted into our founding document. In this limited space, we will first look at five examples, by a sampling of relevant quotations. The resonances will speak for themselves. We will then briefly discuss two themes, obedience and worldliness, which are especially associated with Bonhoeffer and which echo through the *Basis*. The quotation from 'The Time and Form of Mission' is given first, in italics, and is followed by selections from the *Basis*. The summary above each selection is an attempt to capture the essence of the ideas being deployed.

1. The Church exists in-between the Times, and responds to the call of Christ

The Church sees the time between Christ's ascension and parousia as a time graciously given by God for men to hear and respond to the call of Christ, and to take their place among the servant people of God (CNFO, p 26)²⁰

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring (BOU, paragraph 3)²¹

Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith (BOU, paragraph 4)

²⁰ CNFO will be used as an abbreviation for *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*.

²¹ The Assembly Standing Committee resolved to issue in 1992 a new edition of *The Basis of Union* which sought to eliminate non-inclusive language in order to safeguard against the possibility that such language may prevent its use in the church. All quotations from *The Basis of Union* in this paper will be taken from the 1992 edition.

In entering into this union the Churches are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died, and that it awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ (BOU, paragraph 1)

2. We are a Servant Church, of the Servant Lord

The way to that goal, which the Church must follow, is marked out by Christ the servant Lord. ...He chose to reveal His Lordship through becoming a servant, and identifying Himself with man in his lostness, his sinfulness, his disobedience. It is in His servant form that He discloses His omnipotence and glory (CNFO, p 26)

...[Christ] calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord (BOU, paragraph 4)

The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant (BOU, paragraph 13)

The Uniting Church sees in pastoral care exercised personally on behalf of the Church an expression of the fact that God always deals personally with people...and would have individual members take upon themselves the form of a servant (BOU, paragraph 16)

3. The Church exists for the sake of mission in the world

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the Church exists to fulfil a mission. Just as God sent the Son and the Holy Spirit, so also the Church is sent into the world (John 17: 18) (CNFO, p 26)

In entering into this union the Churches are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died (BOU, paragraph 1)

Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world (BOU, paragraph 7)

The Uniting Church will ... order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission (BOU, paragraph 13)

4. Flexible structures and orders of ministry will best serve our mission

We must examine the sociological changes that have occurred in Australian life... We must then ask whether these require different forms of congregational life, new types of ministry, changed structures of church government... To accept this servant role implies a willingness to receive the shape and form of church life which is appropriate to the world-setting in which the mission is carried on (CNFO, p 27)

The Uniting Church recognises that the type and duration of ministries to which women and men are called vary from time to time and place to place, and that in particular it comes into being in a period of reconsideration of traditional forms of the ministry (BOU, paragraph 14)

The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity (BOU, paragraph 17)

The Uniting Church...will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission (BOU, paragraph 13)

....it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought...It prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds. (BOU, paragraph 11)

5. We are to be an obedient Church

Christ's obedience was a 'secular obedience' in which He willingly accepted the duties of service within the family, of work and state, as well as within the sphere of the Church; and this makes it clear that God's purpose for saving the world must bring forth obedient service in all these realms from those who participate in His life through baptism into His body. (CNFO, p 27)

There could be appended under this quotation any one of the numerous times the words 'obey' and 'obedience' appear in the *Basis of Union*. There are nine such references in all, across eight of the eighteen paragraphs, to the obedience of Christ, the obedience of individual Christians, and the obedience, or otherwise²², of the Church. For example, in paragraph one the Uniting Church commits itself "daily to seek to obey [God's] will", in paragraph five the role of the Old and New Testaments in nourishing and regulating Christian "obedience" is acknowledged, and in paragraph fifteen every Council of the Church is enjoined "to obey God's will".

Bonhoeffer and the 'Basis' – an obedient, worldly Church

We have found confirmation of the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Second Report's statement on 'The Time and Form of Mission', and this selection of quotations directs our attention to the presence of its key themes within the *Basis of Union*. Perhaps, then, we may conclude that the Uniting Church can still learn a great deal from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was among our theological cornerstones. If he was found helpful by members of the Joint Commission when they wondered what should be the shape of this future church, then it is very likely that we who are that future church will gain help from him still. Douglas John Hall writes of Bonhoeffer's importance in the following way:

²² One thinks particularly here of paragraph 1, "...they [the three Churches] acknowledge that none of them has responded to God's love with a full obedience".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer may be considered in some ways the model theologian of the end of Christendom, for, having to confront as he did the most absurdly reduced vestiges of Constantinianism, he staked out for future generations of Christians a theology and ethic of resistance that was also a luminous revisitation of discipleship in the biblical mode.²³

Dorothee Solle puts it more succinctly: "Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the one German theologian who will lead us into the third millennium".²⁴ The Uniting Church needs such leading. Readers of the letters to the editor of our Synod magazines in recent years will need no reminding that some in the Uniting Church, and perhaps many, feel we have lost our way. But we are a new church, so we might ask: Have we lost our way, or are we not yet confident we have found it? Whether we have lost it, or are yet to find it, one good place to look for the way forward may be Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on the importance of a church that is both obedient *and* worldly.

Is it not the case that some groups within the Uniting Church have for a number of years been pursuing an agenda that would impress a stricter orthodoxy upon us? The language of obedience is never far from their pens and lips. Is it not also the case that others have argued for an increased liberality in the teaching and practice of the Church? Their stand seems to be taken, at least in part, for the sake of a more worldly church. Often unfairly, the former judges the latter as having forfeited truth for the sake of acceptance by secular *culture*. Equally unfair is the fact that the latter often judges the former as nothing but *legalism*. What both groups are engaged in is one further manifestation of the gospel verses culture contest, a contest that is as old as the Bible and as current as our sexuality debate.²⁵

²³ D J Hall, *Confessing the Faith*, (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1996), p 213.

²⁴ From the after-word, D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1, (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998).

²⁵ John F Kennedy used words similar to these in a speech during the period of civil rights unrest in the United States. "Racism" he said, "is as old as the scriptures and as contemporary as the current debate".

Yet that contest is a false one. Gospel and culture, obedience and worldliness, must be held together. To be worldly without faithful obedience is to be lost. And to resolve to be obedient, with no regard for the fact that our obedience charges us with a responsibility for the world (to engage with and even be changed by surrounding cultures) is to be equally lost. The danger of an unthinking drive toward an all-inclusive, worldly church has always been that one can end up confessing little more than an abstract commitment to 'life' (without recognising that some of what is affirmed is a threat to life). The danger of rigid religious obedience has always been that, under certain conditions, it becomes insular, "with its own rationale and its own satisfactions."²⁶ There is little or no inter-face with reality. The one who did hold obedience and worldliness together is the one who seems to be ignored in such contests; the one who is the focus of our obedience and the source of our call to be in the world, who asked that we obey all he commanded, and told us he came that we might have life and have it abundantly - Jesus Christ.

Christ is not a principle in accordance with which the whole world must be shaped. Christ is not the proclaimer of a system of what would be good today, here and at all times. Christ teaches no abstract ethics such as must at all costs be put into practice...For indeed it is not written that God became an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid proposition or law, but that God became man.²⁷

Both these concepts – obedience and worldliness – are honoured in the *Basis of Union*. They are held there, not in contest, but in creative tension. We will find that both have strong resonances to the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The nine times that obedience is invoked in the *Basis* calls vividly to mind Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship and his writings on Christian community. In a most challenging section of his famous *The Cost of Discipleship*, headed "Single-Minded Obedience",

²⁶ D J Hall, *op cit*, p 340. This paragraph is indebted to pp 336-340 of Hall, 'Discipleship as Worldly Responsibility'.

²⁷ D Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York, Touchstone, 1995), p 86.

Bonhoeffer writes that the call of Jesus makes possible a "concrete obedience" even in those for whom the challenge to follow is intercepted by many barriers. First published in English in 1959, two years into the work of the Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Cost of Discipleship* was found compelling by scholars and lay people alike. It is "only through actual obedience that man can become liberated to believe", Bonhoeffer writes, and it is Christ who makes that obedience possible, by his grace. We are not left alone in our struggle, yet Bonhoeffer does draw upon the emblematic concept of the whole book to warn against ignoring our responsibility to live lives of obedience to Christ. "The elimination of single-minded obedience on principle is yet another instance of the perversion of the costly grace of Jesus into the cheap grace of self-justification."²⁸ For Bonhoeffer, discipleship is clearly "not a humanist adventure but a theologically grounded obedience".²⁹

In paragraph one of the *Basis of Union* we read that, "In entering into this union the Churches are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died".³⁰ Bonhoeffer's most prominent ideas about the worldliness of Christianity are found among writings committed to paper in the last months of his life. From around July 1944 he experienced a final efflorescence of theological creativity. Perhaps an extract from one of his letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge exemplifies it best. He was in Tegel prison, under guard by the SS, and wrote the following reflection on July 21, 1944. It was fifteen months into his confinement and just nine months before his execution.

During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity...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 discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is

²⁸ D Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York, Touchstone, 1995), p 83; but read pp79-85.

²⁹ H Willmer, 'Costly Discipleship' in J de Gruchy (ed) *op cit*, p 178.

³⁰ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 1.

only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. 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.³¹

Amidst talk of obedience, discipline and duties, Bonhoeffer wants here to claim that the obedience of the disciple cannot be defined moralistically.³² Obedience is called for, yes, but not moralistic systems of obedience.

The *Letters and Papers from Prison* found their way into English in 1953 and, soon after, into Davis McCaughey's admiration. Of those letters and papers it has been written, "not only are they a moving testimony to the last years of [Bonhoeffer's] life, but they have also become one of the most provocative resources for theological thought in the middle of the twentieth century."³³ It is his statement about taking seriously not our own sufferings but those of God in the world that is most moving, and instructive. We have reasons to listen to that in the Church today. For Bonhoeffer, there was "the most intimate link between...this-worldly holiness and sharing in the suffering of God."³⁴ To approach holiness of life is to share in the sufferings of the world, not become mired in our own. Those reflections on worldliness are echoed in Bonhoeffer's other posthumous, post-war publication, *Ethics*. It was a book he never completed. The chapters he did finish, along with partially completed chapters and reflections, first appeared in English in 1955. It was then, and remains today, a source of challenge and

³¹ D Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York, Touchstone, 1997), p 369-370

³² H Willmer, 'Costly Discipleship' in J de Gruchy (ed) *op cit*, p 179.

³³ A Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, (London, SCM, 1971), p 163.

³⁴ P Selby, 'Christianity in a world come of age', in J de Gruchy (ed) *op cit*, p 241.

insight to those who would confess the Christian faith in a secular age. Along with those writings cited earlier, one also finds within his *Ethics* particular resonances for 'The Time and Form of Mission'.³⁵

Conclusion

We have found that for Dietrich Bonhoeffer there is this inextricable relationship between obedience and worldliness. Worldliness, on the one hand, is essential if the Church is to be engaged in a living relationship with God and effective in mission. Obedience, on the other hand, is essential if the Church is to resist falling from who we are and failing the one we follow; losing our way in a world which is losing its regard for our confession. When they are held together in a creative tension, obedience and worldliness offer the best hope of the Church truly being the Church. Obedience and worldliness must correct and qualify one another. In Bonhoeffer's writings and life we see them manifest in an inspiring equilibrium. They are also there in the *Basis of Union*. Though never an easy road, a church that can find that equilibrium will find its way forward.

A saying well known to any university student who spends time within an arts faculty is: "Read the Historian before you read the history". In other words, know something about your author, and what was influencing her or him, before you read their work. Our understanding of and appreciation for the *Basis of Union* is enhanced the more we take time to locate its bolder themes within the prevailing currents of theology in the twentieth century. To do that, we need to read the theologians the Joint Commissioners were discussing. No, we do not want to be caught in a theological time warp, for that serves no good purpose. However, we do have a theological inheritance embedded in our *Basis of Union*, an inheritance that reaches beyond the some times stale confessions and catechisms it names. Our efforts to be an obedient and worldly Church - a faithful and joyful Church - will be rewarded if we do. Dr McCaughey's delight was well founded.

³⁵ For example, part II, 'The Church and the World', and part III, 'Ethics as Formation' in *Ethics*, (New York, Touchstone, 1995).

interests, chief among which are walking, cooking and reading.

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