

Lebensraum – just what is this ‘habitat’ or ‘living space’ that Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed for the church?

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Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s liberal use of spatial concepts in constructing an ecclesiology served his theological purpose in the articulation of a concrete ecclesiology. In particular, Bonhoeffer uses the themes of taking-up-space and the visibility of the church. The visibility of the church is depicted as a proclamatory space, a liturgical space and an ordered space, all encapsulated in the concept of *Lebensraum*. Within this space, witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where this reality is proclaimed; a space no bigger than that required to serve the world in witness to Christ. As opposed to any idea of a ‘privatised’ or individual space, Bonhoeffer insisted on the public and territorial nature of this space as essential to the church’s witness, for it was in this very visibility that the church gains space for Christ.

Lebensraum, an idea popularised by Adolf Hitler and incorporated into the foreign policy of the Third Reich, was a highly charged political concept taken over by Bonhoeffer to represent a living space diametrically opposed in form to that proposed by the Reich. A useful way of thinking about the Christian form of *Lebensraum* as proposed by Bonhoeffer is to regard it as the space in which the ‘social acts that constitute the community of love and that disclose in more detail the structure and nature of the Christian church’¹ are to be demonstrated and observed. These ‘social acts’ are built upon the foundational concepts, first found in *Sanctorum Communio*, of *Stellvertretung* or vicarious representative action, *Miteinander* or church members being with-each-other, and *Füreinander* or church members actively being for-each-other. Bonhoeffer proposes that, as its life is lived out in this way, the church will take the form of its suffering servant Lord. It is in this particular space and no other, grounded and upright in Christ, that Christians are to live their lives in witness to Christ.

Keywords: (Dietrich) Bonhoeffer, discipleship, *Lebensraum*, spatiality, *Stellvertretung*, visibility.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, 16 vols (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996–). *Sanctorum Communio*, vol. 1, p. 178.

The visible form of the Body of Christ and the occupation of space on earth

In the summer of 1935 Bonhoeffer delivered the lecture series 'The Visible Church-Community'² to the students at Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer begins by claiming that 'The Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth'. This follows upon the observation that 'the incarnation . . . entails the claim to space granted on earth' for which there is one immediate consequence, namely: 'anything that takes up space is visible'.³ Bonhoeffer must have thought this was not obvious and one might wonder why. His observation was that by 1935 the Reich Church had clearly become an apparatus of the National Socialists and that by joining and supporting the state in its project to exclude Christians of Jewish heritage from leadership within the church and, by extension, affirming the state's anti-Semitic programme, the Reich Church had become invisible, and an invisible following of Jesus was, Bonhoeffer maintained, a contradiction. The Reich Church no longer declared a message that put the local gods on notice and under judgement, nor did it call anyone to a radical form of obedience to discipleship in Christ. It had walked away from its ministry of redemption and settled into a programme of accommodation, even though that included the articulation of faultless doctrine. This was precisely the point that attracted Bonhoeffer's ire; for, in contrast to the claim that the Body of Christ takes up physical space on earth and is visible, he proposed that 'a truth, a doctrine, or a religion . . . needs no space of its own [since] such entities are bodiless'.⁴ Truths, doctrines or even religions 'need no space' for they 'do not go beyond being heard, learned, or understood'⁵ and the church is not defined solely by a truth or a doctrine. The essential church is visible and occupies space in the world and it is this church to which we shall point and say, in faith, 'the new creation has come about in the church-community'.⁶

In connection with the visibility of the body, Bonhoeffer commentator André Dumas has noted that

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* = *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, pp. 225–52. There is an earlier section in *Discipleship* (pp. 110–15) with the same title, embedded in Bonhoeffer's explication of Matt 5:13–16.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 225. Bonhoeffer will return to this theme – using these same words – in the *Ethics* = *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, 'Christ, Reality and Good', pp. 62–3.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 226.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

For faith, no matter how evangelically correct it may be, is only an abstract belief when it is cut off from the immediacy of obedience . . . but if (the churches) are not willing to respond unquestioningly to the call of Jesus Christ, have they not made faith a matter of words rather than deeds? Their faith may be doctrinally unassailable, but are they disciples, bearing responsibility along with Christ for witnessing in the world. They may know all about the history of redemption, but are they agents of redemption now?⁷

Bonhoeffer then moves to ground the visibility of the church in the visibility of the incarnation. The logic is straightforward and uncomplicated. Jesus was born in a stable and ‘hung on a gibbet’. Jesus’ own body was solid, visible and space occupying, and by extension, ‘The body of the exalted Lord is likewise a visible body, taking the form of the church-community.’⁸ Bonhoeffer insists that by occupying space the church has substance; like the city built on the hill, the church following after Jesus can and must be seen, it cannot be hidden. There can be no retreat into any form of docetism.⁹

In his essay ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Political Theology’, Stanley Hauerwas maintains that ‘Bonhoeffer’s work from beginning to end was the attempt to reclaim the visibility of the church as the necessary condition for the proclamation of the gospel in a world that no longer privileged Christianity.’¹⁰ So when Bonhoeffer says ‘The body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth’,¹¹ he is deliberately standing over against traditional Lutheran ecclesiology of the sort that was being lived out by the Reich Church, arguing instead that the church ‘precisely in its eschatological newness as the body of Christ, claims for itself a distinct public presence, a

⁷ Andre Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 119.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 226.

⁹ In *Sichtbare Kirche in Neuen Testament*, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperOne, 1995), Bonhoeffer argues against two dangers facing the ‘church of the Word of God’. The first is a docetic ecclesiology derived from idealism ‘which calls in question the very claim that the church has a place in the world’, since idealism regarded the church ‘as an incorporeal concept which can lay no claim to such a place’; and (secondly) ‘a secular ecclesiology, derived from materialism, associated with a magical attitude to the sacrament’, pp. 153–4.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), p. 34.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 225.

structured social space of its own'.¹² Spatiality and visibility go together and both are the 'necessary condition' for authentic Christian witness.

The background to Bonhoeffer's claims that the Body of Christ takes up physical space on earth, and its corollary, that anything that takes up space is visible, is embedded in a question Bonhoeffer had asked the students and Finkenwalde graduates in the monthly cyclostyled newsletter, as he began his lectures on the New Testament, ahead of the summer course in 1935. 'The present situation in church and theology' he wrote, 'can be summed up in the form of the following question: Does the church take up a space within the world, and if so, what kind of space is it? This is basically the question around which the whole theological confrontation with the state revolves.'¹³ In most churches this crucial, and it must be said contemporary, question is on the whole not well formed. However, any answer to this question is beset with potential confusion. Does Bonhoeffer link spatiality and visibility too easily and does his reference to the visibility of the church refer to a theological proposition or to an empirical, structural dimension? Or perhaps it refers to both?

Bruce Hamill argues that the visibility of the church is not self-evident, correctly noting that what we see when we look at the church cannot be known with empiricist eyes alone.

The theological nature of the church means that it is not self-evident which, among all the objects of vision within the world, is the church . . . visibility depends on who's looking and is thus a matter of theological responsibility and potential dispute. It is one thing to say that an object is visible: it is another thing to say that it is visible 'as' some particular entity. Thus the visibility of the church should not be confused with generic visibility, as Bonhoeffer appears to do when he argues from the spatiality of the church (and the incarnation) to its visibility.¹⁴

To make his point, Hamill quotes from *Discipleship*: 'the incarnation does entail the claim to space granted on earth, and anything that takes up space is visible',¹⁵ an argument which, he suggests is 'epistemologically naïve as

¹² David S. Yeago, 'The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jenson's Ecclesiology', in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 218–19.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 225, n. 2.

¹⁴ B. Hamill, 'Beyond Ecclesiocentricity: Navigating between the Abstract and the Domesticated in Contemporary Ecclesiology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14/3 (2012), pp. 277–94.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 225.

it stands'. He is of course quite correct when he suggests that 'seeing is an interpretive act . . . [and] that the church is rightly seen ("discerned") depends on the fact that included within the church's existence are formative processes'.¹⁶ The potentially confusing point is this: here in *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer is weaving a deep and rich interpretative theological thread through the life and being of the church, insisting that, with the eye of faith, the church be seen as the visible creation and gift of God. However, at exactly the same moment he is also insisting that it be taken as visible event and empirical structure.¹⁷ I propose that Bonhoeffer is using the words 'spatiality' and 'visibility' in a structural as well as a theological sense.

It is Bonhoeffer himself who makes it clear that understanding the church as creation and gift of God and as visible event and empirical structure are to be held together, and in *Discipleship* he is using the notion of visibility as a structural descriptor every bit as much as a theological statement. This is the point he makes when he writes:

[For] the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or even hearts: he needs actual, living human beings who follow him. That is why he called his disciples into following him bodily. His community with them was something everyone could see . . . The community of those who followed him was manifest to the eyes of the world. Here were bodies that acted, worked and suffered in community with Jesus.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer then poses a critical question; 'How does this body become visible?'¹⁹ His answer reflects traditional Reformation depictions of the church. The visibility of the church becomes apparent as the church gathers to hear the preaching of the word which is the 'church's witness to the physical event of God's revelation in Jesus Christ'. Here 'Christ [is] present in the Holy Spirit',²⁰ constantly recreating the community of witness to Jesus. Following Luther's efforts to 'cultivate the proper reading and use of Scripture as a "means of grace"', especially in the preaching of the forgiveness of sins, absolution and the consolation of believers,²¹ Bonhoeffer attributed sacramental significance to the proclaimed and heard Word – the *Sacramentum*

¹⁶ Hamill, 'Beyond Ecclesiocentricity'.

¹⁷ The first of these two points is the one that Hamill makes when he says, 'the meeting of church and eye involves the theological formation of the eye'. 'Beyond Ecclesiocentricity', 3.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 226.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²¹ Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 188.

Verbi.²² In this way the church is shaped as a *proclamatory space*. In the second place, visibility becomes apparent as the church gathers to celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, both given 'solely to the church-community'.²³ In the context of the Third Reich, this *liturgical space* in which the church has its being is exceedingly important for Bonhoeffer since, as David Yeago notes, should the state ever attempt to reach for 'God's glory' and seek to wear the authority rightfully due to God alone, then the 'liturgy of the church . . . by its sheer performance, will by inner necessity become a political declaration of war and an act of political struggle'.²⁴ In the third place, visibility becomes apparent in an *ordered space* as the church-community orders the gifts given to it for service and 'as [the church] appoints its members for service . . . for the benefit of the church-community'.²⁵

Now it might be thought that a depiction of the church might end right here. But at this point Bonhoeffer offers a further dimension of church, which delineates the reality of costly grace and a form of discipleship which asks, indeed requires, everything of the believer/follower. For the visibility of the church also becomes apparent in the space the church-community claims for the daily life of its members, its *living-space* or *habitat* (*Lebensraum*). This space, claimed by the community which 'finds its place between the word of proclamation and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper',²⁶ is the space where all of life is taken up 'into Christ'.²⁷ *Lebensraum* is the form and shape of the life 'necessary to witness to the reality of the new age begun in Christ'.²⁸

There can be little doubt that this particular *Lebensraum* in and of itself has the character of a political statement, and it is here that the eschatological community starts to take shape 'and delineate itself in a first outline in the struggling and suffering church'.²⁹ John Phillips suggests that this explicit delineation of *Lebensraum* is Bonhoeffer's 'attempt to give life to what could have become a static, institutionalised ecclesiology, to thrust the inner-directed and defensive Confessing Church with her visible boundaries

²² Though it should be noted that Peter Zimmerling, *Bonhoeffer als Praktischer Theologe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), p. 90, finds Bonhoeffer's sacramentalisation of preaching 'highly problematic'.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 228–9.

²⁴ Yeago, 'Church as Polity?', pp. 222–5.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 230.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 232–3. Bonhoeffer notes 'that all Christian community exists between word and sacrament . . . and begins and ends in worship', p. 233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Howard Yoder', in Stephen R. Spencer, Timothy Larsen, and Jeffrey P. Greenman (eds), *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), p. 210.

²⁹ Yeago, 'Church as Polity?', p. 224.

between herself and the world, out into the world'.³⁰ This is very likely the case since here in *Discipleship* this delineation of the church has a radical intent: to lay the groundwork for the changing shape of the church's form to assume that of the suffering servant.

Lebensraum – 'a structured social space of its own'³¹

In the concept of *Lebensraum*, Bonhoeffer draws attention to the living space, that structured, social space of the church-community into which the believer is drawn by obedience to Jesus Christ. This is the living space in which the new ethic is practised and nurtured in such a way that it gives distinctive shape to this new Christian habitat. Here the 'Christian experience of salvation' extends its own sociality, as becomes clear in the following comment from *Discipleship*.

Where the world despises other members of the Christian family, Christians will love and serve them. If the world does violence to them, Christians will help them and provide relief. Where the world subjects them to dishonour and insult, Christians will sacrifice their own honour in exchange for their disgrace. Where the world seeks gain, Christians will renounce it; where it exploits, they will let go; where it oppresses, they will stoop down and lift up the oppressed. Where the world denies justice, Christians will practice compassion; where it hides behind lies, they will speak out for those who cannot speak, and testify for the truth. For the sake of brothers or sisters – be they Jew or Greek, slave or free, strong or weak, of noble or of common birth – Christians will renounce all community with the world, for they serve the community of the body of Jesus Christ. Being part of this community, Christians cannot remain hidden from the world. They have been called out of the world and follow Christ.³²

Here we find as clear an expression of the outworking of Bonhoeffer's foundational concepts of *Stellvertretung* or vicarious representative action, *Miteinander* or church members being with-each-other, and *Füreinander* or church members actively being for-each-other,³³ as we might look for anywhere in the Bonhoeffer corpus. This is an unambiguous description of the 'social acts that constitute the community of love and that disclose in

³⁰ John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology* (London: Collins, 1967), p. 120.

³¹ Yeago, 'Church as Polity?', p. 219.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 237.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 178.

more detail the structure and nature of the Christian church'.³⁴ It is now possible to see how the church, committed to life in this *Lebensraum*, might take the form of its suffering servant Lord.

Lebensraum and German territorial expansion

In using the word *Lebensraum*, Bonhoeffer takes the same word used by the National Socialists in the Reich's justification for a ruthless military expansion across national boundaries as of right, and infuses it with a new meaning driven by the form of Christ himself, always more closely taking the form of the suffering servant. This was an extremely courageous move. The two living spaces could not be more different.

Adolf Hitler had revived and popularised the idea of *Lebensraum*³⁵ in the first volume of *Mein Kampf* where 'he discoursed at length on this problem of *Lebensraum* – living space – a subject which obsessed him to his dying breath'.³⁶ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had written: 'Without consideration of traditions and prejudices, Germany must find the courage to gather our people and their strength for an advance along the road that will lead this people from its present restricted living space to new land and soil, and hence also free it from the danger of vanishing from the earth or of serving others as a slave nation.'³⁷

Discipleship was published in November 1937. Coincidentally, in the same month, Hitler met with his Commanders-in-Chief in Berlin and explained that

he regarded the remarks he was about to make as of such importance, that, in the event of his death, they should be regarded as his last will and testament . . . The aim of German policy was to make secure and to preserve the racial community and to enlarge it. It was therefore a question of space [*Lebensraum*]. [The] Germans . . . have the right to a greater living space than other peoples . . . Germany's future was therefore wholly conditional upon the solving of the need for space.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The nineteenth-century German ethnographer, Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), first used the concept of 'living space' in the way that the National Socialists would later utilise it. Ratzel believed that a naturally healthy and vibrant species would of necessity and as of right expand to fill other spaces where they would then take root, expand and exclude any original species.

³⁶ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), p. 82.

³⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999), p. 646.

³⁸ Shirer, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p. 305.

He then communicated his 'irrevocable decision to go to war'.³⁹ *Lebensraum* would be the prize and it would be found by annexing and conquering Czechoslovakia and Austria, then Poland, and Russia. The acquisition of other territories in this way under the National Socialists became one of Germany's most important foreign policy objectives.

If conquered territory and subjugated peoples would be the prize for the German people in their quest for *Lebensraum*, the Christian *Lebensraum*, Bonhoeffer writes, would be the obedient believer's prize as she or he was drawn into the church-community where Christians would love and serve one another and the world. The texture of life within this Christian *Lebensraum* is the texture of costly grace where obedience to Christ's call draws believers into public suffering at the very point where there is a 'clash between the space the body of Christ claims and occupies in this world for worship, offices, and the civic life of its members, and the world's own claim for space'.⁴⁰ When this happens and there are competing claims for space between two completely different understandings of *Lebensraum*, it is the form of Christ which informs the Christian in his or her search for a faithful following after Jesus Christ.

Now, in the struggle for space in 'which to feed and clothe themselves from the fruits of their own labour and with a heightened sense of apocalyptic in which the choice for Christians is to escape from the world or to go to prison', Bonhoeffer declares that 'when they [the Christians] have been deprived of their last inch of space here on earth, the end will be near'.⁴¹ It is hard to know whether this is a historical or an eschatological pronouncement; it could be both of course, for the concept of being deprived of space on earth goes hand in hand with the concept of visibility: remove the last hill on which the city might stand or from which the light might shine, or the space from which the church might have a life, and there is no place left for any witness to the truth.

What might a Christian *Lebensraum* mean? Was it a gifted or a contested space?

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer's *Lebensraum* derives directly from following Jesus in a way which is at the same time both individual and corporate.

Jesus' community with his disciples was all-encompassing, extending to all areas of life. The individual's entire life was lived within this community of disciples. And this community is a living witness to the bodily humanity

³⁹ Ibid., p. 307.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 245–6.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 247.

of the Son of God. The bodily presence of the Son of God demands the bodily commitment to him and with him throughout one's daily life. With all our bodily living existence, we belong to him who took on a human body for our sake. In following him, the disciple is inseparably linked to the body of Jesus.⁴²

There can be no escaping the fact that, when Bonhoeffer spoke of the living space of the visible church-community, he was intending to make a claim for Jesus Christ over against the claim of any other leader or *Führer*. This was a huge claim. In the obedience of following after Jesus Christ, it was Jesus' lordship which conquered and took possession of every inch of territory of an individual's life, always as a consequence of the individual being grafted into the Holy Spirit's new creation after the image of God.⁴³ This is the 'perfect community' since it exists 'between word and sacrament' and 'begins and ends in worship' while awaiting the final banquet with its Lord in the kingdom of heaven. It is also the community in which the material things and goods of this life as well as the moments of life – getting out of bed in the morning, doing what we do during the day, crafting our place in the families we are part of, attending to trade and commerce and the relationships that these require – 'are assigned their proper priority'.⁴⁴ It is the *Lebensgemeinschaft*, the 'visible church-community whose reality extends to all areas of life'.⁴⁵

Bonhoeffer then extends his idea:

Whatever the disciples do, they do it within the communal bond of the community of Jesus and as its members. Even the most secular act now takes place within the bounds of the church-community. This then is valid for the body of Christ: where one member is, there is also the whole body, and where the body is, there is also the member . . . Wherever one member happens to be, whatever one member happens to do, it always takes place 'within the body', within the church community, 'in Christ'. Life as a whole is taken up 'into Christ' . . . [Christians] work and toil or they rejoice 'in the Lord' (Rom 16:9, 12; 1 Cor 15:58; Phil 4:4); they speak and admonish in Christ (2 Cor 2:17; Phil 2:1), they show hospitality in Christ (Rom 16:2), they marry in Christ (1 Cor 7:39), they are imprisoned in the Lord (Phil 1:13,23), they are slaves in Christ (1

⁴² Ibid., p. 232.

⁴³ See Bonhoeffer, *Testament to Freedom*, pp. 154–6.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 233.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Cor 7:22). The whole breadth of human relationships among Christians is encompassed by Christ, by the church community.⁴⁶

This is a bold claim on the lives of those who live out of the *Lebensgemeinschaft* and within the *Lebensraum* for Christ in every respect. There is no hiding place to avoid the consequences of one's living, for the brother and sister in Christ are closely allied with us in everything we do. It was this exposure of life to our brother or sister in Christ that had Bonhoeffer struggling to implement the disciplines of the community at Finkenwalde. It was especially the act of mutual confession which caused greatest angst amongst the seminarians but Bonhoeffer insisted that, without this mutual trust in confession, there would never be a breaking of what he called the recurring cycle of self-deception. This 'full life in Christ' is granted to every Christian through being baptised into the body of Christ:

any baptized person receives an unrestricted privilege to participate in all areas of the communal life of the members of the body of Christ . . . Baptism into the body of Christ changes not only a person's personal status with regard to salvation, but also their relationships throughout all of life.⁴⁷

This is important because not only does this *Lebensraum* have a huge bearing on the lives of believers, it also has a real impact on the life of the world. 'It gains space for Christ', Bonhoeffer says. And here he makes what can only be taken as another political tilt at the Reich.

For whatever is 'in Christ' is no longer under the dominion of the world, of sin, or of the law. Within this newly created community, all the laws of this world have lost their binding force. The sphere in which brothers and sisters are loved with Christian love is subject to Christ; it is no longer subject to the world. The church-community can never consent to any restrictions of its service of love and compassion toward other human beings. For wherever there is a brother or sister, there Christ's own body is present; and wherever Christ's body is present, his church-community is also present, which means I must be present there . . . the risen and exalted Christ has closed in on the world, in fact the body of Christ – in the form of the church-community – has broken into the very midst of the world itself.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 234.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 234–5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 236 and 238.

In living out their lives in the environments within which their church communities are embedded, Christians will experience moments of acute dissonance when their vocation will be called in question. This will happen simply because one belongs to the visible community of Christ and it will happen whenever there is a 'clash between the space the body of Christ claims and occupies in this world for worship, its offices, and the civic life of its members, and the world's own claim for space'.⁴⁹

This will become clear in two ways:

First, it becomes necessary for members of the church-community to make a visible and public confession of faith in Christ. Second, it becomes necessary for the world either wisely to withdraw or to resort to violence. This is the point where Christians are drawn into public suffering . . . They join their Lord in a visible community of suffering (*Leidensgemeinschaft*). They now need even more the full fellowship and support of brothers and sisters in the church-community.⁵⁰

Now Bonhoeffer's articulation changes, for immediately it leads to a most significant development in his ecclesiology. An already familiar motif takes on a startling new clarity: now the church itself takes on the form of the rejected, suffering servant who is the Lord of all. Starting with the Apostle Paul's injunction to 'be transformed into a new form (*μεταμορφουσθε*) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God' (Rom 12:2), Bonhoeffer points to this form which is solely to be determined by Christ; it is in fact the form of the church:

the community of Christ has a 'form' that is different from that of the world. The community is called to be ever increasingly transformed into this form. It is, in fact, the form of Christ himself . . . He was not of this world. If it engages the world properly, the visible church-community will always more closely assume the form of its suffering Lord.⁵¹

The church, like its Lord who suffered, will overcome the world, not by ridding it of evil, but by being transformed into the form of the suffering servant Lord.

In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer provides a further, most eloquent interpretation of this *Lebensraum* created and occupied by the church.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 245–6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 246. *Leidensgemeinschaft* is translated here as 'the community of suffering'. *Leid* is the verb 'to suffer', while *Leiden* are 'the trials and tribulations and suffering of life'.

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 247.

It is intrinsic to God's revelation in Jesus Christ that it occupied space in the world. It would, however, be fundamentally wrong simply to explain this space empirically. When God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world – even space in a stable because 'there was no other place in the inn' – God embraces the whole reality of the world in this narrow space and reveals its ultimate foundation. So also the church of Jesus Christ is the place (*Ort*) – that is, the space (*Raum*) – in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed . . . Rather, the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ . . . It desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ. . .⁵²

This quotation provides us with some of Bonhoeffer's most concise delineations of the church and some significant shifts from his earlier exposition in *Discipleship*. In a 'narrow' space, sometimes without room to move but still with enough space to demonstrate love in its fullness, the church bears witness to the foundation of all reality in Christ. Again, drawing on spatial terminology, Bonhoeffer locates the church in the *Raum* where 'the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed', a dramatic and demanding mandate which leaves little, if any, room for argument about the church's mission and ministry. But unlike the claim in *Discipleship*, that the church's *Lebensraum* is contestable space within the world, here in the *Ethics*, the *Raum* is only the amount of space the church needs 'to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ and to the world's reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ', and is only to be defended 'for the [sake of the] salvation of the world'.⁵³ Here the 'world' is not cryptically ciphered as 'enemy territory', or as a space to be contested, as *Discipleship* might have suggested, but as the very object of God's judgement and love, to be valued and loved by Christ's body. Above all, Bonhoeffer claims, the space occupied by the church is first of all occupied by Christ, who is revealed as the ultimate foundation of all reality. That is why it is fundamentally wrong simply to explain this occupied space empirically. This is not the conquered space of *Lebensraum* described by the National Socialists, but the space created and occupied by the living Word of God. Robin W. Loving expresses it like this,

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 63–4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The visible church 'takes up space' in the world and refuses to be forced out of it. In so doing, the church reveals the true structure of the human world and contradicts any center of value and power that would try to claim the whole world for itself . . . It witnesses by drawing boundaries in a world where loyalties increasingly demand allegiance without limit.⁵⁴

Lebensraum implies substantial and visible spaces that are required out of which the church might proclaim its gospel, worship its Lord, and order and live out its life. Without such visible spaces the church runs the risk of spiritualising Christ and 'devaluing itself into a purely spiritual entity'.⁵⁵ Here in this habitat the eschatological community takes shape and, in the words of Peter Brunner, Lutheran theologian and Bonhoeffer contemporary, 'delineate itself in a first outline in the struggling and suffering church'.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In what may be one of the highest tributes paid to Bonhoeffer regarding his use of spatial imagery, John Webster writes:

Bonhoeffer's use of spatial imagery is especially significant: in its acts of proclamation, sacrament and order, the church assumes a specific set of contours, and so claims a particular territory. The church's authority in the world, its representation of a commendable mode of human existence, does not take the form of a doctrine only but of a communal enactment in space, what Bonhoeffer calls (pointedly) 'the living-space (*Lebensraum*) of the visible church-community' . . . Whereas for most of his contemporary Lutherans, Christian difference was radically internalized, for Bonhoeffer the church's public, territorial character is essential to its witness, for in its visibility before the world, the church 'gains space for Christ'.⁵⁷

The spatial images establish a specific set of contours and claim a particular territory for the church of Jesus Christ and within that particular territory, marked out by these contours, the church represents a commendable mode of human existence which is enacted communally within the *Lebensraum* of the visible church-community. In this way the church gains space for Christ. This is no outrageous claim. Nor is it a modest claim. It is simply a sober

⁵⁴ Robin W. Lovin, 'The Christian and the Authority of the State: Bonhoeffer's Reluctant Revisions', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 34 (March 1981), pp. 32–48, 36.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 63.

⁵⁶ Yeago, 'Church as Polity?', p. 224.

⁵⁷ John Webster, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* 2 (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 176–7.

and a stunning affirmation of the reality of the *Gemeinde* which is grounded in Jesus Christ, and in the gracious electing mercies of God. This *Gemeinde* occupies the *Lebensraum* in which those who live as the redeemed and renewed humanity in Christ live 'upright in the unsteady space between lost certainties and unknown futures',⁵⁸ as they 'mak[e] Christological reality the centre of [their] very being . . . [and] maintain the full range of thought, action and meditation about the mystery of the incarnation that saves confession from being a series of worn-out platitudes, life from a barely-endured pragmatism, and piety from inner smugness'.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Larry Rasmussen, 'The Ethics of Responsible Action', in John W. de Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 206.

⁵⁹ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, p. 16.