

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the necessity of kenosis for scriptural hermeneutics

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Abstract

It is the argument of this article that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach understands creaturely existence to be truly held by the Word made flesh as the risen Christ, who is still wholly human and therefore truly present in creation. Therefore, this article argues with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that, for a viable theological hermeneutics, it is critically necessary to consider the kenotic movement of the risen Christ, not only for a proper understanding of holy scripture in its genuine humanness, but also for an understanding of the new creation as taking place in reconciled creatures through the Word.

Keywords: agency, Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christus praesens*, hermeneutics, kenosis

What is the Bible for us today?

'What is the Bible for us today?' It is this slightly altered version of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous question 'Who is Christ for us today?' that the church and theology must now ask themselves, not only in the face of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and its proclamation of *solā scriptura*, but every day anew.¹ For if the Bible is the *regula atque norma* of the church, it is fundamentally necessary to be aware of how the Bible is to be understood.² Yes, it is called the 'word of God', but what does that actually mean? Does it mean that we hear God speak in these ancient texts, and that these texts have an impact on our daily lives? Or are they to be understood as a mere chronicling of religious experiences people have made in the past? Especially in German theological scholarship (which is my own context), where we tend to interpret the Bible either historical-critically, or based on the experiences and feelings of 'modern' subjects, this question must be stated clearly; and the danger here is that in both cases the Bible becomes ultimately

¹ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English* (hereafter DBWE) 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 362.

² 'Rule and norm'. See *Formula of Concord*, 1.1, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

just one book amongst others. As a result, theological hermeneutics often differs little from any other hermeneutical approach. However, if the Bible is to be taken seriously as the ‘word of God’, it must be considered that the Bible itself, as well as its interpretation, are essential elements of God’s entering into the world, without ignoring the importance of historical-critical scholarship as well as the text’s impact on its readers.³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides an answer to this question, particularly in his lectures on ‘Creation and Fall’, given during the winter semester at the University of Berlin in 1932–3.⁴ These were announced as a ‘theological exposition’ of the text, which for Bonhoeffer meant ‘with due regard for the theories about different sources behind this biblical primeval history’, but also, and ultimately more importantly, ‘the exegesis of the text “as it presents itself to the church of Christ today”’.⁵ Bonhoeffer’s method of biblical interpretation thus seeks to combine a genuinely exegetical and scholarly approach with an understanding of scripture as the book of the church that takes the traditional terminology ‘word of God’ seriously, and does this by understanding the Bible truly and thoroughly as the word of God which takes human form. Accordingly, he asserts that holy scripture must be understood from the point of its content, Jesus Christ, who is its beginning and the end.⁶ Bonhoeffer bases his theological hermeneutics on an ontology of reality (*Wirklichkeit*), which is the Word made flesh: the incarnate, crucified and risen God. Bonhoeffer understands all reality as made and sustained from Christ and through Christ, for in the eternal Son ‘all things hold together’ (Col 1.17). As a result of this perspective, he is led to connect biblical hermeneutics with his understanding of Christ as the mediator of creation, in which he understands the Bible as holy scripture as an element of God’s reality.⁷ Understanding scripture is thus for Bonhoeffer a theological task that needs to be undertaken from the perspective of a christological ontology; that is, from the incarnate God, the Word made flesh that will eternally be flesh. Therefore, he demonstrates a deep confidence in the Bible, not only theoretically but practically, too, in which using scripture means the renewal of creaturely nature.

³ For a similar but slightly different approach, which will be periodically referenced in this article, see John Webster, *The Domain of the Word* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

⁴ Cf. Nadine Hamilton, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutik der Responsivität: Ein Kapitel Schriftlehre im Anschluss an ‘Schöpfung und Fall’* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016).

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 151, 153; see also p. 83.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 399.

It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer stresses, along with Christ's agency in creation and his lasting presence in the world, that a kenosis occurs in the movement of the Word into the realm of signs. This approach fulfils three moments: first, an understanding of the biblical texts in their divine and human nature; secondly, a fully understood kenotic bodily presence of Christ in creation; and as a result, thirdly and finally, a theological anthropology that understands the complete human being in its totality from the Word that is made (and always will be) flesh.

It is the argument of this essay that Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach understands creaturely existence to be truly held by the risen Christ, who is still wholly human and therefore truly present in creation. This is because, '[e]ven as the Risen One, Jesus remains the human Jesus. Only because he is human can he be present to us.'⁸ In the following, I want to show with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that it is crucially necessary for a viable theological-hermeneutical approach to consider the kenotic movement of the risen Christ, not only for understanding holy scripture in its genuinely human being, but also for understanding the new creation as taking place in reconciled creatures through the Word. Therefore, I want to take a deeper look at Bonhoeffer's approach to scripture, hermeneutics and anthropology.

On historical-critical exegesis

It is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's first and most important hermeneutical 'principle' for understanding the Bible as holy scripture that the nature of the canonical texts of the Christian faith, and of the acts by which those texts are made objects of understanding, are to be understood not simply as historical texts, but by reference to that by which they have come to be what they are.⁹

Concerning his basic decision to conceptualise theological hermeneutics based on an ontology of scripture and not on a theory of hermeneutics, Bonhoeffer states clearly that scripture for him is more than just a collection of (culturally meaningful) texts. By grounding scripture in the domain of the triune God and his self-revelation, and more precisely in Jesus Christ, he is not making a statement only about the Bible but about all reality (*Wirklichkeit*). In grounding the Bible within the *Wirklichkeit* of Jesus Christ, he binds together these human historical texts with the Word made flesh. More closely, he states clearly that the Bible is holy scripture, for in it God speaks just as the Spirit speaks in Jesus Christ. The Word made flesh is present and communicative precisely in these ancient texts.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932–1933*, DBWE 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), p. 312.

⁹ Cf. DBWE 3, p. 22.

It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer emphasises the importance of the historical-critical approach. As these texts are human texts, they are to be examined like any other ordinary text with 'all methods of philological and historical research'.¹⁰ However, because he grounds his handling of scripture in the 'reality of Christ' (*Christuswirklichkeit*), historical criticism, especially as it had been used in pre-war Germany, cannot be the only and surely not the final point of interpretation. Quite early (in his 'Paper on the Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture' from 1925), Bonhoeffer states that approaching the scriptures in the way that his contemporary Old Testament scholars were used to doing is not a fully adequate approach to the Bible as the word of God, given that for them the method itself legitimates the authority of the Bible and not the other way around.¹¹ One can see this paradigmatically in how Bonhoeffer deals with the translation of the first three chapters of Genesis. Not only does he modify Martin Luther's translation of the verses where he finds it to be imprecise or inappropriate, but he also contradicts important German Old Testament scholars of his time when he refuses, for example, to understand the translation of *טֹב* and *רַע* only from within the context of the actual verse, but instead reads these terms from the standpoint of the whole story of God and his creation, to name just a few examples of many.¹²

Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Bible is a historical-critical one which analyses the text philologically. In taking seriously the Hebrew words and phrases in his interpretation, Bonhoeffer makes clear that he himself wants to be engaged in the analysis of the biblical texts, and that he considers this engagement with the text as necessary and reasonable in order to protect the given scriptural text from the arbitrariness and egocentricity of human *ratio*. But if Old Testament exegesis approaches the holy scripture with a preconceived methodology for deciding what is to be deemed as historical and what counts as the true essence of biblical theology, the authority of the text is as a result bound to a certain scholarly method of verifiability. Thus, scholars decide on the extent and nature of the results in advance by choosing a method. It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer feels it is necessary

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918–1927*, DBWE 9 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p. 286. Interestingly, even the German OT scholars sensed that their approach was not appropriate to their subject. Hermann Gunkel states regarding this that they have to find their way back to 'the actual theological problem'. Hermann Gunkel, 'Ziele und Methoden der Erklärung des Alten Testaments', in Hermann Gunkel (ed.), *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), p. 24.

¹² Cf. DBWE 3, pp. 36, 88. See more in Hamilton, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutik der Responsivität*, pp. 32–69.

to disagree with his teachers when they grant the reconstructed 'original' sources a higher status than the biblical text itself. It is hence with his *great respect for the present text* – which means both the Old and New Testament – that Bonhoeffer, in his reading and interpreting scripture, allows the text its own characteristic peculiarity by *being entirely human and entirely divine at the same time*.

Christ and biblical inspiration

For Bonhoeffer the experience of Barth's theology offered an approach to scripture that leads to the cultivation of a trust in the Bible, in which Bonhoeffer himself heard and found God's immediate voice in all biblical proclamations and, as a result, became convinced that a greater bond to that text was necessary. As he states in *Life Together*: 'Proper reading of Scripture is not a technical exercise that can be learned; it is something that grows or diminishes according to my own spiritual condition.'¹³ As can be seen in his approach to historical-critical exegesis, Bonhoeffer's concern goes beyond a purely scholarly interpretation of the Bible, whose choice of a particular (human) method limits the scope of its theological vision. He was certain that God was the author of these vastly different texts and that through interpreting these texts the analyst would become a hearer of the word.

Therefore, Bonhoeffer values every single word of scripture, as we have seen in his approach to historical-critical exegesis. And he takes the Protestant dictum of the *claritas* of scripture seriously. Just as he rejected the use of preconceived methodologies which sought to decide what was truly historical and therefore could be counted as scripture's true nucleus, he also rejects foreign hermeneutical schemes which do not derive from the Bible itself. For Bonhoeffer it is unconditionally necessary that the Bible itself is the judge, measure and guiding principle for its own interpretation. Scripture cannot be developed from human knowledge, for in it God and the world are confronted with each other's otherness.

Accordingly, Bonhoeffer does not stop at the literal translation of the biblical text, but shows that taking scripture literally entails understanding single words from within their context in the whole story. For example, understanding Adam and Eve's realisation of their nakedness as the rupturing of their relationship to God and to each other can only be gained within the whole story of creation and fall and only when viewed from its end in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer therefore points out on many occasions that if there is a 'principle' to understanding scripture, it is only the living Jesus Christ: 'In

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together. Prayerbook of Bible*, DBWE 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 64.

¹⁴ Cf. DBWE 3, p. 124.

the church, therefore, the story of creation must be read in a way that begins with Christ and only then moves on towards him as its goal; indeed one can read it as a book that moves towards Christ only when one knows that Christ is the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.¹⁵

With this, the old Protestant-orthodox principle of interpretation is shifted to the effect that it is not scripture in its word/letter that is the *principium cognoscendi*, but God himself who is the source of knowledge of himself. As a result Bonhoeffer states with Barth: 'The formal and material principles of dogmatics are identical; the material principle is not one created from other sources, but rather also = scripture.'¹⁶ Christ as content, or rather subject (as Barth calls it), determines the interpretation alone; only from him do the biblical texts receive not only their unity, but their interpretation as well. When a general philosophical theory provides the key for deciding the appropriate interpretation, such as is the case with the dogma of verbal inspiration, there is not a particularly big difference from the historical-critical method: in both cases biblical hermeneutics is determined by an external theory or method, hence the form is not only prioritised above the content, but the interpretation itself is drawn from another source. If Bonhoeffer instead considers only Christ as the standard of all interpretation, the formal and material principles are the same as when no external principle is used at all. Ultimately, that is what Luther stated against Rome: *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, that scripture – God's word – interprets itself.

Anthropological hermeneutics

One finds the same insight when it comes to understanding the canon. The canon of the biblical texts is for Bonhoeffer not something that is determined from the outside, from the side of readers and interpreters once and for all (as we commonly like to think); on the contrary, it is determined by scripture itself, that is, from the living word of God itself. With Jesus Christ as the only *doctrina fidei*, the canon defines itself as scripture and provides its own justification, with its only content being Christ himself.¹⁷ In other words, scripture becomes God's word and therefore a unity always anew from Christ without binding itself to external unity.¹⁸ Jesus Christ is thereby not merely a formal principle or something similar. This is

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ DBWE 9, p. 437. Cf. Karl Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes, Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1927), p. 451.

¹⁷ Cf. DBWE 9, pp. 359–60.

¹⁸ This is why Bonhoeffer criticises Barth's understanding of the canon as a formal unity, as he is afraid that in so doing even Barth puts the formal principle over the material

why for Bonhoeffer the canon constitutes itself within its use, within its reading and interpretation by people. In reading these distinctive biblical texts, the content itself leads the way towards their understanding, which means experiencing them as the word of God. Even though Bonhoeffer seems in this respect to be quite close to German liberal theology, on closer examination he is not; for it is not the subject taking over the interpretation of these texts, but the text itself. John Webster expresses this point fittingly: 'He [Jesus Christ] draws their acts [i.e. the biblical texts] into his own act of self-utterance, so that they become the words of the Word, human words uttered as a repetition of the divine Word, existing in the sphere of the divine Word's authority, effectiveness and promise.'¹⁹ The reader is a part of the interpretation of scripture but only a passive one, as scripture interprets itself.

It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer bases his biblical hermeneutics not only on a biblical ontology but additionally on a theological anthropology. Bonhoeffer takes as a basis for his hermeneutics an understanding of human being as being-in-relation. He finds this constitution of humans in their creatureliness, which means that 'existence is envisaged in reference to revelation'.²⁰ With Genesis, the Bible makes clear that being human means first and foremost being not on our own (Gen 2:18). Adam is bound to Eve as Eve is derived from Adam. '[T]hey are one and yet two.'²¹ The existence of the human being is hence an existence that is invested in the other. Unity in duality, as Bonhoeffer characterises the existence of humanity in the second creation story, is thus the characteristic structure of the original human being. Being two but one, as Bonhoeffer states in *Creation and Fall*, 'actualizes to the highest possible degree their belonging to each other, which is based precisely on their being different from each other'.²² 'Human being exists in duality, and it is in this dependence on the other that their creatureliness consist.'²³ Therefore Bonhoeffer understands the creatureliness of

principle. Cf. DBWE 9, p. 321, n. 8. See also Edward van't Slot, 'The Freedom of Scripture: Bonhoeffer's Changing View of Biblical Canonicity', in Ralf Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmermann (eds), *God Speaks to Us: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 105.

¹⁹ Webster, 'Domain', p. 8.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, DBWE 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), p. 82.

²¹ DBWE 3, p. 97.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Already in *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer understood being a person as becoming 'a person ever and again through the other, in the "moment"'. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, DBWE 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), pp. 55–6.

the human being as nothing other than a relation (*relatio*), a relation between creature and creature, between creature and creation, and above all between creature and God. Accordingly, he understands the creatureliness which is the being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) not primarily in terms of the traditional ontology of substance, as not only the Catholic tradition (still) does (*analogia entis*), but instead as a relational ontology (*analogia relationalis*).²⁴

Being a creature thus means for Bonhoeffer being in relation to God, and thereby in relation to others. Therefore, Bonhoeffer understands freedom not as autonomy, as freedom from something, as we intuitively do, but as freedom for someone. Being a creature in his understanding is being in a relation to the creature and the other creatures with whom one is made. Bonhoeffer's conception of human being thus underlies an understanding of the constitutive relationality of humankind. We are creatures in relation; our freedom is not autonomy but a relational freedom that is free for God, and in this free for the other and creation.²⁵

Accordingly, Bonhoeffer states that we can lose our creatureliness when this relation to God (and with this to the other and the creation) is destroyed.²⁶ This happens, in Bonhoeffer's reading, with the first 'pious question' (*fromme Frage*) with which humankind evades the word of God and therein provides a human understanding of God's essential nature.²⁷ For Bonhoeffer humankind's first transgression is hence not the act itself (the picking and eating of the forbidden fruit), but instead the calling into question of God's own words.²⁸ With the first 'conversation about God, the first religious, theological conversation', the original creaturely relation between humankind and God is destroyed, as Adam and Eve believe themselves to understand God's words in a deeper, better way than God himself.²⁹ And even if the first human beings are completely pious in their attempt to be obedient to God, it is crucial that, instead of truly relying on and obeying God's Word, they call it into question from the standpoint of their own rationality. This is thus the first and fundamental split between God and humankind, when humankind wants to understand God by judging him with the human *ratio*.³⁰ And it is the main issue for all interpretation of scripture, as we have seen above, that humankind does

²⁴ Cf. DBWE 3, p. 65.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 66–7.

²⁶ We can find this reading in his interpretation of Gen 3:6, DBWE 3, pp. 115–16.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 128–30.

indeed prefer to talk about God instead of with God: that is, that we set our human rationality above God's very Word.

Hermeneutical anthropology

Because of this, understanding myth is one of the crucial points for Bonhoeffer's scriptural hermeneutics, as here the relation between faith and rationality comes to disclosure. For Bonhoeffer myth itself now comes true (and in contrast to his German colleague Rudolf Bultmann, not only its kerygma) as the main element of the contemporising of the word of God, guiding humankind into a totally alien and inhospitable place that is the cross of Christ.³¹ Only here in particular, the fallen human being stands convicted of his own deification, of his being *sicut deus*. It is there that his *ratio* is brought to its limit through the very mystery of Christ and is accused of hubris. It is the myth that speaks the truth even when it seems to be anthropomorphic. Indeed, Bonhoeffer states that 'clear anthropomorphism much more plainly expresses the fact that we cannot think of "God as such" whether in one way or another. The abstract concept of God, precisely because it seeks not to be anthropomorphic, is in actual fact much more so than is childlike anthropomorphism.'³² Thus, the modern elevation of human rationality is revealed to be a lie of humankind *sicut deus* as it is exactly the crime of Adam and Eve, the first human beings: placing human *ratio* before obedience to God. Humankind in its limited abilities of understanding is able to recognise God as its creator only in this mythological way.³³

For this reason, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on God's mystery as the reason for all that is comprehensible and manifest intends to protect scripture from any human control as well as estrangement. With the emphasis on the mystery as the place of God's revelation, humankind is convicted of its lie and, with that, placed before and confronted with the truth.

With this, the question of the subject of interpretation, which has been in focus not only since modernity, but indeed especially since this time, appears in a new light. With the change of perspective from the eternally divine text to the human being, Bonhoeffer's focus changes – ahead of his time – from the text to the recipient. For this reason, it is not the human being that qualifies scripture as holy and divine, but instead scripture proves itself within the reader to be that way. Autonomy and heteronomy, activity and passivity are therefore no longer diametrically opposed alternatives, for

³¹ Cf. DBWE 3, pp. 80–2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 26–9.

now the leader becomes the follower. Within this event, the interpretation of scripture actually takes place as readers themselves are interpreted through scripture. It is in that event that the old subject, i.e. humankind *sicut deus*, is to be understood as the new creature, as in the true and genuine understanding of scripture a new reality takes place, because it is in Christ (Gal 2:20).³⁴

Because of this, for Bonhoeffer in this alien gospel God's reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is opposed to humankind, as this reality is determined through the eschaton. God's presence, and hence the contemporising of the historical Jesus in his word, thereby receives the character of the inaccessible,³⁵ more precisely of 'future' (*das Zukünftige*), because in it God approaches humankind and thereby transforms humankind into God's new creature.³⁶

The Bible, then, does not tell stories about alien and past people and their experience with their God; on the contrary, this alien word becomes true in its reality as our own.³⁷ Bonhoeffer, hence, understands the hermeneutical movement of the contemporising of scripture in a dual manner: first, the Word points beyond itself in its immanent presence to the transcendental *Zukünftige*; and secondly, it incorporates the interpreter into itself. By this, Bonhoeffer truly understands the hermeneutical event of 'being in Christ' as a reality that shapes the creature itself, through the Word made flesh, into its medium of the word. It is for this reason that we have to understand Bonhoeffer's hermeneutics as a *language event*, because the human being is only empowered through the word to *real* speech, to be a true creature and in this to be a part of God's kingdom.³⁸

Humanity thus fulfils its being as a creature only when it has assumed the form of Christ; moreover, it is a realisation of original creatureliness in community. Obviously, this means that Bonhoeffer finds his hermeneutics, or better said his whole theology, on an *ontology of responsiveness*, as for him the emphasis lies on God's communicative self-revelation, which is personal: the eternal Word made flesh.³⁹ God's action towards the world is therefore personal because he is a person in Jesus, and in him first and foremost is a

³⁴ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 286. Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 93.

³⁵ Cf. DBWE 12, p. 330.

³⁶ Cf. DBWE 5, p. 62. See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, DBWE 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 486.

³⁷ Cf. DBWE 3, p. 82.

³⁸ Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *Hermeneutik zwischen der Macht des Gotteswortes und seiner Entmachtung in der Moderne*, in Gerhard Ebeling (ed.), *Theologie in den Gegensätzen des Lebens*, vol. 4 of *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), p. 217.

³⁹ Cf. Peter Dabrock, 'Responding to "Wirklichkeit": Reclaiming Bonhoeffer's Approach to Theological Ethics between Mystery and the Formation of the World', in Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ulrik Nissen and Christiane Tietz (eds), *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich*

person enabled to be a (new) creature. With this, we understand why and to what extent Bonhoeffer understands the life of this creature in Christ as life in responsiveness – more precisely, in responsibility. It is this, after all, which Gen 3:9 and Isa 43:1, among many other passages, stress: namely, that it is God's claim on the human being which enables him or her to respond. Consequently, all human speaking is always mediated, because that which was previously received is then passed on.

Bonhoeffer on kenosis

If we take Bonhoeffer's claim seriously that the interpreter of the Bible is in turn interpreted by the Bible itself, one can see that Bonhoeffer's scriptural hermeneutics is based on an understanding of the responsivity of scripture as a *performative language event*: in trying to unlock scripture, the interpreter him- or herself is unlocked. Because if it is not scripture that is interpreted, but instead the interpreter becomes a new creature within the encounter with the text, this means that the creature is brought back to its actual being (*Eigentlichkeit*) in its createdness in the image of God. Obviously, the author of *Sanctorum Communio* can only think of this existential change of the human being as being located in one place: the church. Against the general German emphasis on religious subjectivity, Bonhoeffer stresses that:

The form of Jesus Christ takes form in human beings. They do not take their own-self determined forms. ... In Christ the form of humanity was created anew. ... He who bore the form of the human being can only take form in a small flock; this is Christ's church. 'Formation' means therefore in the first place Jesus Christ taking form in Christ's church. Here it is the very form of Jesus Christ that takes form.⁴⁰

It is thus obvious why, on the one hand, Bonhoeffer understands the Bible only as the 'book of the church',⁴¹ and on the other how he actually conceptualises the creature: in community that is the body of Christ.⁴² The church of Christ is the body of Christ, as in its true creatureliness takes place in the formation of individual (fallen) subjects into persons united through and in God.⁴³ It is for this reason that we find in the phrase *ecclesia* as the *body of Christ* the foundation of Bonhoeffer's hermeneutics, in which all

Bonhoeffer: *A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), p. 77.

⁴⁰ DBWE 6, p. 96.

⁴¹ DBWE 3, p. 22.

⁴² Cf. DBWE 6, pp. 96–7.

⁴³ Cf. DBWE 1, pp. 192–208.

of his theological anthropology receives its christological purpose, and the metaphor of the body becomes reality.⁴⁴

Hermeneutically, this means the church, which is ‘founded upon the witness of Holy Scripture’, is the ‘church of Holy Scripture’.⁴⁵ The Bible as book of the church is the Word made flesh in concrete history; it is God’s revelation made person in the Word made flesh. It is for this reason that the language event is an event that is communicative, social and historical, for the new created person in community arises and exists only in and through the Word. Thus, we have to say more accurately: with Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical ‘principle’, as Bonhoeffer states in *Creation and Fall*, Jesus Christ proves himself as a personal event that changes human existence and thereby involves this dynamically in the event of the Word made community.⁴⁶ The new created human being is, hence, a part of the communion of the saints in Christ, so that this hermeneutical event is a communicative event. In the church’s existence, it is the end of all things, announcing this end as ‘the church-community makes the word the word, as the word constitutes the church-community as church. The Bible is the word only in the church-community, that is within the *sanctorum communio*.’⁴⁷ In short, this is ‘Christ existing as church-community’, as Bonhoeffer establishes in *Sanctorum Communio*, which is to be understood as describing a relational ontology.⁴⁸

It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer stresses the hermeneutical importance of the originally christological concept of kenosis, which describes a way of understanding the person of Christ in which the divine Logos, as the Second Person of the Trinity, enters into the limitations of humanity through self-emptying, as Paul describes it in *Philippians* 2:6–11. Bonhoeffer takes seriously God’s devotion to God’s creation in the Word by not seeing God’s kenosis as limited to the incarnation, but rather applies the doctrine to the creation itself.⁴⁹ And it is by means of this understanding of God’s kenosis in all of creation that Bonhoeffer approaches the subject of biblical hermeneutics: according to Bonhoeffer, the Bible is to be understood as truly the Word of God, because the Word elects to enter into the realm of signs, and thereby their realm of hermeneutical movement which is the

⁴⁴ Cf. DBWE 12, p. 323.

⁴⁵ DBWE 3, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 21–3.

⁴⁷ DBWE 1, p. 232.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁹ It would be interesting to analyse Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the kenotic moment of the Word in comparison to Calvin’s concept of the presence of the Logos in the elements of the Lord’s Supper and in the creation itself. For more on this, see the discussion of the so-called *extra Calvinisticum*.

interpretation of the interpreters themselves. This does not mean that the Bible's ontological status is similar to Jesus'. It is not similar to the way in which the second person of the Trinity makes itself mortal in Jesus. It is not that the divine Word utterly commits himself to this human word in a way that the human word once and for all is divine, as the theory of verbal inspiration claims.⁵⁰ The Bible is and always will be an essentially human word. This is what Bonhoeffer makes clear at the very beginning of his lecture on *Creation and Fall*.⁵¹ And this is why he claims it necessary to analyse the Bible with 'all methods of philological and historical research', as this 'continual returning from the text ... is the objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) in the method of theological exposition'.⁵² To neglect this means to neglect God as creator. Accordingly, the Bible has no 'kenotic ontology'.⁵³ God's use of creaturely auxiliaries in the word is totally different from the union of the divine and human nature in the incarnate Son. Scripture does not have a divine nature.

Nevertheless, God takes this *sermo humana* into his service and he truly speaks with and through these human words. The kenosis, thus, does not take place in the Bible itself, but in its reception. God is present in these words, not substantially or essentially, but in his free will to speak within and through them, and therefore he makes himself present in the interpreters themselves. In the reading, in the listening, God's word is present in the world, taking bodily, relational-ontologically human form in the church-community. It is God's free self-movement in his Word, which is Jesus Christ, to abidingly address human beings as his creatures, so that not only the members among one another become truly one flesh, but also that Adam is part of this one body. Because Adam is formed (*gleichgestaltet*) in Christ and Christ took form in him, he is a part of Christ's body in the world. And this is in fact what Bonhoeffer calls discipleship.

The new sacramental existence

As a Lutheran theologian to the core, Bonhoeffer believes Christ to be present bodily wherever he is present at all. In his understanding, this incarnate Word of God confronts the human being ever anew in a concrete and personal way, which is precisely why it cannot be understood only as a spiritual and internal phenomenon, or only as a reorientation of reason. On the contrary, when Christ 'who is the Word in person is present in

⁵⁰ Cf. DBWE 3, p. 51.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 40–1.

the word of the church or as the word of the church', he is truly bodily present.⁵⁴ As Word, he is present in the church in 'Word, sacrament, and church-community'.⁵⁵ And this means, as Bonhoeffer states clearly, that the form of the present Christ is 'the Word in bodily form'.⁵⁶ Especially in the sacraments, where the Word is truly tangibly bodily, Christ is present in the Word, 'but only as Word, as Word in bodily form. The sacrament, in the form of nature, engages human beings in their nature.'⁵⁷

Accordingly, Bonhoeffer takes the Pauline word of the church being the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–26) very seriously. Jesus is the body of the church, for in word and sacrament the church-community truly becomes the body of Christ.⁵⁸ In his word, God sanctifies the elements of the eucharistic bread and wine, so that '[t]he God-human Jesus Christ is wholly present in the sacrament'.⁵⁹ This presence of Christ in the elements is, of course, not the traditional Catholic ontological understanding of the presence of God in wine and bread; instead, the emphasis lies on the word through which God sanctifies these elements:

Sacrament exists only where God, in the midst of the world of creatures, names an element, speaks to it, and hallows it with a particular word God has for it by giving it its name. Through God's speaking to it, this element becomes what it is. This is what happens in the Lord's Supper; God hallows the elements of bread and wine by speaking the divine word. But the name of God's Word is Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus Christ that the sacrament is hallowed and given its meaning. By his Word, God has bound himself to the sacrament, that is, Jesus Christ is one who is bound by the sacrament. The God-human Jesus Christ is wholly present in the sacrament. As God spoke at the creation, 'Let there be light; and there was light', so the Word addressed to the sacrament becomes [reality].⁶⁰

This means that Christ is the embodied Word in his church-community: he is present in the flesh as church-community.⁶¹ The traditional controversy

⁵⁴ DBWE 12, p. 317. Cf. Erwin Metzke, 'Sakrament und Metaphysik: Eine Lutherstudie über das Verhältnis des christlichen Denkens zum Leiblich-Materiellen', in E. Metzke (ed.), *Coincidentia Oppositorum: Gesammelte Schriften zur Philosophiegeschichte* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1961), pp. 158–204, esp. pp. 192–6.

⁵⁵ DBWE 12, p. 315.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Cf. DBWE 4, p. 216.

⁵⁹ DBWE 12, p. 319.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Cf. *ibid.*

about *how* Jesus Christ can be present in the elements, the question of *res* and *signum*, is thereby exposed to be the wrong question, the wrong approach. For it is not about the *how*, but about the *who*.⁶²

As can clearly be seen, Bonhoeffer stresses here the exalted Christ's presence in the world as the humiliated one. '[H]e is the new creature', and he is this in bread and wine, through which 'as newly restored creation' he is the creator of the new creation.⁶³ 'As creator, he is present as our Creator, who, through this new creation, makes us ourselves into new creatures.'⁶⁴ For Bonhoeffer this means not only that Christ is the only one, the original sacrament itself, inasmuch as he is the both Creator of all nature and the new creature, but also that in Christ 'the church-community is the body of Christ' and is consequently *Christus praesens*.⁶⁵

Accordingly, Bonhoeffer declines to speak of only the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament and thereby in the elements themselves.⁶⁶ There is more to it than just taking these elements into service. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer argues, as we take the sacrament, we *eat* his flesh and *drink* his blood, as he is present in word and sacrament.⁶⁷ There is no way to comprehend his remaining presence in the word and sacrament by our human concepts. If we neglect the christological presence, there is the ever-recurring danger – which was a problem for the church then and still is now – that the sacrament falls completely under human power. Instead, '[t]he union is something utterly unique, incomparable, and is therefore designated as *unio sacramentalis*'.⁶⁸ What can help us to understand the union and the remaining bodily presence of Christ in the world is the creation itself. As in the eternal Word from the beginning in which God gave life to the creation, he once again gives new life to his creation in the word of the sacrament. Because God speaks and God binds his word to the fallen nature, which once was transparent and itself a sacrament referring to its creator, once again the elements become what they really are: a reference to God. This is what happens in the Word: God speaks to us and as he speaks, the Word addresses us directly. In God's address (*Anrede*), the Word transforms the fallen subject into a communicative person, as

⁶² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 322.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 322–3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁶⁶ Cf. Metzke, 'Sakrament und Metaphysik', pp. 166–71.

⁶⁷ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, DBWE 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), pp. 539–40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 541.

[b]y its character as word spoken by one another, it desires community. By its character as truth, it seeks this community only by bringing the other person into the truth. Truth here is something that takes place between two persons, not something eternally at rest within itself. Truth happens only in community between two persons.⁶⁹

Thus, in Bonhoeffer's opinion, Christ is not the exalted one withdrawn and separated from time and space. On the contrary, he is present in the world in his word, he 'is not dead but alive and still speaking to us today through the testimony of scripture. He is present with us today, in bodily form and with his word'.⁷⁰ Jesus Christ is therefore embodied in the church-community, as he creates this community in the address of his word. This event is not just a personal one but also truly a communicative one, because the fallen human being is liberated from her own (self-made) muteness and enabled a new expressiveness,⁷¹ as she is now a part of the body of Christ.⁷² The event of the sacrament is therefore truly a word-event: in the *performative effective Word* the old subject is transformed into the new person, the new creature of God. The church is therefore truly church, for in this event the gathering of people becomes the church of God. We therefore have to understand God's embodiment in the community of people as *sanctorum communio*,⁷³ as a sacramental event of the real incarnation of Christ not in the elements but in the flesh of the church-community.⁷⁴ Only in true personhood is *ekklesia* possible. The church is thus in its self-realisation effectively to be thought of as *creatura verbi* in which it proves itself to be the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth.

Hermeneutics of responsivity

One can now fully understand Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the Bible as book of the church. In reading and interpreting scripture, the reading subject is transformed into the new creature that is part of the body of Christ.⁷⁵ Only 'through the Bible in its fragility, God comes to meet us as the Risen One'.⁷⁶ Only through the paradoxical duality of history and faith is the risen

⁶⁹ DBWE 12, p. 317. Cf. DBWE 8, p. 501.

⁷⁰ DBWE 4, pp. 201–2.

⁷¹ Cf. Oswald Bayer, *Christus als Mitte: Bonhoeffers Ethik im Banne der Religionsphilosophie Hegels* (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag, 1985), p. 265.

⁷² Cf. DBWE 12, p. 323.

⁷³ Cf. DBWE 4, p. 285.

⁷⁴ Cf. DBWE 15, pp. 539–40.

⁷⁵ Cf. DBWE 4, pp. 213–4.

⁷⁶ DBWE 12, p. 331.

Lord to be comprehended as the historical Jesus.⁷⁷ Therefore, the Bible itself is not this incarnation; rather because God chose to take these thoroughly human texts into his service, because it is his lasting will to bind himself to his creation, he not only communicates through these transient texts but changes reality in addressing the creation through them. To understand the presence of the divine and human nature of Christ in the world, as a bodily presence altering the hearers of the word, means therefore that for Bonhoeffer hermeneutics is not a static theory. Instead, biblical hermeneutics describes a dynamic event of the Holy Spirit in which the reader him- or herself gets to be a part of this process of understanding and reconciliation. Jesus Christ is the Word, and as this Word he speaks to us yesterday, today and tomorrow. He addresses his readers in their very own existence, as he creates us anew as God's creatures.

Hence we can see that Bonhoeffer places great emphasis on the hermeneutical consequences of the doctrine of creation, particularly God as divine Creator and humanity must be thought together, in relation. There is no (theological) talk about God or human being without the other, since God is the creator and the world is God's creation. This is why Bonhoeffer does not reject the historical-critical approach. In understanding this textual tradition as a story of God with his people, we do not just see the authors and redactors of the biblical texts as part of this story: we ourselves are still a part of this narrative. God assimilates us into his own plan⁷⁸ and makes us a part of the passing 'through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land'.⁷⁹ Because God's word is his story with his people, with us this story is not finished yet. It is the *hic et nunc* of our very own lives in which we are made a part of this story by, through and in God's word. 'What is important is not that God is a spectator and participant in our life today, but that we are attentive listeners and participants in God's action in the sacred story, the story of Christ on earth.'⁸⁰

Moreover, God lets the reader (i.e. lets us) be a part of this new creation in Christ, a part of this kingdom of God in its existence. Accordingly, every interpretation, every confrontation with scripture is an incarnation of the Logos, for it is in the new creation of the creature that the Word contemporises itself in the reader, letting him or her be a part of the kingdom of God because of this *being* anew. It is the real humiliation of

⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Cf. DBWE 3, p. 61.

⁷⁹ DBWE 5, p. 62. Cf. Jens Zimmermann, 'Finitum Capax Infiniti or the Presencing of Christ: A Response to Stephen Plant and Robert Steiner', in *God Speaks to Us*, p. 92.

⁸⁰ DBWE 5, p. 62.

the Logos that he abandons himself into the hands of his interpreters and descends into indeterminacy.⁸¹

With Bonhoeffer's understanding of biblical hermeneutics, the reading of scripture is then indeed the embodiment of the Word in which the Risen One embodies himself in the new creature. Bonhoeffer's hermeneutical approach thus establishes a *hermeneutics of responsivity*. It describes the encounter with God's word as a dynamic existential language event. That is why faithful understanding is a *sacramental event*: it is not about a certain understanding of scripture, but about *being understood through the word*, so that a new reality is brought to fruition. Only in this participation in the reality of Christ can the creature be 'new': in its new ability to communicate. Only then is it able to answer God's address in its whole existence – that is, in its being and acting an answer to this reality.⁸²

Bonhoeffer's biblical hermeneutics, therefore, ranges between rational understanding on the one side, and believing acknowledgement on the other, out of which a general conception of hermeneutics arises that includes an understanding of the world in total and therefore of humankind as well. As a result, any understanding of scripture that corresponds to Christ's reality can only be a scriptural interpretation which involves the hearing subject. Human existence itself, then, becomes the object of exegesis from the vantage point of this text. This event makes possible a new reality between God and humanity: faith, which stems from hearing the word of scripture, is a new self-understanding before God.

It is therefore not surprising that Bonhoeffer's theological hermeneutics is a decidedly *anthropological* one. In the Word made flesh, the reader of scripture is no longer the subject of the interpretation, but is instead involved in the reality of God, so that it is not the reader who interprets scripture, but scripture that interprets the reader. Bonhoeffer's approach, then, can be called *hermeneutical anthropology* as well. And his hermeneutics is both: anthropological hermeneutics and hermeneutical anthropology, given that an understanding of the Word of God and of God himself cannot happen without an understanding of humankind before God.

For this reason, in Bonhoeffer's theology and his hermeneutical approach the Bible is only *prima facie* the decisive subject; moreover, it is the medium of its own process of understanding, which Bonhoeffer understands truly and fully as the incarnation, the bodily presence of Christ in the

⁸¹ Cf. Ulrich Körtner, 'Rezeption und Inspiration: Über die Schriftwerdung des Wortes und die Wortwerdung der Schrift im Akt des Lesens', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 51/1 (2009), pp. 46–8.

⁸² Cf. DBWE 6, p. 49.

human word. Therefore, theological hermeneutics includes not only an interpretation of the Bible but also an interpretation of the world. In this new self-understanding before God in Christ, a new reality is enabled that understands human nature and the world as truly held by the Word made flesh.

It is therefore crucial for Bonhoeffer to understand the Bible in its truly human nature, which God has chosen to take into his service for his presence in the world. Because only from understanding it as human word is it to be understood in its divine nature, in something like the way that in Christ human and divine nature are separate but inseparable at the same time. This is why Bonhoeffer understands the Bible only and fully through Christ, who is in Bonhoeffer's (Lutheran) understanding the exalted but bodily present God in creation.⁸³ From this point of view, Bonhoeffer derives an anthropology that is understood with the kenosis of the Second Person of the Trinity. In Christ as the agent of creation,⁸⁴ the biblical text is to be understood as a natural element that refers to God himself, for in the encounter with it the reader is transformed from the old Adam to the new Adam in Christ.⁸⁵ Yet this means indeed that the new creature in Christ is a part of the divine Trinity, given that the responsive creature in Christ is part of this new divine reality with his or her whole being.⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer thereby understands responsibility existentially, as participation of the new creature in the reality of God, since being a new creature means responding and acting in and for the realisation of the kingdom of God in the world.⁸⁷

⁸³ Cf. Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 40–50.

⁸⁴ Cf. DBWE 6, p. 83.

⁸⁵ Cf. Zimmermann, 'Finitum Capax Infiniti', p. 90, n. 16: 'Another way of expressing the same thing is to say that Bonhoeffer has a deeply sacramental hermeneutical framework.'

⁸⁶ Cf. DBWE 4, pp. 286–7.

⁸⁷ DBWE 6, p. 55.