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THE UBIQUITY OF LUTHER IN BONHOEFFER, WITH A GLANCE AT ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS¹

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings, Martin Luther is ubiquitous. Bonhoeffer cites or quotes no theologian more often than Luther—about 870 times, almost always approvingly.² The next most frequently cited theologian is a distant second, Karl Barth with fewer than 300. For comparison, Bonhoeffer cites Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard, and John Calvin each only several dozen times.

What I would like to show is how, from the beginning to the end of his career, Bonhoeffer was in conversation with Luther's thought. After doing so, I explore the ecumenical implications of this reliance on Luther, arguing that, from Bonhoeffer's perspective, his Lutheranism was not compromised by his ecumenism nor was his ecumenism compromised by his Lutheranism.

Bonhoeffer and Luther

While a student in Berlin in the 1920s, Bonhoeffer was introduced to cutting-edge Luther scholarship. He studied with Karl Holl, the leader of the Luther Renaissance, whose 1921 book on Luther was a theological event—another of Bon-

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² This includes direct mentions, citations, and quotations of Luther by Bonhoeffer (or by students' notes recording Bonhoeffer) in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works.

hoeffer's teachers, the great Adolf von Harnack, said that Holl's *Luther* "affected us like a sudden, powerful revelation."³ For Holl's seminars in 1925–1926, Bonhoeffer wrote long, detailed historical papers on Luther's evaluation of himself and his understanding of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Holl was the first person Bonhoeffer considered writing his dissertation with, though deliberation was cut short by Holl's death in 1926. From Holl he learned the centrality of justification and that doctrine's connection to the church community. But Bonhoeffer soon criticized Holl for relying on post-Kantian philosophical categories that undermined these Lutheran insights.⁵

Bonhoeffer eventually settled on Reinhold Seeberg as a dissertation advisor and wrote under his direction *Sanctorum Communio*. The phrase "communion of saints" appears in the Apostles' Creed and is taken up by Luther and the Lutheran confessional documents as a descriptor of the church.⁶ The dissertation is about much more than the church; it is about the social character of all basic Christian concepts.⁷ In articulating the sociality of theological concepts and doing so especially in conversation with the concept of the church, Bonhoeffer was developing an insight he saw as central to Luther but lost in later Lutheranism. In his later lectures on "The Nature of the Church," for example, Bonhoeffer regrets that a "Lutheranism developed which had broken away from the communal idea of the church." He also laments that Luther's concept of the priesthood of all believers "has today been individualized." In those same lectures, he goes on to associate the proper, communal understanding of the priesthood of all believers with the "*communio sanctorum*."⁸ Looking back from "The Nature of the Church," we see that Bonhoeffer develops in *Sanctorum Communio* what Holl had glimpsed but failed to safeguard; a robustly social understanding of the church in necessary connection with justification.

The central concern of Bonhoeffer's post-doctoral dissertation, *Act and Being*, is the articulation of a proper concept of revelation, without which "the doctrine of justification would be in jeopardy."⁹ After criticizing notions of revelation in terms of 'being,' which he associates with Catholic and pseudo-Lutheran theology, and

3 Adolf von Harnack and Hans Lietzmann, *Karl Holl: Zwei Gedächtnisreden* (Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Weber, 1926), 4.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Luther's Feelings about His Work as Expressed in the Final Years of His Life Based on His Correspondence of 1540–1546," in *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918–1927*, DBWE 9:257–284; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Luther's Views of the Holy Spirit according to the Disputationen of 1535–1545 Edited by Drews," DBWE 9:325–370.

5 See Joachim van Soosten, *Die Sozialität der Kirche: Theologie und Theorie der Kirche in Dietrich Bonhoeffers "Sanctorum Communio"* (München: Kaiser, 1992), 168–173.

6 See David P. Daniel, "Luther on the Church," in Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomír Batka, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 335. Also, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al., 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42–43, Augsburg Confession, VII–VIII.

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, DBWE 1:21. See Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 19ff.

8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Nature of the Church," in *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, DBWE 11:289, 317.

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, DBWE 2:78 n. 89.

notions of revelation in terms of 'act,' which he associates with Reformed theology, Bonhoeffer offers an understanding of revelation in terms of the 'person.' Bonhoeffer develops his account of revelation as person, above all the person of Christ, with reference to Luther's insight that God's encounter with us (God's acting on us) occurs in God's unreserved entry into creation (God's being with us).¹⁰

Shortly after completing these technical, abstract dissertations, Bonhoeffer undertook, with his close friend Franz Hildebrandt, an entirely different project: an "Attempt at a Lutheran Catechism." Its title, "As You Believe, So You Receive," is borrowed from Luther, who often said that God's promises are fulfilled for those who believe.¹¹ The title sets the tone for the catechism, which the authors describe as an attempt "to formulate what the Lutheran faith is saying today."¹² The catechism is not based, as is traditional, on the Apostle's creed but on a statement of faith from one of Luther's catechetical sermons that Bonhoeffer carried in his prayer book.¹³

In 1931 Bonhoeffer became a theology instructor at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, where he taught courses on Christology, the church, ethics, and theological exegesis. According to the surviving manuscripts and student notes, Bonhoeffer peppered his lectures and seminar discussions with references to Luther. For example, he ended his lecture course on the history of twentieth-century systematic theology by presenting some unresolved problems and challenges for future theology before asking, "Who will show us Luther?"¹⁴ When he gave up regular university instruction in the hectic year of 1933, he left his students with an essay, "What Should a Student of Theology Do Today?" In it he answered the title question by encouraging his students to "go back to the very beginning, to our wellsprings, to the true Bible, to the true Luther."¹⁵

In the mid-1930s Bonhoeffer was active in the church struggle, which was, among other things, a conflict between the church and the state over control of the church, as well as a conflict between factions within the Protestant church over its own future.¹⁶ When dealing with the struggle between church and state, Bonhoeffer

10 DBWE 2:82 n. 1. See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The History of Twentieth-Century Systematic Theology," DBWE 11:241–244. I argue that the crux of *Act and Being's* argument is a Lutheran understanding of revelation as the unity of act- and being- characteristics in the person of Christ, Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Franz Hildebrandt, "As You Believe, So You Receive: Attempt at a Lutheran Catechism," DBWE 11:258 n. 2.

12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Franz Hildebrandt, "As You Believe, So You Receive: Attempt at a Lutheran Catechism," DBWE 11:258–259.

13 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 187.

14 "The History of Twentieth-Century Systematic Theology," DBWE 11:244.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Should a Student of Theology Do Today?," in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, DBWE 12:435.

16 Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 15.

fer drew on the Lutheran logic of the two kingdoms to speak out against state encroachment on the church.¹⁷

In the intra-church struggle, Bonhoeffer was a part of the Confessing Church movement and was active in working against the German Christian movement, a pro-Nazi faction of the church. On this front, Bonhoeffer's guiding star was Luther's definition of the church as the community where the Gospel is preached and heard. He argued against the German Christians' proposed racial preconditions for church membership, claiming that they undermined the nature of the church, for which the only membership "criterion is the Word of God and faith."¹⁸ Eventually, Bonhoeffer argued that the German Christian controlled Reich Church was a false or heretical church. He did so again on the basis of the Lutheran definition of the church as the place where the Gospel is preached and heard or, amounting to the same, the community where Christ is present.¹⁹

In 1935 the Confessing Church established its own seminaries to circumvent the official path to ordination that was controlled by the German Christians. Bonhoeffer directed one of these seminaries, located first in Zingst, then in Finkenwalde, and finally in an 'underground' network, after the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde in 1937. The theological classics for which Bonhoeffer is perhaps best known, *Discipleship* and *Life Together*, developed out of the lecture courses and seminars from this period.

In the opening chapter of *Discipleship*, entitled "Costly Grace," Bonhoeffer tells how "God re-awakened the gospel of pure, costly grace through God's servant Martin Luther."²⁰ "Nonetheless," Bonhoeffer continues, "what emerged victorious from Reformation history was not Luther's recognition of pure, costly grace, but the alert religious instinct of human beings for the place where grace could be had the cheapest." The result was not Luther's costly grace but cheap grace, the misunderstanding that "through discovering the gospel of pure grace, Luther proclaimed a dispensation from obeying Jesus' commandments in the world."²¹ Bonhoeffer judged that cheap grace, this post-Lutheran misunderstanding of Luther, was also threatening the contemporary church, where "Luther's teachings are quoted everywhere, but twisted from their truth into self-delusion."²² In what can be read as a new articulation of Luther's polemics against the antinomians,

17 For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," DBWE 12:361-370.

18 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Aryan Paragraph and the Church," DBWE 12:427.

19 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "On the Question of Church Communion," in *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, DBWE 14:656-678.

20 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4:47.

21 DBWE 4:49.

22 DBWE 4:53.

Bonhoeffer undertook in *Discipleship* to correct pseudo-Lutheran cheap grace by reasserting Luther's costly grace. He did so developing the notion of discipleship as characterized by both the reception of God's grace in faith and obedience to God's command.

The seminary at Finkenwalde provided Bonhoeffer with an opportunity for reflection on, and practical experimentation with, Christian community. He established a daily routine for the community, bookended by a long worship service and meditation session in the morning and another long service at night. In between, the seminary director and his students did academic work.²³ This almost monastic structure led to widely-circulating rumors of monkish, legalistic, and otherwise un-Lutheran practices underway at Finkenwalde. In the opening chapter of *Life Together*, titled "Community," Bonhoeffer deals with these objections head-on, portraying communal life and its practices as consequences of that most Lutheran of doctrines, justification by grace through faith. He begins by defining Christian community as "community in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ." This means "Christians are persons who no longer seek their salvation, their deliverance in themselves, but in Jesus Christ alone." Bonhoeffer takes this to be a restatement of the reformers, who called "our righteousness an 'alien righteousness,' a righteousness that comes from outside us (*extra nos*)."²⁴ While it is the word of Jesus Christ that justifies, "God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed to others [...]. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God's word to them." In this way, Bonhoeffer makes a close connection between justification and the necessity for community; justification is mediated in community. He concludes: "Therefore, we may now say that the community of Christians springs solely from the biblical and reformation message of the justification of human beings through grace alone."²⁴ *Life Together* is a concrete account of the social mediation of justification, which had been Bonhoeffer's concern since at least *Sanctorum Communio*.

Bonhoeffer's late, unfinished magnum opus is now referred to simply as *Ethics*. A title that Bonhoeffer himself suggested in a letter was "'Preparing the Way and Entering in' corresponding to the division of the book (into penultimate and ultimate things)."²⁵ He defines the ultimate as "justification of the sinner by grace alone, [...] by faith alone."²⁶ The penultimate, in contrast, is that which precedes,

23 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 428–429.

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Life Together," DBWE 5:31–32.

25 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Eberhard Bethge," in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, DBWE 16:92. Translation altered.

26 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Ultimate and Penultimate Things," in *Ethics*, DBWE 6:146–147.

follows, and is defined by the ultimate.²⁷ This is what more traditional Lutheran language would describe as the temporal kingdom. With the language of the ultimate and penultimate things, central to the project of *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer describes the justification of the sinner before God and the action of that justified sinner in the world.

In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and sent to prison for his connections with conspirators. He nonetheless continued to write, and he produced the letters which Eberhard Bethge later collected as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. These letters included a number of theological reflections, which Bethge labeled the ‘new theology,’ one concerned with “the nonreligious interpretation of biblical terms in a world come of age.”²⁸ Certainly, much of Bonhoeffer’s prison thinking was novel. The ideas of ‘nonreligiousness’ and ‘the world come of age’ do not have strong precedents in his earlier work. But there is also much continuity. ‘Nonreligious’ is a negative or polemical term; Bonhoeffer is interested in thinking through a form of Christianity that is *not* religious. Stated positively, though, Christianity which is not religious is ‘worldly;’ Bonhoeffer is interested in overcoming a religious form of Christianity with a worldly form.²⁹ Put this way, the new theology is in strong continuity with Bonhoeffer’s earlier work, which had long been concerned with worldliness. And on exactly this point Bonhoeffer draws from his constant theological conversation partner, writing, “[i]n the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. [...] I think Luther lived in this kind of this-worldliness.”³⁰

Bonhoeffer engages with no theologian more than with Luther. He discusses Luther from the beginning to the end of his career, in all the genres of his writing.

Lutheranism and Ecumenism

Bonhoeffer was committed not only to Luther, but also to the ecumenical movement. What does Bonhoeffer’s robust participation in the ecumenical movement mean for his Lutheranism? I want to handle the relationship of his Lutheranism and ecumenism by specifying this question into two versions. First, does Bonhoeffer’s ecumenism diminish his Lutheranism? Second, does Bonhoeffer’s Lutheranism diminish his ecumenism?

To the first question – whether Bonhoeffer’s ecumenism makes him any less Lutheran – the short answer is: No, because he participated in the ecumenical move-

²⁷ “Ultimate and Penultimate Things,” DBWE 6:159.

²⁸ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 853.

²⁹ See Clifford J. Green, “Bonhoeffer’s Contribution to a New Christian Paradigm,” in Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, eds., *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspective, Emerging Issues* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2013), 215 n. 42.

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letter to Eberhard Bethge,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:485.

ment as a Lutheran. Understanding this requires positioning him within the Protestant³¹ ecumenical landscape of his time.

From Bonhoeffer's perspective, the biggest divide within the ecumenical movement was between the Anglo-American churches and the continental European churches. The Anglo-Americans thought that the churches would come closer to ecumenical unity if they focused on political, social, and humanitarian issues, while downplaying theological issues. The continental European churches, in contrast, thought that the way towards church unity required focusing on issues of scripture, confession, faith, and theology. Thus, there was a basic division between the Anglo-Americans, who tended to focus on ethics and practical issues, and the continentals, who were eager to tackle theological issues. This basic difference in orientation had the effect of reducing the significance of confessional differences on both sides; any differences between, say, the Methodists and Anglicans on the Anglo-American side, or between the Lutherans and Reformed on the continental side, were less significant than the differences between the Anglo-Americans and the continentals.³²

With this in mind, we can talk about Bonhoeffer's position within the ecumenical movement in terms of three, increasingly narrow ecclesial communities. Firstly, and most broadly, he saw himself as part of the ecumenical church, the church of Christ which transcended national boundaries. Secondly, and more narrowly, he belonged on the continental European side of the division. This was where he felt at home intellectually, as reflected in his persistent attempts to guide ecumenical conversations toward theological issues, such as the concept of the church³³ or the nature of confession.³⁴ And the continental side is also where he stood institutionally; he usually represented the Confessing Church, a German church composed of Lutherans and Reformed.³⁵ Thirdly, and most narrowly, he participated in the ecumenical movement as a Lutheran. That is, as a representative of this German, Lutheran-Reformed church, he was himself Lutheran in theological orientation. As he understood it, his participation in these three ecclesial-intellectual communities were compatible with each other. His participation in the ecumenical move-

31 Roman Catholics did not participate. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," DBWE 14:408.

32 Some places where this basic division is discussed include Bonhoeffer, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement," DBWE 14; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism without Reformation," in *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940*, DBWE 15:439-446. As Bethge puts it, for the "Confessing Christians the ecumenical world seemed irritating and unserious theologically, while the humanist and liberal ecumenists viewed the Confessing church as theologically carried away and hysterical," Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 482.

33 For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance," DBWE 11:356-369.

34 For example, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement."

35 The Confessing Church also included Union congregations, resulting from a merging of Lutheran and Reformed traditions in the early 19th century.

ment did not compromise his sympathy with the continental point of view, nor his participation in the Confessing Church, which in turn did not compromise his basically Lutheran theological orientation. So, in to answer to this question—no, his participation in the ecumenical movement does not diminish his Lutheranism because he participated in the movement as a Lutheran.

As a quick illustration of this point, we can take a look at Bonhoeffer's 1932 lecture, "On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance." After characteristically indicting the ecumenical movement for lacking a theology, and specifically a concept of the church, Bonhoeffer himself offers what he thinks should be its understanding of the church. The definition he provides is radically expansive: "the church as the one church-community of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the world, has the task of speaking his word to the entire world. There are local boundaries for the proclamation of each individual church, but the *one* church has no boundaries."³⁶ The one church extends beyond national boundaries, and its proclamation is directed to the whole world. Although he presents the range of the church expansively and internationally, notice that he defines the church in a way much more amenable to the continental Protestant ecumenists. The church is defined by its preaching of the word—not a particular social form or an ethical program. Furthermore, when he continues by describing the character of the church's preaching, he does so in a Lutheran way, in terms of Gospel and law.³⁷ In this example, Bonhoeffer's ecumenism is displayed both in his participation in the ecumenical conversation and in his transnational definition of the church, but he shows his ecumenism to be continental and specifically Lutheran, both by guiding that conversation toward basic theological definitions, and in the specific definitions he offers.

So, Bonhoeffer's ecumenism does not make him any less Lutheran. But, turning to the second question, does his Lutheranism then make him less ecumenical? The short answer is: No, because Bonhoeffer understood Lutheranism as quintessentially ecumenical. We can see this logic at work in his 1935 essay on "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement."

In this essay, Bonhoeffer argues that the Confessing Church and the ecumenical movement each pose challenges and questions for the other. Again, characteristically, he presents the Confessing Church as posing basic theological questions to the ecumenical movement about the church and confession. Bonhoeffer urges, as he had for several years, the ecumenical movement to understand itself as the church. But doing so would require the movement to take seriously something

³⁶ "World Alliance," DBWE 11:358–359.

³⁷ "World Alliance," DBWE 11:359. The language Bonhoeffer uses is "gospel and commandment." As he explains, a commandment is a concrete instantiation of the law.

which it had intentionally avoided—the issue of confession (here understood as confession of faith rather than confession of sin). It is for the sake of unity that the ecumenical movement had refrained from discussing the divisive issue of confession, but Bonhoeffer argues that true unity requires unity in confession.³⁸ To the degree that the ecumenical movement has welcomed the Confessing Church into the ecumenical movement, it can no longer avoid, thinks Bonhoeffer, the issue of confession. Thus the Confessing Church raises for the ecumenical movement the question of confession.

The question the ecumenical movement raises for the Confessing Church, on the other hand, is that of ecumenical openness. “If the Confessing Church isolates itself behind its confessional claims, such that its own confession leaves no room for the ecumenical idea itself, the question arises in all seriousness as to whether, in the Confessing Church itself, the church of Christ is still to be found.”³⁹ The danger for the Confessing Church is that it will see itself as—by virtue of the truth of its confession—in sole possession of the truth. The ecumenical movement, the very existence of which suggests a transnational and trans-confessional church, poses to the Confessing Church the question of ecumenical openness. In short, the Confessing Church poses the question of truth, while the ecumenical movement poses the question of unity.

Bonhoeffer goes on to argue that the Confessing Church’s confession can handle both the question of truth and the question of unity. The content of the Confessing Church’s confession is “justification from faith alone,”⁴⁰ which is to say that the church is in sin and lives entirely from God’s grace. When the Confessing Church confesses this truth, it therefore also confesses its sins. When the Confessing Church confesses this truth, it also therefore confesses that this truth is not its possession. Thus when it confesses rightly, it remains open to the possibility that others also confess the truth.⁴¹ The Confessing Church confesses the truth in a way that is open to ecumenical unity.

A few months before the publication of “The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” Bonhoeffer used this same logic to argue that Lutheranism is quintessentially ecumenical. According to student notes from a discussion on the topic, “What is Confession?” Bonhoeffer says,

The characteristic feature of the Lutheran confession of faith is that the content of its proclamation, and the truth it acknowledges, is that of a posture of penitence (because of not having access to God and his truth) [...]. When understood this way, this makes the

38 “The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” DBWE 14:398.

39 “The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” DBWE 14:409.

40 “The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” DBWE 14:407.

41 “The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” DBWE 14:407–408.

Lutheran confession of faith the one church of the gospel; it is precisely for this reason that it is fundamentally ecumenical.⁴²

From Bonhoeffer's perspective, his Lutheranism does not compromise his ecumenism, because Lutheranism is eminently ecumenical.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's intellectual relationship with Luther does not, in my judgment, receive the interpretive attention it should. For example, despite the persistence and seriousness with which Bonhoeffer engaged the controverted theological tradition of Luther, and the steady flow of Bonhoeffer scholarship, there has not been any scholarly monograph on the place of Luther in his thought. One reason for this lack of attention, perhaps, is the fear that emphasizing the Lutheran character of his thinking might undermine its ecumenical appeal. But, as we have seen, Bonhoeffer's Lutheranism does not, from his point of view, undermine his ecumenism. If it is objected that from perspectives other than Bonhoeffer's—say, from the perspective of contemporary ecumenical theology—his Lutheranism does in fact undermine his ecumenism, then I can only say that an interpretation of Bonhoeffer's ecumenism which does not also take seriously his Lutheranism is bound to be a poor one, for the ubiquity of Luther in Bonhoeffer cannot be ignored.

The Ubiquity of Luther in Bonhoeffer, with a Glance at Ecumenical Implications

Abstract

After presenting Bonhoeffer's lifelong engagement with Luther, this paper argues that his ecumenism does not diminish his Lutheranism, since he participated in the ecumenical movement as a Lutheran, nor does his Lutheranism diminish his ecumenism, since he understood Lutheranism to be fundamentally ecumenical.

⁴² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Is Confession?," DBWE 14:328.