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IS THE CHURCH DEAD? BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY-OF-THE-CROSS AND THE FUTURE OF ECUMENICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

1. Introduction

April 9, 2015 marked the seventieth Anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death by hanging. It is impossible to know his precise last words, though from early childhood he "would picture himself on his death bed [...]. He knew what his last words would be and sometimes rehearsed them aloud, though he dared not reveal them to anyone."¹ The last recorded words he said are extremely fitting with the entirety of his theology, "This is the end – for me, the beginning of life." And after he had said these words, he asked Payne Best to deliver a message – an ecumenical message – to Bishop George Bell, "Tell him [...] [w]ith him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interest, and that our victory is certain."²

Is it strange that Christians today often meet on April 9 to celebrate Bonhoeffer's *death*? Rather than immediately answer this question about his life and death, this article will primarily address a similar question with relation to the life and death of the church, the very church which Bonhoeffer continually theologized about.

Is the church dead? Perhaps this question seems trivial to members of the church – the church is obviously "not dead," right? *Not exactly.* According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this question is far from trivial. He wrestled with this question in Gland,

1 Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 3

2 Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest* (Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2015), 1–2.

Switzerland, on August 29, 1932, in a speech entitled “The Church is Dead.”³ He addressed this question because, according to the speech, a serious German had apparently recently told Bonhoeffer that “the church is dead” and that we should prepare “for its honorable funeral.”⁴

It is important to recognize that this speech was delivered roughly four months before Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and thus before the unfolding of the drama between the Reich church and the Confessing Church. It is true that “in 1936 everybody was talking of [Bonhoeffer’s] ominous statement, ‘He who separates himself from the Confessing Church separates himself from salvation.’”⁵ However, this 1932 speech was an ecumenical one, and thus could not constitute an attack on the Reich Church, which was only formed later. Nevertheless, one should take note that the Nazi Party was rising in power, that it became the largest party in parliament following the July 1932 elections, and that Bonhoeffer himself alludes to this political extremism in this speech.⁶

Given that this speech is dealing with the “normal” church⁷—and not the extremes of a church under a totalitarian state—it seems justified to continue the conversation by asking if the church is dead *today*, and to point out the implications for the future of ecumenical ecclesiology. In order to understand Bonhoeffer’s synthesis, I will examine the Gland speech through the hermeneutic of the theology-of-the-cross, and examine two theological paradoxes from Gland: life is hidden in death, and peace is hidden in struggle. I conclude the article by pointing out the implications of this “death” and “struggle” for the future of ecumenical ecclesiology, which is precisely what Bonhoeffer did in Gland.

2. The Dialectic of the “Address in Gland”

The Gland address was delivered to a group of ecumenical theologians, so all the while Bonhoeffer must have been considering his ecumenical context. The dialectic goes from death, to non-death, and synthesizes towards life out of death. But one must be careful to recognize that this synthesis is not the point in and of itself; the dialectic is there as a way of setting the stage for a further theological paradox

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Address in Gland,” in *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, DBWE 11:375–381, 350–357. Throughout this article I will refer to Bonhoeffer’s writings using the English Critical Edition (DBWE), followed by volume and page number. I will reference the German Critical Edition (DBW) if I give an alternate translation. This speech was delivered at the International Youth Conference of the Universal Christian Council arranged by Life and Work and the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches.

4 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:375.

5 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 495; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, DBW 14:676.

6 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:379.

7 Granted, we affirm that the church is always already a “miracle,” and thus, not “normal.” See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Thy Kingdom Come,” in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, DBWE 12:292ff.

connected with the ecumenical struggle of the church to establish peace and unity in this-world. Without further ado, I now proceed to describe the thesis and anti-thesis of the dialectic.

2.1. The Thesis: "The Church is Dead"

Early in the speech, Bonhoeffer proclaimed, "the unbelieving world says: the church is dead."⁸ As Geoffrey Kelly writes, "He opened the conference, therefore, with the electrifying statement that the church was to all practical purposes a dead entity as far as the unbelieving world was concerned."⁹ He even goes into the figurative details of preparing the funeral flowers, and then boldly proclaims that the persons who have never seriously questioned whether the church is dead, "should ask themselves whether they ever really believed in the church."¹⁰ This is even more electrifying than Kelly has suggested, because Bonhoeffer was saying that the believing world ought to question whether the church is in fact dead, and that escaping this question calls one's own belief into question.

Most readers can probably agree with Bonhoeffer that the unbelieving world would state that "the church is dead." It is no coincidence that Bonhoeffer's statement here is reminiscent of Nietzsche's famous phrase, "God is dead."¹¹ If the "church is Christ existing in the church community," as Bonhoeffer often referred to the church, then proclaiming "the church is dead" was a natural consequence of saying "God is dead," even going so far as to imply that *we* killed the church through the program of modernity, and that we can no longer use the church as a source of *morality*, just as we can no longer use God as a source of *morality*. I will return to the matter of morality and peace below, following the conversation already begun on death and the church.

If Bonhoeffer said that it is the unbelieving world which says "the church is dead," then does this mean that he—part of the believing world—endorses the corollary, namely, that "the church is not dead"? To answer briefly, no. Bonhoeffer was indeed pointing out that the church was a dead entity to the unbelieving world, but his solution was not a reactionary one, where the believer instinctively proclaims that "the church is not dead." Nevertheless, although Bonhoeffer did not endorse proclaiming "the church is dead" as the unbelieving world, his theology

8 "Address in Gland," DBW 11:351, 376. Translation mine.

9 Geoffrey B. Kelly, *Reading Bonhoeffer: A Guide to His Spiritual Classics and Selected Writings on Peace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 135.

10 "Address in Gland," DBWE 11:376.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter A. Kaufmann (New York: Knopf, 2010), sec. 125. "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

did have sympathies towards this position. For Bonhoeffer, even from his youth, “ultimately, death would enthrall more than it frightened.”¹²

2.2. The Anti-Thesis: “The Church Is Not Dead”

If the believing world cannot affirm that “the church is dead,” then it seems reasonable for Christians to conclude that “the church is not dead.” Bonhoeffer did not agree with this reasoning. He made sure to state in a parallel anti-thesis that “the unbelieving world – full of pious illusion – says: the church is not dead.”¹³ It is not difficult to see why Bonhoeffer claimed that the unbelieving world says “the church is dead,” given the spread of atheism, nihilism and corruption within the church, not to mention the fact that he said he was prompted to write this address because that a man declared to him that “the church is dead.”

Was it reasonable for Bonhoeffer to write that the unbelieving world also says “the church is not dead”? How can it be that the unbelieving world both states that “the church is dead,” as well as that “the church is not dead”? And what then is the believing world allowed to say about the life and death of the church?

Before proceeding to Bonhoeffer’s “synthesis” – *that the life of the church is hidden in her death* – I will now digress for a moment to discuss the theology-of-the-cross. It is not possible to truly appreciate Bonhoeffer’s dialectic apart from understanding the theology-of-the-cross. After discussing the theology-of-the-cross, in terms of both Luther and Bonhoeffer, we will return to the synthesis of the latter’s “Address in Gland” through addressing two theological paradoxes: life is hidden in death, and peace is hidden in struggle. To demonstrate further continuity, I will supplement this reading with Bonhoeffer’s other writings, primarily in the essay “Thy Kingdom Come” and his lecture series *Creation and Fall*, all as a way to point us towards the future of ecumenical ecclesiology.

3. On Reading Bonhoeffer: The Theology-of-the-Cross as the Hermeneutical Key for Continuity

This section follows H. Gaylon Barker’s explicit usage of maintaining continuity in the life and writings of Bonhoeffer, through using Martin Luther’s theology-of-the-cross as the hermeneutical key.¹⁴ It is time now to briefly examine Luther’s -theology-of-the-cross before returning to examine Bonhoeffer’s synthesis from the “Address in Gland.”

¹² Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 4.

¹³ “Address in Gland,” DBW 11:351, 376. Translation mine.

¹⁴ H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther’s Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer’s Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

To say that Luther did not use the phrase “*theologia crucis*” frequently is an understatement. As Vercruyse notes, “Luther uses the expressions *theologia crucis* and *theologicus crucis* – as far as I know – in only five texts,”¹⁵ most famously in the Heidelberg Disputation. Despite the infrequency of this phraseology, Forde argues that “as far as the theology of the Reformation is concerned, the Heidelberg Disputation is the most influential of all Luther’s disputations.”¹⁶ To understand the theology of the Reformation – or the theology of Bonhoeffer – one needs to understand *theologia crucis* as formulated in the Heidelberg Disputation.¹⁷

3.1. The Heidelberg Disputation

The disputation was delivered in April, 1518 – two years before Luther’s excommunication – and it was his chance to cohesively defend his previous teachings on ecclesiological reform. Therefore, one must take into account the continuity between Luther and his Catholic counterparts; i.e., he was a Catholic trying to reform the church from within. In the last two decades, scholars have begun to see more of this continuity. As Christine Helmer suggests, recent research has helped discover “a historical Luther who looks more medieval, more Catholic, more mystical, and more philosophically astute than ever before.”¹⁸

Theologians are in agreement that the structure of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation is of paramount importance, although it is not uncommon for authors to ignore its full structure. Although there are forty theses, greater weight is usually given to the theological theses (nos. 1–28), while the philosophical theses (nos. 29–40) are often ignored.¹⁹ For instance, Forde writes, “If it is true that these theses are carefully crafted, we need to look at the structure of the Disputation more closely,”²⁰ but then he goes on to say that the fourth and final section is theses nos. 25–28, thereby ignoring the philosophical theses. This interpretation stems from the assumption of a primary discontinuity between Luther and his Catholic counterparts, thereby, the twelve philosophical theses are a rejection of metaphysics and do not carry importance for the rest of the disputation. However, Luther’s Heidelberg Disputa-

15 Jos Vercruyse, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation,” *Gregorianum* 57 (1976), 524. “Namely, the *Asterisci Lutheri adversus Obeliscos Eckii*, the Lectures on Hebrews, the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* and finally the famous Heidelberg disputation. The fifth one is to be found in the *Operationes in Psalmos*, Luther’s second course on the Psalms, held from 1519 to 1521.”

16 Gerard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 19.

17 Though it is important to do this against the background and in relation to the other relevant passages about *theologia crucis* in Luther’s oeuvre.

18 Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, ed., *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 24.

19 For more on the history and structure of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, refer to works such as those of Bauer (1901), Köstlin (1901), Kalkoff (1906), Clemen (1912), Loewenich (1929), Ebeling (1964), Brecht (1981), and Scheible (1983), McGrath (1990, revised in 2011), Forde (1997), Hall (2001) and Vercruyse (1976, 1981, etc.).

20 Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 21.

tion, which described *theologia crucis* in detail, was concerned with (a fundamental) ecclesiology through the reforming of both theology and philosophy through all forty theses of the disputation. The twelve philosophical theses are not a full rejection of philosophy, just as the twenty eight theological theses are not a full rejection of theology; rather, both sections were carefully crafted together as the requisite cohesive argument for Luther's ecclesiological reform.²¹

3.1.1. A Philosophical Critique – Not a Rejection

Alister McGrath wrote that "Luther's emphasis upon the cross as a theological criterion and foundation arises from and within a tradition of meditation upon the sufferings of Christ, characteristic of late medieval spirituality."²² McGrath's observation that Luther's *theologia crucis* is drawing upon a Catholic meditation of the passion of Christ cannot be ignored. Furthermore, this type of meditation ought to remind us of "philosophy" – namely, according to Socrates, philosophy is a life-long "meditation on death." Luther's meditation upon the sufferings of Christ and the theology-of-the-cross amount to an existential Christian philosophy, and it is not a rejection of philosophy in the slightest. Therefore, not only is he not rejecting philosophy with theses 29–40, but he is actually performing Christian philosophy in his meditation on the cross.

Luther's philosophical critique is not simply against Aristotle, but rather, it is against all philosophers – rather, glorious philosopher-kings – because "no person philosophizes well unless he is a fool, that is, a Christian" (Thesis 30). This does not mean that all philosophers are to be rejected, but precisely the opposite. Luther is not rejecting philosophy or metaphysics, he is rather encouraging those who philosophize to first become "thoroughly foolish in Christ" (Thesis 29). One becomes the humble philosopher-fool in Christ by meditating on the cross and death of God; this is what I call being a practitioner of an existential Christian philosophy.

It is true that Luther viewed the scholasticism of the day as a theology-of-glory, though he was proposing a theology-of-the-cross as a corrective, not a rejection.²³ Perhaps Luther's harshest critique against Aristotle was against his ethics. As McGrath states,

[T]he Aristotelian dictum that a man becomes righteous by performing righteous deeds is rejected by Luther; it is only when a man is justified (*iustus coram Deo*) that he is capable

21 Kari Kopperi, "Theology of the Cross," in Olli-Pekka Vainio, ed., *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 155–172. The (New) Finnish Interpretation helps one become aware that Luther's Heidelberg Disputation consists of a purposefully and carefully blending theology and philosophy.

22 Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 208.

23 In Bonhoeffer's context, we must realize that "scholasticism" was not his concern when it came to the theology-of-glory versus the theology-of-the-cross—in ironical fashion, Bonhoeffer was calling forth attention to how the Lutherans of his day were themselves embracing a theology-of-glory, and needed a corrective through the theology-of-the-cross.

of performing good deeds. Underlying this criticism of Aristotle is Luther's basic conviction that man is naturally incapable of performing anything which is good *coram Deo*, and which could be regarded as effecting his justification.²⁴

It thus becomes clear that *the philosophical theses are theological theses*, so long as we are able to associate the ethical connection between the works of God and the works of man. As Karl Holl – the man who began the Luther renaissance and influenced Bonhoeffer – wrote, “[Luther] faced an insoluble problem [...], the noose in which he was caught and which threatened to strangle him.”²⁵ The noose was directly related to works (and love), because Luther knew that “as he exerted himself [toward seeking God in love] he discovered that at the very outset the exertion itself invalidated the act.”²⁶

3.1.2. The Critical Issue: The Heart Turned Inwards

How is one able to seek God in love? What type of work would this be? What type of humility would be required? Luther wrote, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ” (Thesis 25). In his proof of this thesis, Luther went on to write, “His justification by faith in Christ is sufficient to him.” God himself is the one who both humiliates – even the work of humiliation belongs to God²⁷ – and declares the sinner just, because faith is *sufficient* for justification, not merely *necessary*.²⁸

What is the “theology-of-the-cross”?²⁹ Is it a methodology or a way of being? I have called it an existential Christian philosophy, for it is both a methodology (*theologia crucis*) and a way of being (*theologicus crucis*) which comes about through meditation on the death and sufferings of Christ, and of his church. Luther – and other theologians of the cross such as Paul and Bonhoeffer – “systematically” inverted values through theological paradoxes, but it was always in light of an interpretation given because of the meditation on the cross.³⁰ The hindrance to this meditation – the hindrance to true philosophy – was the inward curvature of the heart.

24 Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 139.

25 Karl Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38.

26 Ibid.

27 Proof of Thesis 25: “Therefore man knows that works which he does by such faith are not his but God's.” And Thesis 27 reads: “One should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.”

28 It now becomes obvious that *sola fidei* and *simul justus et peccator* are embedded within the *theologia crucis*.

29 There are different “theologies of the cross.” For instance, John Caputo is “just proposing a theology of the cross” (John Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 41). I am in the process of writing an article which examines the difference between Caputo's and Bonhoeffer's theologies of the cross. It should be noted that these theologies of the cross are clearly demonstrated in the light of their A-Religiosity (i.e., Caputo's religion without religion and Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity).

30 A few examples of inverted values will be discussed shortly, i.e. glory hidden in humility, life hidden in death, peace hidden in struggle. We could also include other examples, such as power is hidden in weakness and joy hidden in suffering.

Luther was attacking far more than the sale of indulgences; he was confronting the heart turned inwards, and the fact that the scholastic system of Luther's day had a propensity to make this inward curvature easy to occur. "Luther's criticism of the scholastic theology, theological and philosophical speculations, the theology of glory and Aristotelian philosophy are focused on the same unacceptable principle of the *amor hominis*."³¹ Bonhoeffer later shows us that Luther's successors had the same inward curvature, thus *it had nothing to do with the scholastic system in and of itself*. Luther was not rejecting his predecessors, their teachings, or Rome, but rather he was urging the intimate connection between the works of Christ and the Christian. Again, "Luther considers philosophy to be good in itself, but it is easily perverted into a corrupt form of theological speculation."³² The issue at hand was not "[meta-physics or] *being* but [fallen] human reasoning."³³ Luther was part of this system and likely wanted to remain in communion, otherwise he would not have gone to Heidelberg at the risk of his own life. Traveling there was dangerous and there was the possibility he could have been assassinated on the way or when he arrived.

The critical issue at hand was the *cor curvum in se*. This is the same issue which the young Bonhoeffer learned from Karl Holl. "[Holl] convinced [Bonhoeffer] that even the devout are not able really to love God. Henceforward, Luther's dictum of the *cor curvum in se* became a keyword for him. He applied it again and again."³⁴ For instance, in his *Christology* lectures, Bonhoeffer refers to "enslavement to our own authority. It is the *cor curvum in se*."³⁵

Bonhoeffer repeatedly refers to the imprisonment of one's own ego—in other words, the *cor curvum in se*—and that "faith means to be torn out of the imprisonment of one's own ego, liberated by Jesus Christ."³⁶ Therefore, what is needed is the "liberated self," where the self is liberated from the *cor curvum in se*. In the words of Karl Holl, "The pride that wants to rescue a bit of self, and in some way to claim some goodness before God, is the greatest barrier to reconciliation with God."³⁷ Nonetheless, the liberated self "is the highest sense of selfhood imaginable; but it is also a completely temperate, completely *humble*, one may even say, an *absolutely selfless sense of self*."³⁸ The *cor curvum in se* is the issue, and I hope to show below, this is exactly what Bonhoeffer was communicating in Gland.

31 Kopperi, "Theology of the Cross," 169.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 171. Kopperi continues, "Therefore the problem of the theology of glory is not the concept of being but human reasoning, which, after the fall, abuses God's creation and seeks human glory in one's own works."

34 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 46.

35 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," DBW 12:283, 303.

36 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:147–148.

37 Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?*, 44.

38 Ibid., 86. Emphasis mine.

3.1.3. Theological Paradoxes

In his introduction to the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther refers to “theological paradoxes,” in accord with St. Paul and St. Augustine, thus it is no surprise that one reads many theological paradoxes throughout it. These paradoxes are akin to the dialectical/hermeneutical way of thinking adopted by Bonhoeffer. One theological paradox which resonates throughout both Luther’s and Bonhoeffer’s writings is that glory is hidden in humility.

Luther, in his famous thesis concerning the theology-of-the-cross, refers to the “rearward parts of God.” Namely, Thesis 20 reads: “The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian.”³⁹ The *rearward* parts of God are *made visible* through suffering and the cross.

To restate this paradox, the theology-of-the-cross concerns itself with revelation, albeit a *concealed* revelation. It is only through *daily dying* that one receives the *concealed* revelation of God. When Moses asked God to show him his glory, Moses was shown the rearward parts. *When we ask God to show us his glory, he shows us his cross.*

In the proof of Thesis 20, Luther writes, “it does [one] no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross.” Indeed, this concept helps supply the title of the theology-of-glory versus the theology-of-the-cross – it could just as easily have been called a theology-of-humility. The theology-of-the-cross is communicating that God’s glory is *hidden* in humility. The cross/humility is not opposed to glory in and of itself, rather, the theology-of-the-cross always includes the life, death, and glorious resurrection.⁴⁰ What is emphasized, however, is that Good Friday always precedes Easter Sunday. Or in Paul’s words, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). But even so, what has this to do with Bonhoeffer?

Like Luther, Bonhoeffer often used theological paradoxes, and he makes a specific parallel to Luther’s theology-of-the-cross (*Kreuzestheologie*), by showing that the community-of-the-cross (*Kreuzesgemeinschaft*) is known “through suffering and the cross.”⁴¹ In making this parallel, he defines the community-of-the-cross as Jesus Christ and his church, which is “Jesus Christ existing in church-community.” As is often noted, Bonhoeffer adapted this phrase from the idealism of Hegel, in order

³⁹ This translation of Thesis 20 comes from Alister McGrath (*Luther’s Theology of the Cross*), and it should also be noted that he is the one to have observed the connection which Luther made with Moses.

⁴⁰ In my forthcoming dissertation from KU Leuven, I explain in detail the reasons for my creating and using the hyphenated neographism to demonstrate that the theology-of-the-cross is not one branch of theology to be studied; the unhyphenated form leaves ambiguity and is susceptible to the critique that it is opposed to resurrection and glory.

⁴¹ See Thesis 20 from the Heidelberg Disputation. My forthcoming dissertation from KU Leuven addresses this parallel in detail. To my knowledge, no one has specifically written about it.

to transform it into a model of Christian realism. For Bonhoeffer, the community-of-the-cross is not simply the church; rather, it is Jesus and his church, in a relationship where they are inseparable yet distinct. This then is why the community-of-the-cross parallels the theology-of-the-cross — both can only be known “through suffering and the cross,” for that God comes to us in humiliation, suffering, and death. Bonhoeffer makes this parallel fairly obvious in *Discipleship*, in that he describes a distorted version of the theology-of-the-cross, and corrects this distortion by describing the true community-of-the-cross.⁴² Now it is time to turn our attention to the reasoning behind Bonhoeffer’s theological paradoxes.

4. The Synthesis: The One Reality

Bonhoeffer’s immediate (initial) synthesis of “the church is dead” and “the church is not dead” is the theological paradox that “the life of the church is hidden in her death.” However, this paradox is simply one way to communicate the true, ultimate synthesis, i.e. that there is only one reality. “There are not two realities, but *only one reality* [...], *the one realm of the Christ-reality*, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united.”⁴³ This concise definition from his *Ethics* makes it clear why Bonhoeffer was so adamant in the “Address in Gland” that we ought not to escape this-world. He was deeply concerned with participating in this one reality. In examining this address, one discovers that Bonhoeffer communicates the synthesis of this one reality through many iterations of what I have referred to as theological paradoxes; each paradox reveals that the two apparently dichotomous pseudo-realities are in fact part of the one reality.

4.1. Life Hidden in Death

As I argued above, that although the principle that “life is hidden in death” was Bonhoeffer’s immediate synthesis to the dead/not dead problem, nevertheless the true synthesis is what Bonhoeffer understood as “one reality.” Following the discussion above regarding the theology-of-the-cross and the theology-of-glory, together with their respective communities, it is now possible to more fully reflect on the nature of this “death.”

Bonhoeffer was responding to the theologians- and communities-of-glory, that is, theologians and communities which glory in their “piety.” Upon hearing the atheist’s thesis that “the church is dead,” “pious” react by proclaiming that

42 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4:113–114. Later on in *Discipleship*, he also describes the hiddenness, glory, and works in perfect parallel to Luther: “We never derive any *glory* from our own works, for we ourselves are God’s work [...]. Our good work is thus completely *hidden* from our eyes. Our sanctification remains *hidden* from us until the day when everything will be *revealed* [...]. On that day, Jesus Christ himself will *reveal* to us the good works of which we had been *unaware*. *Without knowing it*, we have fed him, provided him with drink, given him clothes, and visited him; and *without knowing it*, we have turned him away” (DBWE 4:278–280). Emphasis mine.

43 DBWE 6:58.

“the church is not dead.” The result is that there are two “types” of unbelievers – i.e. the atheist and the theologian-of-glory. To reiterate, the thesis of the atheists in the *unbelieving* world is that “the church is dead,” whereas, the anti-thesis of the theologians-of-glory in (*vis-à-vis*) the *unbelieving* world is that “the church is not dead.”

Bonhoeffer writes in a similar fashion in his essay, “Thy Kingdom Come,” but there he refers to the “otherworldly” and the “pious Christian secularist,” as being two sides of the same coin. In my estimation, the otherworldly and the pious Christian secularist are describing two characteristic aspects of theologians-of-glory – that is, the people who declare that “the church is not dead.” I have not offered this further division among the unbelieving world simply to ascribe labels; rather, it is because the essay “Thy Kingdom Come” gives us further insight. In this essay, one reads that the otherworldly are hostile to Earth and the pious Christian secularists are hostile to God, and that both are types of “religious escapism” from the one reality.⁴⁴

When the otherworldly-theologian-of-glory hears an atheist say “the church is dead,” his response is to proclaim that “the church is not dead, because it is alive in some spiritual realm.” When the pious-Christian-secularist-theologian-of-glory hears an atheist say “the church is dead,” his response is to proclaim that “the church is not dead, it is simply wounded and needs to be healed, so let’s get to work with our humanitarian aid.” The former is hostile to Earth, and the latter is hostile to God. The realization of the one reality was continuously on Bonhoeffer’s mind, and we repeat his conclusion from the *Ethics* – “There are not two realities, but *only one reality* [...], *the one realm of the Christ-reality*, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united.”⁴⁵ According to Bonhoeffer, what matters is participating in this reality, hence every attempt to escape is a refusal to participate in the one reality. As he said in Gland, “the cross places us in the midst of a world that has gone haywire,”⁴⁶ and he adjures his listeners: “do not flee from the world [...], [but rather, be] responsible to the world.”⁴⁷

The evasion of the one reality means the refusal to participate in it because of one’s other-worldliness or one’s piety. In this evasion of responsibility for the world, the person evading it ironically “finds himself.”⁴⁸ But in finding the self, the individual has simply returned to the theme of the *cor curvum in se* which was discussed earlier. Therefore, this finding of the self is not a “good thing,” indeed,

44 “Thy Kingdom Come,” DBWE 12:286ff.

45 DBWE 6:58.

46 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:379.

47 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:378.

48 “Thy Kingdom Come,” DBWE 12:288.

as Bonhoeffer explained in his series, *Creation and Fall*. In these lectures, he expounds what it means to be *sicut deus*, “like God,” as a result of the fall, through actually receiving what the serpent promised. Bonhoeffer writes:

In what way does humankind’s being *sicut deus* consist? It consists in its own attempt to be for God, to have access to a new way of “being-for-God,” that is, in a special way of being pious.⁴⁹

In the essay “Thy Kingdom Come,” Bonhoeffer makes reference to the *sicut deus* by stating, “We ourselves are a god who cannot perform miracles.”⁵⁰ What is this miracle which he speaks of? The miracle is “God’s miracle, of breaking through death to life,”⁵¹ because “it is God’s command which creates that which lives out of what is dead.”⁵² We truly became gods, but we also received the curse of death, and only the creating God can break through death to life, i.e. the miracle. And in the words of the Gland address, the immediate synthesis reads: “The believer speaks: The church lives in the midst of dying, solely because God calls it forth out of death into life, because God does the impossible.”⁵³ Yet here it is not simply that God breaks through death to life, for he goes on to say, “it is certain that [...] our life is hidden in death.”⁵⁴ The breakthrough to life can occur no other way.

Bonhoeffer is not saying that the church is dead, like the atheist, nor is he saying that the church is not dead, like the theologian-of-glory. Bonhoeffer has synthesized these two sides of the unbelieving world by calling for the community-of-the-cross to realize that true life is hidden in the midst of her death – in the death which she freely chooses for herself on the cross with Christ, again and again. The theology-of-the-cross recognizes and embraces the suffering of Jesus on the cross, and that his actions defeated death by death. However, if the story stops there, we actually end up in a theology-of-glory, where we may allow sin to abound – all the more because, after all, death has defeated death. *One ends up glorying in the victory without personally taking up the cross*. It turns into what Bonhoeffer labeled as cheap grace, “the mortal enemy of our church.”⁵⁵ In order to stay true to the theology-of-the-cross, one must affirm that death has been defeated by death through the cross, but then one must also affirm that the daily life of following after [*Nachfolge*] Christ must also include taking up the cross, for as St. Paul says, “I die daily”

49 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, DBWE 3:116.

50 “Thy Kingdom Come,” DBWE 12:291.

51 “Thy Kingdom Come,” DBWE 12:291.

52 DBWE 3:57.

53 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:376.

54 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “21 August 1944,” in *Letter and Papers from Prison*, DBW 8:573, 514. Translation mine.

55 DBWE 4:43.

(1 Cor. 15:31). This is the “costly grace” which Bonhoeffer spoke of, and like Paul, he emphasized the repetitive nature of the death by writing, “Every time Christ calls a man, one is led into death.”⁵⁶

Bonhoeffer later asked, in a sermon from 1935, “How do Christians, how does Christ’s congregation, learn to die?”⁵⁷ In the end, the answer is in listening to the Gospel and praying, “Lord, teach your congregation to die.”⁵⁸ This is not an atheistic-determination of a dead church, this is not a glorious-determination of an undead church, rather, this is a free choice of being a community-of-the-cross, where life is found in the midst of dying for others. This death and life is not determined, rather, it is a free and responsible choice.⁵⁹

4.2. Peace Hidden in Struggle

I would be remiss to ignore the rest of the “Address in Gland,” because it goes on to describe the one reality through another theological paradox, and to explain one may participate in this one reality. Bonhoeffer’s dialectic was a stepping-stone to discussing peace and morality, and he specifically related this to ecumenical Christian organizations. He argues that we cannot escape this-world; it is precisely because the cross places us in the midst of the world that we are called to be responsible in it. Furthermore, it is in the midst of this-world that one discovers the false gods of “security” and “peace.”⁶⁰ Unfortunately, it is often Christian organizations which are vying for this security. Bonhoeffer gives a very strong critique towards such Christian organizations:

Nothing, such organizations are *nothing* at all, like a house of cards blown away in a whirlwind [...], *nothing*, our well-meant intentions, our speeches about peace and “good will” are *nothing* at all, unless the Lord himself comes and casts out the demons. What are so-called international attempts at reconciliation, all these attempts to understand one another, all so-called international friendship – as necessary as they are in themselves – in the light of this reality? [...] The crucified Christ is our peace. Christ alone adjures the false gods and the demons. Only before the cross does the world tremble, not before us.⁶¹

To call “security” and “peace” demons and false gods was no small thing, and it was directed at many of the people whom were listening to the “Address in Gland.” Bonhoeffer was indirectly stating that many of the organizations which were present at this very meeting were “nothing”! Bonhoeffer had come to realize

56 DBW 4:81, 87. Translation mine.

57 DBWE 14:899.

58 DBWE 14:905.

59 For more on Bonhoeffer and freedom, cf. *Act and Being* and *Creation and Fall*.

60 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:379.

61 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:379. Emphasis mine.

that “the crucified Christ is our peace.”⁶² And because of this, it means that there is false peace, indeed, “there can be a peace that is worse than struggle.”⁶³

Here then, one can see the self-deception of those who would argue that Bonhoeffer delivered the speech at Gland simply to declare the miracle of the life of the church which is hidden in her death. Certainly, Bonhoeffer used the saying, “the church is dead” as a catalyst to discuss the life hidden in death, but even more so, as a way to discuss morality in this-world; albeit not a rigid morality. If glory is hidden in humility, and if life is hidden in death, then peace is hidden in struggle, because “in this world, there is peace only in the struggle for truth and justice.”⁶⁴

5. Concluding Remarks for Here and Now

5.1. The Future of Ecumenical Ecclesiology

I began this article by stating that there would be ecumenical considerations, and I now turn our attention to this. Ecumenical theologians recognize that the ecumenical movement is in a kind of ecumenical winter, and many are now searching for new methodologies in the hope of entering into an ecumenical spring. While fully acknowledging the positive contributions that have come about through bilateral and multi-lateral dialogues, differentiated consensus, the World Council of Churches, etc., the question had been raised as to whether there has been a patient listening to the other, which has actually shaped who we are.⁶⁵ There is much *talk of listening*, but there has been lack of the *humility* which follows when one truly listens. Listening requires patience and humility, and patience and humility are painful. Indeed, patience comes from the word *passio*, which means suffering.

In 2003, results were published from sixteen prominent theologians and ecumenists who had met for three years in Princeton, NJ. Their goal was to search for a new methodology concerning ecumenism, because of the limited, albeit positive, progress of bilateral dialogues and differentiated consensus. This meeting, which became known as the Princeton Proposal, was seeking reconciliation, as the title itself suggests: “In One Body through the Cross.” In essence, the proposal called for a meditation on death and the cross, where all confessional identities must undergo sacrifice. The question remains, however, whether communities have since acted upon this sacrifice, or is this talk of sacrifice and the cross merely “idle talk”?

62 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:379.

63 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:380.

64 “Address in Gland,” DBWE 11:381.

65 These sentiments are shared by scholars such as Paul Murray and the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. See Paul D. Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

If peace is hidden in struggle, what does this mean for ecumenism? It means that the sacrifice must be real. But it is not sacrifice alone, according to Bonhoeffer; the ecumenical import from the "Address in Gland" is that "we should all love one another here in our diversity."⁶⁶ "Here" implies in this-world, "diversity" means difference, which is an ironical way to address an ecumenical gathering which is often focused on "unity." Bonhoeffer was not concerned with trying to create unity, or a new methodology — one could search his corpus for such a methodology, but our search would end in vain. Indeed, as Bonhoeffer warns,

Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive. Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.⁶⁷

Too often Christians have turned "peace," "security," or even the concept of "sacrifice" into ideals. According to Bonhoeffer, in his day these ideals had become false gods and demons. If he were to ask us whether this is still true today, it is likely that many of us would have to answer affirmatively, that we have indeed idolized these concepts. And to the extent that this true of Christians, Christian Churches and the ecumenical movement today, Bonhoeffer's words still encourage us to *love* one another in our diversity. As early as *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer already identified *love* to be the answer. He wrote there, "*Love finds community without seeking it, or precisely because it does not seek it.*"⁶⁸ But if the answer is love, how can one avoid turning love itself into a false god and demon?

5.2. Love One Another Here in Our Diversity

One can only keep love itself from becoming an ideal by recognizing that love is a person, not simply an activity. In Dietrich's words, "Love is not what Christ *does* and *suffers*, but it is what *Christ* does and what *Christ* suffers. Love is always *He Himself*. Love is always Jesus Christ Himself."⁶⁹ Furthermore, St. Paul said, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2). Thus as Christians we must confess, that if we proclaim life, peace and security, but have not love, we are nothing. This is precisely why Bonhoeffer adamantly proclaimed that we are "nothing" and ended the address in Gland by imploring us to "love one another here in our diversity." To fail to love others here in our *diversity*, is to simply love ourselves, the *cor curvum in se*.

⁶⁶ "Address in Gland," DBWE 11:381.

⁶⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Life Together", DBWE 5:36.

⁶⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1:176.

⁶⁹ DBWE 6:335. Emphasis original.

Love humiliates. Love struggles. Love receives the kiss of betrayal. Love nails you to the cross. Love kills. The Church is not greater than the master, and this means that the Church should expect to experience those same things. Glory is hidden in humility. The miracle of life is hidden in death. And the true peace of Christ is hidden in the struggle to love the unlovable as Christ.

5.3. Celebrating Bonhoeffer's Life through His Death

To ask once more, is it strange that Christians today often meet on April 9 to celebrate Bonhoeffer's *death*? Not at all. The only way in which we can properly celebrate the life of Bonhoeffer is through his death. His end accounts for his beginning. It is because of his death that we are able to celebrate his life and encourage the church to act with responsibility in this-world as he did.

Bonhoeffer's life and death are perfectly reflected in his theology. It is no coincidence that he wrote, "The church therefore sees the beginning only in dying."⁷⁰ This is why we must pray, "Lord, teach your congregation to die." As individuals and as communities, we need to learn how to die for other individuals and communities, indeed, even the unbelieving ones, even when—rather, precisely because—we become guilty like Christ on the cross.

As I close this paper, to give clarity I ask once more: *Is the church dead?* This reflection on Bonhoeffer's "Address in Gland" has led to the conclusion that the church is indeed dead. However, this is not because of we failed as Christians or as a Church-community. Rather, it is because we freely chose to go to the gallows with Christ, whenever we are faced with the moment of responsibility in the here and now—just as Bonhoeffer did in his own here and now. As it was for Bonhoeffer then, so it is for us today; every response to the call of Christ is the end, which is the beginning of life. *The church, yes the church, is dead!*⁷¹

Is the Church Dead? Bonhoeffer's Theology-of-the-Cross and the Future of Ecumenical Ecclesiology

Abstract

Is the church dead? Dietrich Bonhoeffer seriously considered this question in Gland, Switzerland on August 29, 1932, and the author of this paper leads us to reflect on this question today. Early in his speech Bonhoeffer declared that, "the unbelieving world says: the church is dead." This would lead one to believe the opposite corollary, namely, that it is the believing world which says "the church is not dead." However, this is not what Bonhoeffer said. Rather, he also stated that it

⁷⁰ DBWE 3:22.

⁷¹ I am here paralleling the lyrics of an old Lutheran hymn, "God, Yes God, Is Dead" (*Gott selbst ist tod*).

is the unbelieving world which says “the church is not dead.” How can it be that it is precisely the unbelieving world which both states that “the church is dead” as well as that “the church is not dead”? The “obvious” synthesis to this dialectic is that the believing world is allowed to say that the life of the church is hidden in her death—though this is merely one outworking of the true synthesis: that there is one reality, that is, the Christ-reality. In order to truly understand Bonhoeffer’s synthesis in his ecumenical context, the author uses Luther’s theology-of-the-cross as a hermeneutical key to examine two theological paradoxes from the “Address in Gland”: life is hidden in death, and peace is hidden in struggle. He concludes the article in the precisely the same way as Bonhoeffer did in Gland, by pointing out the implications of this “death” and “struggle” for the future of ecumenical ecclesiology.