

Finkenwalde - an experiment to restore a failing ecclesiology?

Donald Fergus

PO Box 13 508, Christchurch, New Zealand

donfergus2503@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper considers Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of the theological dimension of the concept of Christian community and in particular his conviction that believers must avoid the confusion that follows when 'community romanticism' (*Gemeinschaftsromantik*) is equated with the community of saints (*Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*). Bonhoeffer insisted that the task of building Christian community was one of crafting a space in which Jesus stands between believers, protecting them from the 'damage of sheerly human immediacy'.¹ Without Jesus' mediating presence he believed, everything could go badly wrong.

Keywords: Bonhoeffer, church-community, confession, Finkenwalde, *Lebensraum*, mediator

In January 1935, three months before his arrival at the Confessing Church's seminary at Zingst on the Baltic Sea coast, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from London to his brother Karl-Friedrich. In spite of his deep despair and disillusionment with the Reich church, it seems he now believed even more deeply in the restoration of the church.

Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical and mad about a number of things. I myself am sometimes afraid of that. But I know that the day I become more 'reasonable', to be honest, I should have to chuck my entire theology . . . I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus sky high – like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt-out shells behind. The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising

¹ André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 134.

discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people together and do this.²

Almost eighty years later, William H. Willimon, writing in *The Christian Century*, observed that ‘a consumptive society perverts the church’s ministry into another commodity which the clergy dole out to self-centered consumers who enlist us in their attempt to cure their emptiness. Exclusively therapeutic ministry is the result . . .’ In order to combat this, Willimon proposes that the task of theological educators is to ‘train the church’s leaders in a rigorously theological refurbishment of the church’.³

It is interesting to observe that while the two cultural settings of mid-twentieth-century pre-war Germany, and early twenty-first-century North America are worlds apart, both proposals as to how to manage and deal with failing ecclesiologies are surprisingly similar. A ‘restoration of the church’ and a ‘rigorous theological refurbishment of the church’ sound like related projects. This paper will propose that a rigorous theological refurbishment of the church that Bonhoeffer judged to be ‘profoundly impoverished and helpless’ was essential to effect a restoration of that same church.⁴ By the time Bonhoeffer arrived back in Germany, he was acutely aware that the building blocks for a theological refurbishment of the church, ideas already seen clearly in *Sanctorum Communio*, would need to be coupled with existential acts of obedient response to Jesus if there was to be a restoration of ‘the holy body of Christ, even Christ’s very presence in the world’.⁵ Within the community of the seminary at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer launched his own experiment, whereby he hoped to train the church’s leaders to be in the vanguard of just such a rigorous ‘theological refurbishment of the church’ as together they attempted to reconfigure the presence of Jesus within pre-war Germany.

Bonhoeffer’s view of the church, which provided a solid platform for almost everything he subsequently wrote and did, is given expression in *Sanctorum Communio*. In an unpublished portion of the preface to the 1930 German edition of his dissertation, Bonhoeffer expressed the wish that *Sanctorum Communio* would be received as ‘a modest contribution to a “philosophy of the church”’. He hoped that his essay might clarify ‘the nature of the church and of religious community’. He also commented that

² London, 1933–1935, vol. 13 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (hereafter *DBW*), ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996–), pp. 284–5.

³ See William H. Willimon, ‘Making Ministry Difficult: The Goal of Seminary’. *The Christian Century* 130/4 (February 2013), pp. 11–12.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, vol. 1 of *DBW*, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*

there had ‘rarely . . . been as much talk about community and church as in the last few years’.⁶

To put it as simply as possible, Bonhoeffer’s position was that the church is that space or habitat (*Lebensraum*) ‘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” are to be demonstrated and observed.’⁷ These ‘social acts’ are built upon 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’.⁸

These three concepts constitute the basis of Bonhoeffer’s theological architecture of the church and are brought together in his axiomatic signature phrase the ‘church-community’, which stands as shorthand for the longer ‘(Die Kirche ist) Christus als Gemeinde existierend’, or ‘(The church is) Christ existing as church-community’.

In crafting this particular axiom, Bonhoeffer shows his determination to reclaim the uniqueness of the *sanctorum communio*. As Joachim von Soosten points out in the ‘Editor’s Afterword’ to the German edition of *Sanctorum Communio*:

The ‘*sanctorum communio*’ is the community based on Christ’s vicarious representative (*stellvertretendes*) suffering on our behalf, and it consists of Christians on earth who in turn stand up for-each-other (*füreinander-eintreten*). The marks of the church (*Kirche*), if understood comprehensively, always imply the sociality of the church-community (*Gemeinde*). The proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments make Christ’s vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*) present for us; and this vicarious representative action in turn finds expression in the church’s social form. The social dimension of the concept of the church is, thus, not an external addition to this concept, but an original, constitutive element.⁹

So the axiom ‘Christ existing as church-community’ turns out to be a highly condensed and enriched theological statement about the sociality of revelation. It is Bonhoeffer’s theological affirmation that captures his unrelenting insistence that Jesus Christ, God’s utterly free disclosure of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 178; for a discussion on *Lebensraum*, see the author’s essay in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67/1 (2014), pp. 70–84.

⁸ *DBW*, vol. 1, p. 178.

⁹ Ibid., p. 294.

Himself to humankind, be located concretely in time and space; and it firmly establishes Christ at the very centre of the community of renewed humanity known as the church. This church is that part of humanity in which Christ has taken shape and form, the renewed form of humanity. Or, to put it in the words of Bonhoeffer interpreter André Dumas, ‘the church is that “space” where the world is formed in Christ and where Christ is formed in the world’.¹⁰

Eberhard Bethge regarded the phrase *Christus als Gemeinde existierend* as a ‘preliminary organisation of [Bonhoeffer’s] ideas’ that would protect a christological core and a communal structure and serve ‘as a barrier against metaphysical speculation and a transcendental evaporation of the idea of God’.¹¹ Bethge recounts that his early critics believed that Bonhoeffer was carried away by his ‘discovery’ of this taut axiom, and allowed ‘the difference between Christ and community (to) disappear to the point that the two were identified with one another, and that with his critical function of eschatology he also dispelled the provisional character of the church, losing sight of its “historicity”’.¹²

As far as I am aware, Bonhoeffer never abandoned this cardinal axiom, this ‘preliminary organisation of ideas’, even though the phrase slips out of regular usage after the christology lectures of 1933. It was Bonhoeffer’s way of ensuring, as best he could, that humankind would neither ‘lose sight of the Church as human historical society’, nor ‘polarise God and the human community and render God as a purely transcendent reality, unrelated to human social space and time’ – the very issues he pursued with vigour at Finkenwalde, and later in the *Ethics* and from his prison cell in Tegel.¹³

So when Bonhoeffer returned to Germany from London in the spring of 1935 at the age of 29 to take up the role of Director of the Preachers’ Seminary at Finkenwalde, his understanding of the nature of the church was already well laid down. *Stellvertretung* as the ‘structural principle that shapes the life of the church-community’, thus making it possible ‘for members of the church-community to be actively-with-one-another (*Miteinander*) and for-one-another (*Füreinander*)’, became the essential shaper of life in the Finkenwalde community as portrayed in *Life Together*.¹⁴ It was at Finkenwalde that his tenacious commitment to protecting the ‘christological core and a

¹⁰ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 94.

¹¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, rev. edn (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 84.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 56.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 294.

communal structure' would work itself out in his experiment in living in community. He would also make it clear to his students at Finkenwalde and at the university in Berlin (where he also taught until his teaching permit was revoked by the Reich Ministry of Education in August of 1936) that this was a time for the display of extraordinary, perfect, undivided love. If they desired to be one of Jesus' disciples, there was no other way.

Rediscovering 'community in Christ the peacemaker as the reality of the church'¹⁵

The seminary at Finkenwalde had a relatively short life: it opened at Zingst at the end of April 1935, relocated to Finkenwalde within a few months and was closed by the Gestapo in September 1937. One year later, in September 1938, Bonhoeffer went to Göttingen, to the home of his twin sister Sabine, taking with him his friend Eberhard Bethge, with the specific intention of recording and interpreting his experience in the community of students in the seminary at Finkenwalde.

The house was empty, for earlier that month Bonhoeffer had arranged for Sabine and her husband, Gerhard Leibholz, along with their two young daughters, to cross the border into Switzerland to escape from the difficult times that he knew would lie ahead for any Jews who remained in Germany.¹⁶ In the four weeks he spent in Göttingen, Bonhoeffer committed to writing in *Life Together* 'his thoughts on the nature and sustaining structures of Christian community, based on the "life together" that he and his seminarians had sustained both at the seminary and in the Brothers' House at Finkenwalde'.¹⁷ He took this opportunity to make it clear that the church would need to 'promote a sense of community like this if it was to have new life breathed into it'.¹⁸ *Life Together* is Bonhoeffer's interpretive reflection on the experiment at Finkenwalde, where he developed a working ecclesiology crafted out of the concepts of Christian personhood and being established by practices unique to the community of Christ – practices that mark it off from all other visible communities.

¹⁵ Keith Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006), p. 78.

¹⁶ Gerhard Leibholz, the husband of Bonhoeffer's twin sister Sabine (1906–99), was a lawyer and popular law lecturer at the University of Göttingen. Leibholz was a baptised Christian of Jewish descent on his father's side. The Leibholz family made their way to Oxford, England, and after the war returned to Germany, where Gerhard Leibholz became a judge of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany and Professor in the University of Göttingen. He died in Feb. 1982.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, vol. 5 of DBW, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In broad brush strokes, the question Bonhoeffer was addressing in *Life Together* was: 'How does a Christian community live when it is constantly threatened with terror and an ideology designed to destroy it and rob it of its unique character and message?' A question of the same order, yet reflecting a very different time and space, is: 'How does a Christian community live when it is constantly faced with the paralysing indifference of the society in which it is embedded?' Neither situation 'allow[s] any decisive significance to be attached to questions about God and truth'.¹⁹ And in such situations, Bonhoeffer argued, the church's only hope is to trust 'absolutely in Christ's presence in the Word, and in the communion of saints'.²⁰

Bonhoeffer's interest in 'community'

Bonhoeffer's interest in 'community' preceding his experience at Finkenwalde had a long history.²¹ His experience of intimate, robust community began with his own family of origin, which had had a huge impact on him as a defining matrix of being and personhood. His experiences in Rome in 1924 had created vivid and lasting memories of vibrant and winsome forms of Christian community, and his contact with the African American churches of New York's Harlem district during his year at Union Theological Seminary (1930–1) etched deep marks that he never forgot.²² During the early 1930s while teaching in Berlin, Bonhoeffer had earned a reputation for providing 'off-campus' weekend and holiday gatherings for and with his students where rudimentary forms of life together in Christian fellowship emerged.²³ He had become a skilled and knowledgeable ecumenist and was familiar with the worship forms, spiritual practices, and disciplines of his international colleagues. Twice he had planned to travel to India and stay with Mohandas Gandhi in his ashram, plans that were never realised. In addition, Bethge draws attention to Bonhoeffer's academic interest in monastic orders and practices, and to his growing commitment to a personal discipline of daily quiet times and meditation.²⁴

In 1934, while still in England, Bonhoeffer had met Hardy Arnold, the son of Eberhard Arnold, who in the 1920s had founded the Brüderhof Community at Rhoen in Germany. The Brüderhof were a Protestant

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126 (Editors' Afterword to the German edn).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²¹ *Ibid.*; see pp. 6–20.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928–1931*, vol. 10 of DBW, pp. 314–15.

²³ See Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (eds), *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Fontana Books, 1973), pp. 59–67; and Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 208, for a reference to the 'Bonhoeffer circle' of students.

²⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 461–2.

community influenced by the Anabaptist tradition, and Bonhoeffer was immediately attracted to the Brüderhof concept. Before leaving for Germany, Bonhoeffer arranged visits to a number of colleges and seminaries throughout England to learn about these various communities and their spiritual disciplines. He visited Methodist Richmond College and Spurgeon's (Baptist) College, both in London; the Cowley Fathers at the Society of St John the Evangelist at Oxford; the Woodbrooke Quaker Centre in Selley Oak, Birmingham; the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham in Nottinghamshire; and Mirfield and the Community of the Resurrection in Yorkshire.

So as he returned to Germany, Bonhoeffer was imagining a Christ-centred and controlled, quasi-monastic community serving the wider church, where young men preparing to be pastors would rediscover community in Christ the peacemaker. Prayer, meditation and mutual confession, common theological work and a very simple lifestyle would comprise the core activity of the community and the basic objective would not be introversion of any kind but preparation for proclamation. This would be an experiment in discipleship which would initiate a search for 'a new form of ministry' and provide a refuge for pastors under increasing pressure in the community at large.²⁵

The spatial and theological structure of the Finkenwalde community – a *vita communis*

Bonhoeffer's main concern was that life at Finkenwalde would serve the proclamation of the Word of the gospel of Christ. Life together in the community, which included the Brothers' House, was to be guided by adherence to a daily routine commencing with early morning worship comprising reading from the Bible (according to a pattern of *lectio continua*), singing together, and prayers of and for the community, which would be followed by the breaking of bread, and then breakfast together. 'After the first morning hour, the Christian's day until evening belongs to work.'²⁶ There was a brief break at midday for lunch and prayer, and in the evening the breaking of bread and the final worship service, which was to include, most significantly, the request for the mutual forgiveness of sins so 'that reconciliation can be achieved and renewal of the community established'.²⁷ The sole purpose of this order of life together was to build community of a sort that would support and initiate the search for a new form of ministry. The ability of the leadership to manage the shape of this life-in-community

²⁵ Ibid., p. 467.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 74.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

would be critical, and in this regard Bonhoeffer was well equipped. He brought with him considerable understanding of what we today call 'group process'. Much of this understanding, along with his native skills, had been acquired as a result of richly endowed life experiences particularly within his family. Also, no doubt, there was a lively appreciation of his father's thoughts and ability regarding such matters.

His father, Karl, was Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at the Charité Hospital in Berlin from 1912 until 1937. He was a scientist of high repute and a reserved, involved and loving father.²⁸ He was not an enthusiastic supporter of Sigmund Freud's emerging 'therapies' and did not support a proposal to establish a Chair in Psychoanalysis at the University of Berlin in 1917, probably reflecting his 'own personal feelings, temperament, and taste'.²⁹ Dietrich shared his father's caution and reserve. As Clifford Green comments, 'Respect for reticence was deeply embedded in Dietrich's character. Inquisitive prying into people's inner life was repugnant to him, as was promiscuous self-disclosure. Uncovering everything that exists was not, he felt, truthfulness, but cynicism.'³⁰

Bonhoeffer's belief about the role of Jesus Christ as mediator between people, already made abundantly clear in *Discipleship*, fitted perfectly with these passionately held beliefs and gave theological shape to the inter-personal functioning of the experiment at Finkenwalde. These beliefs spoke to an issue that Bonhoeffer had raised in *Sanctorum Communio*, where he had urged his readers not to confuse community romanticism (*Gemeinschaftsromantik*) with the community of saints (*Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*).³¹

In a passage written a decade earlier that could have been written with Finkenwalde in mind, Bonhoeffer asks, 'Where (does) faith experience the church?'³²

it certainly does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists within the church (*kirchliche Gemeinschaft*); where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord's Table, and intercede for one another in prayer. It is precisely in the context of everyday life that church

²⁸ Zimmerman and Smith, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 19–33.

²⁹ Clifford Green, 'Two Bonhoeffers on Psychoanalysis', in *Bonhoeffer Legacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), p. 63.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 278

³² *Ibid.*, p. 281.

is believed and experienced. The reality of the church is understood not in moments of spiritual exaltation, but within the routine and pains of daily life, and within the context of ordinary worship.³³

Two critical realities lay beneath these mundane yet extraordinary processes: Jesus would mediate the experiences between people in the church, thus ensuring the integrity of their dealings with one another; and the only purpose of the project would be that Christ be formed within the community. As Bonhoeffer reminded Bethge (with a wry smile no doubt), this would take some time, since ‘one has to live in a congregation for a while to understand how “Christ is formed” in it (Gal. 4:19)’.³⁴ Bonhoeffer maintained in uncompromising fashion that the internal formation of Christ, while a personal process, also becomes a corporate process that the community cannot evade or avoid.

André Dumas suggests that where *Nachfolge* required obedient saints, *Life Together* put human beings ‘back into the church’ by crafting a space in which Jesus, as mediator standing between them, protects believers from the ‘damage of sheerly human immediacy’.³⁵ In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer had established the theological claim that Jesus Christ is the only originator of community and the mediator between God and humankind. ‘In that capacity, Christ is also the mediator between human beings themselves.’³⁶ Bonhoeffer did not wish to pry and believed that all trust would be destroyed in any attempt to ‘psychologise and analyse people’.³⁷ Without Jesus’ mediating presence amongst and between the believers, everything could go badly wrong.

In his essay ‘Ecclesiology’, Stanley Grenz writes about the church as ‘a people imbued with a particular “constitutive narrative”’ that provides them with the interpretive framework through which they find their identity in Christ. It is this framework that mediates the meaning they find in their personal and communal stories.³⁸ This is what Clifford Green is referring to when he writes about the life at Finkenwalde and says that by ‘mediation’ Bonhoeffer is not referring to the ‘mediator in a dispute’ but ‘the way that our beliefs, images, [and] stereotypes mediate our experience – how

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Eberhard Bethge, 16 July 1944, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of DBW, p. 475.

³⁵ Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 134.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 127 (Editor’s Afterword to the German edn).

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 221, n. 18.

³⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, ‘Ecclesiology’, in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 262.

they profoundly shape the way we perceive and relate to other people and groups'.³⁹

There can be no dispute over the assertion that life experience is mediated to us in some way or other. Indeed, today it is fashionable for 'life coaches' and other trainers to insist that we see the world through 'our own particular set of lenses'. Always the implication is that the other person's lenses will give them a different view of the world, and that if we forget this or ignore it, we will never fully appreciate or understand whatever it is they may be thinking, feeling, saying or doing. But to say that Bonhoeffer is not thinking of Christ as we might think of a 'mediator in a dispute' is to deny Bonhoeffer what I consider to be the power and strength of the extremely elegant theological and pragmatic position he established amongst the Finkenwalde seminarians.

Bonhoeffer knew only too well that people have the ability to create conflict and, at times, mayhem amongst themselves based either on their different views of the shared world they inhabit or on the basis of their generally unacknowledged and undeclared need systems. Bonhoeffer was insistent that members of the community recognise that Jesus Christ stand between each of them as mediator. This is precisely the way he portrays Christ's presence as he writes about the high risks that sheer human immediacy poses for durable Christian community; the sort of immediacy that 'seeks the intimate fusion of I and You', or alternatively seeks an experience of a spiritual 'high' through some form of community romanticism (*Gemeinschaftsromantik*).⁴⁰

There can be little doubt about Bonhoeffer's position on Jesus Christ as mediator within the new community. The most unequivocal statements had already appeared in *Discipleship*:

No human way leads from person to person. The most loving sensitivity, the most thoughtful psychology, the most natural openness do not really reach the other person – there are no psychic immediacies. Christ stands between them. The way to one's neighbour leads only through Christ. That is why intercession is the most promising way to another person, and common prayer in Christ's name is the most genuine community.⁴¹

Or again:

it is precisely this same mediator (Jesus) who makes us into individuals, who becomes the basis for entirely new community. He stands in the center between the other person and me. He separates, but he also unites. He cuts

³⁹ Clifford Green, 'Human Sociality and Christian Community', in John W. de Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p. 126.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 41.

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4 of *DBW*, p. 96.

off every direct path to someone else, but he guides everyone following him to the new and sole true way to the other person via the mediator.⁴²

Not only is Bonhoeffer's depiction of Christ 'standing between' believers in the Christian community known as the church a theologically accurate portrayal of the place Christ occupies between women and men and between God and humankind in the event of redemption; it is also a spatially accurate way to describe the position of the One who reminds us that unless we pass our humanity through the prism of light and truth that he is, our relationships in community run the risk of collapsing the oft-times fragile new order established by Christ. Not only is Christ the Redeemer, but as Mediator he is also the healer of relationships. Imagined precisely in terms of a spatial configuration, Christ standing between believers in the Christian community provides comfort and consolation for the believer and protection from the potentially destructive damage of human immediacy.

Christ standing between us

How exactly does Christ stand between us? Bonhoeffer spells this out in some detail in 'Confession and the Lord's Supper'.⁴³ Christ stands between us figuratively, since believers construct and receive Christ's presence as if he were there; and Christ stands between us concretely in the presence of the other, in the shape and form of the sister and/or brother in Christ who is Christ to us. Bonhoeffer insists that those who believe in Christ were still destined to remain sinners, and that in Christ's presence all pretence is ended. Only by remembering at all times that the community of saints is also the community of sinners may we be made by Christ into the

community of faith, and in that community Christ made the other Christian to be grace for us. Now each stands in Christ's place. In the presence of another Christian I no longer need to pretend. In another Christian's presence I am permitted to be the sinner that I am, for there alone in all the world the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ rule . . . Other Christians stand before us as the sign of God's truth and grace. They have been given to us to help us . . . When I go to another believer to confess, I am going to God.⁴⁴

Such a belief sustains mutual confession, which Bonhoeffer believed lay at the heart of true community building. However, he promoted this practice of

⁴² Ibid., p. 98.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 108–18.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 109.

mutual confession cautiously at first, since the members of the community felt 'embarrassed and resentful' and extremely uncertain about it.⁴⁵

Still, Bonhoeffer believed that enormous benefits flowed from the practice. Specifically, mutual confession led to the following breakthroughs:

- to the genuine community of the cross (since it strikes at the root of all sin, which is pride),
- to new life (since 'confession is conversion') and
- to assurance (since apart from the practice of mutual confession, we live in a cycle of delusory self-forgiveness that the other believer breaks wide open).⁴⁶

It seems that Bonhoeffer shared Luther's understanding of confession, which Oswald Bayer summarises as follows:

'Confession embraces two parts [writes Luther]. First, that one confesses one's sins; the other, that one hears the absolution or forgiveness from the one who hears the confession, as if one receives it from God himself and as one does not indeed doubt, but truly believes that his sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven'. In this way, when a human being assures me of the forgiveness of sins in the name of God, God himself has forgiven me in that very act and at that very moment. The human word is not just an indication of the divine word, but it is actually the Word of God.⁴⁷

The basis of the Christian community is thus determined by what people are in Christ, since it cannot be constituted on the basis of what people are in themselves – even in their inwardness and piety as Christians. This is far too precarious a basis on which to be church. 'We have one another . . . through Christ, but through Christ we really do *have* one another' – a state of affairs that very neatly 'dismisses at the outset every unhappy desire for something more'. And in a shrewd observation Bonhoeffer notes that 'those who want more than what Christ has established between us do not want Christian community. They are looking for some extraordinary experiences of community that were denied them elsewhere.'⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 465.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 111–14.

⁴⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p. 270.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 34.

Two claims

In the interests of becoming clear about things from the beginning, Bonhoeffer makes two claims. First, 'Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality'.⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer explains this point as follows:

Christian community is a gift of God to which we have no claim. . . . [It is] not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.⁵⁰

True Christian community works not as we 'live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ'.⁵¹ We have no claim to this gift of Christian community, but can only be thankful that we are graced with the possibility of being a participant in it. This forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ then makes possible the role of the church as the community of truth and justice. It is on this basis that Stanley Hauerwas argues that 'the church gives no gift to the world[s] in which it finds itself more politically important than the formation of a people constituted by the virtues necessary to endure the struggle to hear and speak truthfully to one another'.⁵² Here the church assumes the shape of a truth-telling community, the only basis upon which justice and peace can rest. Further, this justice and peace is sanctification which, 'properly understood, is the church's politics'.⁵³ In arguing that Christians can only participate in the 'church's politics' within a visible Church community, Hauerwas, like Bonhoeffer, disposes of the idea that sanctification is merely a personal process. It is in fact a corporate process: 'the holiness of the church [which] is necessary for the redemption of the world'.⁵⁴

This leads to Bonhoeffer's second claim: 'Christian community is a spiritual (*pneumatische*) and not a psychic (*psychische*) reality'.⁵⁵ No one is to hold on to the dream of living their lives in community on the basis of a 'wishful image', since this will only lead to 'great disillusionment'. There is

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵² Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), p. 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 35.

an inevitability about this possibility, however, and in a passage that sounds remarkably up to date, Bonhoeffer observes that

a community that cannot bear and cannot survive such disillusionment, clinging instead to its idealized image, when that should be done away with, loses at the same time the promise of a durable Christian community. Sooner or later it is bound to collapse. Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive.⁵⁶

It is worth noting the numerous ways in which Bonhoeffer makes this point both about the wholesome and equally potentially distorted nature of the 'Christian community'. He draws the distinction between spiritual reality, the basis of which is 'the clear, manifest Word of God in Jesus Christ', and psychic (emotional or 'human') reality, which is a darker, more impenetrable reality surging off the back of self-centred human need. In a clear and psychologically accurate way Bonhoeffer points out that 'the basis of spiritual community is truth; the basis of emotional community is desire'.⁵⁷

Bonhoeffer then suggests that 'within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, an "immediate" relationship of one to another', whereas in the

self-centered community there exists a profound, elemental emotional desire for community . . . a yearning for immediate union with other flesh . . . [which] seeks the complete intimate fusion of I and You . . . [and] forc[es] the other into one's own sphere of power and influence.⁵⁸

This behaviour can only spell disaster, in that it breaches the boundary between I and You and brings about the 'non-mediated community of souls in a distorted form . . . One has been overpowered by something, but not won over.'⁵⁹

On the other hand spiritual love, which is neither self-centred nor self-serving, knows that it has no direct access to the other person, because Christ stands between; and because spiritual love is bound to the word of Jesus Christ alone, we should not long for unmediated community with anyone. For, left to our own devices in self-serving love (notice that it can

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 35–6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 40–2.

still be called 'love'), we are very likely to construct an image of the other, 'about who they are and what they should become'. When 'spiritual love' shapes the believer's behaviour in community, not only will it 'respect the other as the boundary that Christ establishes between us . . . it will find full community with the other in the Christ who alone binds us together'.⁶⁰

Bonhoeffer concludes with the recognition that 'spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by the truth', and is thus set over against 'human community', the basis of which is desire:

The existence of any Christian communal life essentially depends on whether or not it succeeds at the right time in promoting the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God's reality, between spiritual and emotional community. The life and death of a Christian community is decided by its ability to reach sober clarity on these points as soon as possible. In other words a life together under the Word will stay healthy only when it does not form itself into a movement, an order, a society, a *collegium pietatis*, but instead understands itself as being part of the one, holy, universal, Christian church, sharing through its deeds and suffering in the hardships and struggles and promise of the whole church.⁶¹

Paradoxically it seems, mediated space between believers protects from manipulation and potential destruction of the ecclesial community.

Summary

So, in summary, what can be said about the church-community depicted in *Life Together*? United by common convictions, Bonhoeffer and the future young pastors of the Confessing Church in the seminary at Finkenwalde developed an understanding of discipleship that burst the boundaries of Christian life built around the much less demanding notion of 'acquiring faith' or even 'having faith'. Discipleship grounded in the Sermon on the Mount and empowered by the instincts and wisdom of the early church, that had 'watched so carefully over the boundary between church and the world', called the community at Finkenwalde towards and into nothing less than costly grace.⁶²

And within itself the community acquired a theological shape that shunned the quest for human immediacy in favour of the mediated encounter between persons that, Bonhoeffer believed, would protect its health and vitality and, in conforming it to Christ, give birth to a robust and enduring

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 54.

community. This community, which existed only on the basis of God's word spoken in judgement and grace, found its life-force and energy in this word; it lived by what the Reformers identified as 'an alien righteousness' (*fremde Gerechtigkeit*), a righteousness that comes from outside of us (*extra nos*).⁶³

It is worth recalling that the restoration of the church was Bonhoeffer's plan. In formulating articulate theological proposals as early as *Sanctorum Communio*, he had commenced his own engagement in theologically refurbishing a failing ecclesiology. At Finkenwalde this became the substructure that supported the weight of the practical outworking of what it might mean to be a community that spoke of the presence and blessing of Christ in a nation with war now on the horizon. However this could be no cheap community. It called for considered understanding, deliberate intent and a form of following after Jesus that would be recognised as costly discipleship. As far as I am aware, there was never any suggestion that the local worshipping congregation should take the same shape as the Finkenwalde community, but it remains the case that the picture of this particular community pointed to a shape that might not be unlike that of a local church-community. At the very least, the local community could be informed by the same theological shape and a goodly sharing of the same practices.

Was Bonhoeffer successful in his project? The question is probably misleading. For what would the markers of 'success' be, especially in a society about to be torn apart by war? To update the question for First World churches in the early twenty-first century, we might ask what the markers of 'success' would be in a society characterised largely by indifference to Jesus Christ, the same society that searches for a way and a form of relating that will satisfy the need for companionship, community and belonging.

Bonhoeffer appears to be disinterested in imagining what might constitute 'success' or 'failure'. His interest, as always, was in the crucified Christ who

disarms all thinking aimed at success, for it is a denial of judgement. Neither the triumph of the successful, nor bitter hatred of the successful by those who fail, can finally cope with the world. Jesus is certainly no advocate for the successful in history, but neither does he lead the revolt of the failures (*gescheiterte Existenzen*) against the successful. His concern is neither success nor failure but willing acceptance of the judgement of God. Only in judgement is there reconciliation with God and among human beings.⁶⁴

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *DBW*, p. 90.

What allows those who are successful and those who are unsuccessful to stand before God is their acceptance of the divine judgement, since 'only in the cross of Christ, and that means as judged, does humanity take on its true form'.⁶⁵ So it is within the suffering of the uniquely shaped and lived church-community that the failure and success of Christ repeats itself. The church once again becomes the grand statement and sign of God's redeemed community.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 91.