

Bonhoeffer's Eighth Day: The Orders of Preservation and a Theology of Natural Ability

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*The award-winning Belgian film *Le huitième jour*, about a young man with Down syndrome, begins with static on a television screen. This reflects the current state of disability study: much has been accomplished through the work of Nancy Eiesland, Amos Yong, and John Swinton, but there still is static in the conversation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer rejected the theological discourse of his day regarding the orders of creation and argued instead for the orders of preservation. This turn, in the area of theology and disability, means a move away from questions about God's creating (or not) of disability, and instead moves toward the preservation of life in Christ. In so doing, Bonhoeffer takes a surprising stance as a Protestant by drawing on natural law theology and points to our high calling in life on "the eighth day."*

Keywords: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, disability, orders of creation, orders of preservation, Nancy Eiesland

Le huitième jour, il a créé Georges.

(On the eighth day, [God] created Georges.)

—*Le huitième jour*, directed by Jaco Van Dormael

L*E huitième jour* (1997), an award-winning Belgian film about a young man with Down syndrome, begins with static on a television screen. While much has been accomplished in the field of disability study through the work of Nancy Eiesland, Amos Yong, and John Swinton, there still is static in the conversation. A *ressourcement* of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his work on the orders of preservation, in conversation with the film *Le huitième jour*, can provide a clarifying lens. Bonhoeffer rejected the

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theological discourse of his day regarding the orders of creation and argued instead for the orders of preservation. Such a turn, in the area of theology and disability, means a move away from questions about God's creating (or not) disability and instead orients the conversation toward the preservation of life in Christ. In so doing, Bonhoeffer takes a surprising stance as a Protestant by drawing on natural law theology and points all people to a high calling in life on "the eighth day."

Le huitième jour, Jaco Van Dormael's film about the abled and the disabled, is a helpful conversation partner for Bonhoeffer as it depicts ordinary life on "the eighth day." The easy labels of our society might easily stereotype Georges, the film's main character (played by Pascal Duquenne), as disabled by Down syndrome. We would then quickly label his unexpected friend Harry (played by Daniel Auteuil) as abled. Yet the film quickly challenges our notions of what is fallen and redeemed, abled and disabled, and ordered and disordered as this story of life on the eighth day unfolds.

In his day, Bonhoeffer also challenged the status quo.¹ Theology during his time heralded the orders of creation as a way of justifying the institution of racial, personal, national, and cultural stereotypes. In this thinking, order and disorder were easily labeled and used toward radical ends. Bonhoeffer changed the conversation by offering a more nuanced view of "the orders of preservation" that turned away from judgment of what was abled or disabled after the Fall. Instead, he looked toward what God had preserved in all people within the Fall and viewed this preservation as directed toward Christ.

In this article, Bonhoeffer's orders of preservation will be brought into conversation with Van Dormael's film *Le huitième jour* to consider how the orders of preservation might direct us to a "theology of ability" that defies labeling and instead offers a high view of utility and a challenge and commission for each person's ability to be pointed toward Christ through his or her work in this world.

Bonhoeffer's concept of the orders of preservation relies on a unique Protestant approach to the traditional Catholic theory of natural law by offering a Christological lens through which to understand what moral order God has preserved in creation through Jesus Christ. Traditional Catholic natural law theory posits a divine knowledge of morality and reason that is grafted

¹ I am grateful to Bernd Wannewetsch for first introducing Bonhoeffer's work into the study of disability and theology. See Bernd Wannewetsch "My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness: Bonhoeffer and the War over Disabled Life," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 353-69.

into the human being. Bonhoeffer builds on this legacy by acknowledging sin and looking toward what is preserved over and above the created order in Christ. With this fine-tuning, Bonhoeffer offers a helpful clarification of natural law theory and in so doing builds on a modified natural law argument in order to make Christ the origin, essence, and goal of all human life. For Bonhoeffer, Christ is Lord over all, and that lordship begins within the human person preserved, protected, and directed toward Christ. Bonhoeffer's development of this modified natural law theory emerged in response to the ongoing Protestant/Roman Catholic debate about life on the eighth day. His willingness to draw on natural law and the inherent strength of Christ present within creation offers a helpful nuance in theology and disability by focusing on the ability present within the created order.

This article will explore the problem inherent within the Protestant tradition in its rejection of natural law and see the consequence of this for the "disabling" of theology. Then through an exploration of Bonhoeffer's understanding of creation, the Fall, and life after the Fall, we will consider a theology of ability that emerges in a turn in natural law to the orders of preservation. This will be the foundation for Bonhoeffer's ethics, which is grounded in the reality of life but maintains a high calling to the ability of all humanity to respond to the complexities of life in this world on the eighth day.

I. STATIC DISCUSSION?

In the beginning there was nothing.
There was only music.

—*Le huitième jour*, directed by Jaco Van Dormael²

Le huitième jour begins with static on a television screen and the words "In the beginning there was nothing." Bonhoeffer responded to what he viewed as a static view in the Protestant tradition in its rejection of natural law. He recognized a problem within this tradition as its theology became more confined and maintained a staunch commitment to "an (orthodoxly static) apology for the divine grace."³ While on the surface that static was lacking in movement, unbending from its position, there was more pull under the surface that Bonhoeffer wanted to uncover.

² *Le huitième jour*, written and directed by Jaco Van Dormael, 1996. These are the opening words of the film; they scroll across the bottom of the screen as static buzzes on a television screen.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 143.

The problem, according to Bonhoeffer, is that in the Protestant tradition the ultimate and the penultimate are always pitted against each other. He recognized two opposing views: a radical position and a compromise position. In the radical view, the singular true reality is the ultimate, which is always over and against the penultimate. One might say that the penultimate is totally depraved without Christ. In the compromise view, the ultimate is utterly removed from the everyday.⁴ In both views, the ultimate and the penultimate are always mutually exclusive. In Bonhoeffer's view, Protestant theology fails here by maintaining a complete separation of the two; such a separation is an unconscious rejection of both the Incarnation and the Resurrection wherein both doctrines radically join the ultimate and penultimate. These stances stand in contradiction to a robust theology of the Incarnation and the Resurrection that highlights a mutual earthiness and transcendence in daily life. The picture that emerges in either of the two views is as blurry as the static on the television screen. For Bonhoeffer, such a dichotomy leaves both the theologian and the ethicist with nothing but depravity and radical distance—static.

We feel the tug of the static in what reads as a lament in Bonhoeffer's elaboration of the tension between radicalism and compromise:

Radicalism hates time, and compromise hates eternity. Radicalism hates patience, and compromise hates decision. Radicalism hates wisdom, and compromise hates simplicity. Radicalism hates moderation and measure, and compromise hates the immeasurable. Radicalism hates the real, and compromise hates the word.⁵

This division results in an all-too-easy allocation of two spheres in the vein of Augustine or Luther. Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian life will not be relegated to two spheres because that life is "the dawning of the ultimate in the penultimate"⁶ that emerges from what is already present within the penultimate. This is where Bonhoeffer turns away from traditional Protestant theology and moves toward the realm of Thomistic natural law, by claiming that within the created order there is a "preservation" of the good in Christ. The fine-tuning that Bonhoeffer offers to this blurry picture is the principle he describes as "the orders of preservation." He argues that "for the sake of the ultimate, the penultimate must be preserved."⁷ God's activity of preserving is an undervalued attribute of a God who is too easily labeled as Creator.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 104–5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

As *Le huitième jour* unfolds one wonders how music might be heard amid the static buzz of a television that has lost its transmission signal. From the perspective of Georges, the kind of sound that most hear as noise might perhaps be music. His viewpoint directs us to something deeper and unexpected. The work of ethical reflection for the purpose of ministry in the life of the church is exactly this: to listen to the static and find a deeper, more resonant sound. In the area of theology and disability, this deeper note matters for parents who struggle to make sense of their child's life and value within a world driven by stereotypes and easy judgments. This deeper note also matters for those with disabilities themselves. The deepest note raises questions: Did a loving God create what appears to us as that unclear picture, that "static" that is disability? Or is it the love of God that holds this static together, preserving life together whether seemingly abled or disabled?

II. DISABLED THEOLOGY?

The tendency to equate disability and tragedy, to romanticize the body and suffering, all must be "unnamed" in Christian theology.

—Rebecca Chopp, foreword to *The Disabled God*, by Nancy Eiesland⁸

Nancy Eiesland's groundbreaking work *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* speaks to the static as she wrestles with the legacy of the Protestant tradition and offers fine-tuning with hope for a deeper sound. Having experienced a lifelong disability as a paraplegic, Eiesland speaks from a source of deep wisdom. Writing in 1994, she explores then-current work in the field of disability and theology as well as attitudes and policies within the political sphere that address disability. She advocates for frameworks of empowerment and the growth of liberating practices. After exploring the failure of government to adequately address the needs of persons with disabilities, she turns to the carnal sins of the church and the consistently "disabling theology" that she encounters there. Eiesland notes the tug of static in the conversation that disables theology:

The Christian interpretation of disability has run the gamut from symbolizing sin to representing an occasion for supererogation. The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero.⁹

⁸ Rebecca Chopp, foreword to *The Disabled God*, by Nancy Eiesland (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 12.

⁹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70.

The problem is that these stereotypes may be found in Scripture as easily as they may be found in popular and social imagery. Eiesland struggles with texts that have shaped certain judgments. The themes that emerge from these texts—"sin and disability conflation, virtuous suffering and segregationist charity"¹⁰—depict the extremes in thought that play out in the tug-of-war of static. Eiesland notes the progress in the ways that texts regarding women have been reinterpreted. She hopes for new attention to the texts that until now have disabled theology because of their view on disability. These new interpretations are vital; they matter for the identity of the individual, the institutions they form, and the incarnation in which we believe.

Reading Eiesland alongside Bonhoeffer, we see in her frustration with disabling theology that Protestant tendency to either radicalize or compromise the relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate. The world is either tragic (the radical solution) or romanticized (the compromise solution). Such a distinction leads to either divine blessing or damnation, the superhero or the defiled. In his nuanced affirmation of natural law Bonhoeffer offers insight that addresses this gap. For him, that thought process begins with the biblical story of Creation. For those in disability studies, that text makes us ask whether the current form of created order, abled and disabled alike, is still that good that God proclaims in a litany of praise, or whether the created order was good only until the Fall.

III. A CREATION STORY

On the first day he made the sun, it stings the eyes. On the second day he made the earth and he made the sea, it wets your feet. On the third day he made records. They tell me I was born in Mongolia. On the fourth day he made television. On the fifth day he made the grass, when you cut it—it cries. You have to comfort it, and talk kindly to it. On the sixth day he made men, they come in all colors and butterflies. On Sunday he rested, that was the seventh day.

—Georges, in Jaco Van Dormael's *Le huitième jour*

The Roman Catholic tradition and Protestant theology have long been at odds regarding the subject of natural law. Bonhoeffer offers a surprising middle ground between the two in his reflections on "the last things and the things before the last." While thoroughly Protestant in his confirmation that the essence of Christian life is in the justifying event of Jesus Christ by grace alone,¹¹ Bonhoeffer offers a surprising nuance in his recognition and

¹⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 98.

affirmation of natural law. Even more surprising is his claim that the natural must be reclaimed “on the basis of the gospel.”¹² Here, he begins at the end by naming the “ultimate” juncture of human life: the justification of the sinner by grace alone through Jesus Christ.¹³ This justification is the last word, the last thing, and the ultimate event in the Christian life. All that precedes is the “penultimate.” That is, the created world in all of its complexity after the Fall is a prelude to the ultimate. The nature of the penultimate is where theologians must struggle, and where there is division between Protestants and Roman Catholics. After the seven days of Creation, after the Fall, as life continued on the eighth day, the question is this: is what remained in the penultimate completely fallen, or is there some evidence of a Thomistic natural law that preserves some semblance of the good within human will, reason, and the created order? To understand Bonhoeffer’s reflections in his essay “The Last Things and the Things before the Last,” it is necessary to return to the first things—that is, Creation, the Fall, and the reality of human life after the Fall.

Bonhoeffer understood the complexity of life on that so-called eighth day. Even more, he understood the theological impossibility of sorting out what is good or bad or other. Theology errs in its attempts to understand creation because we live in the “twilight,” which prevents our attempts to understand.

Humankind remains between *tob* and *ra*, remains split (*im Zwiespalt*); even with its *tob*-good it remains beyond God’s good. With its whole existence (*Dasein*), split as it is between *tob* and *ra*, it remains far away from God, continuing to drop (*im Sturz*), in the fallen and falling world. For just this reason humankind is in the twilight. And because it is in the twilight, all human thinking about creation and the fall (including the biblical author’s own thinking) is restricted to this twilight. . . . Humankind after all cannot find its way back behind its split state to unity.¹⁴

Here Bonhoeffer acknowledges the inability of humanity to sort out what is fallen.¹⁵ Human perception cannot sort out the static between what is distorted, disordered, even disabled. And there is additional static: we remain in the twilight, that state split between *tob* and *ra*, good and evil. Differentiating

¹² Ibid., 121.

¹³ Ibid., 143.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 140.

¹⁵ Wannewetsch, “My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness,” 355. Here, Wannewetsch describes the reaction Bonhoeffer had to the community at Bethel, where the “disabled” were provided care. Here, Bonhoeffer realized it was not the disabled who were “insane” but rather those who thought they could pass judgment.

between the two is an impossible task, not only for us but even (as Bonhoeffer boldly asserts) for the biblical authors. This is good news for those of us caught up in trying to figure out life on the eighth day. Our judgments are unable to perceive what is ordered or disordered, abled or disabled, redeemed or fallen. So we are left with an unclear picture, one that is always partially lit and partially dim. And yet, Bonhoeffer takes a step forward in freeing us from the capacity to make accurate judgments about good and evil. Still, how then are we to live between the *tob* and the *ra*?

As *Le huitième jour* continues to unfold, Georges narrates the creation story he learned from his now-deceased mother. The world unfolds as he has been taught. Even the way in which he views butterflies originates in this creation story: "Swift, mad, light. Fluttering and proud. Butterflies, in flowery flight with their wings form a cloud. They lunch on primroses." If only we could all see the world through this creation story.

Bonhoeffer understood the power of the creation story we tell. His book *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* was the corpus of his teaching to students at the University of Berlin during the winter of 1933. As we well know in retrospect, that winter was a time of absolute unrest.¹⁶ One attendee described the impact of Bonhoeffer's theological discourse: "In these lectures this extraordinary man, Bonhoeffer, exploded everything I had taken for granted as custom or tradition in theology/the church, the state/politics, academic scholarship/research and so on."¹⁷ Even Bonhoeffer himself, reflecting back on this period, seemed surprised by the impact of these lectures not only on his students, but on his own thinking: "I came to the Bible for the first time."¹⁸ One might argue, then, that even for Bonhoeffer himself this was a creation story, a creation of something new.

The lectures journey from the first day of Creation in Genesis 1 through the blessing and completion of Genesis 2:1–3 as the seventh day unfolded and God rested after hallowing all that God had created and made. Bonhoeffer explicates that rest with a particular nuance that names God's completion of creation and perhaps hints at what will become God's ongoing work as "preserver" of life:

Rest in the Bible really means more than having a rest; it means rest after completing one's work; it means completion. It means the peace of God in which the world lies; it means transfiguration. It means turning our eyes

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ Letter from Finkenwalde, January 27, 1936, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 14, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 113.

wholly toward God's being, toward worshipping God. It is after all never the rest of a lethargic god but the rest of the Creator; it is no letting go of the world but the final glorification of the world that gazes at the Creator. Even in God's rest, God of necessity remains the Creator. "My Father is still working, and I also am working." God now remains the Creator, but now as the one who has finished the work of creation.¹⁹

The created world, then, is transfigured on the seventh day as God rests. The work of humanity, then, is to gaze and to praise.

In this portion of the lecture, Bonhoeffer names two ideas that will be developed in full as his thought process continues to unfold. God, who remains the Creator, has completed the work of creation. Christ, though, through his intimacy with his Father, will still be at work on that portion that has not been completed. This may sound paradoxical at first. But the line Bonhoeffer draws here will have great consequence later. God's work in creation is done. Now, Christ will be at work preserving that creation through his ongoing work.

With these words, Bonhoeffer begins to reject the theological discourse of his day regarding the orders of creation. He addressed this directly in a paper he presented at the Youth Peace Conference in Czechoslovakia on July 26, 1932. He argued that no consistent theology existed for the ecumenical movement. Responding to that problem, he explored two possible places wherein the church might discover its command.²⁰ While the Sermon on the Mount might seem like a mission statement for the church, Bonhoeffer argues that this is not the starting place. Another answer, he claims, might be the orders of creation. But the church has misused these in his day. He again notes the problem of trying to sort out the fallen from the good in the orders of creation:

Now there is a special danger in this argument; and because it is the one most used at the moment, it must be given special attention. The danger of the argument lies in the fact that just about everything can be defended by it. One need only hold out something to be God-willed and God-created for it to be vindicated for ever, the division of (man) into nations, national struggles, war, class struggle, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, the cutthroat competition of economics. . . . But the mistake lies in the fact that . . . creation and sin are so bound up together that no human eye can any longer separate the one from the other, that each human order is an order of the fallen world and not an order of creation.²¹

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 69.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936*, The Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, vol. 1, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 161.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161-62.

The only acceptable response to the question he poses is a third command, the command toward the origin, promise, and fulfillment of Christ:

All the orders of the world only exist in that they are directed toward Christ, they all stand under the preservation of God as long as they are still open for Christ, they are orders of preservation, not orders of creation.²²

Regarding the area of theology and disability, such a turn means a move away from questions about God's "creating" (or not) disability, and instead orients the conversation toward the preservation of life in Christ. In so doing, questions about disability as part of the fallen world are regarded as unknowable. Energy is focused instead on what has been preserved within the Fall and pointed toward Christ and his vocation in the world.

We learn, then, that the static on the screen is not a sign of genetics gone awry, but a reflection of the fact that all of us are fallen. This is a place where Eiesland would agree with Bonhoeffer; she observes, "To be human is to sin; to be a human institution is to institutionalize sin."²³ This statement acknowledges that sin is not a separating out of what is good in our lives and what is fallen: such knowledge is beyond human capacity. And, according to Bonhoeffer, such knowledge is beyond theological inquiry. Thus the task of humanity is to acknowledge sin and then, in Eiesland's words, to "open a space for the inflowing of grace and acceptance."²⁴ For Bonhoeffer, Genesis 1–3 is not a creation story, but rather a relation story. What has gone awry within humanity is not the equating of disabled bodies or minds with any aspect of the Fall. Instead, we are all fallen because we have broken relationships with God, self, and other. The eighth day, then, is a story of relationships, not genetics, gone awry.

IV. THE EIGHTH DAY

The process of life never stands still. The creation has not come to an end. The Bible says that God created man on the sixth day and rested. . . . That day of rest must have been a short one. Man is not an end but a beginning. We are at the beginning of the second week. We are the children of the eighth day.

—Thornton Wilder, *The Eighth Day*²⁵

²² Ibid., 162

²³ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Thornton Wilder, *The Eighth Day* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 16.

Though he does not identify it as such, for Bonhoeffer, the eighth day is the day that humanity begins to live without God at the center. Instead the human creature lives by its own resources, apart from God and without limits.²⁶ Humankind lives with its eyes wide open to the static that is *tob* and *ra*, the good and evil of creation. Bonhoeffer's language for this is "breaking apart" (*Entzweiung*). The two are no longer a unity, but always at odds with each other in duality. In this "breaking-apart" world, the original picture of the unity and beauty of creation is lost. What is left is "now covered in a veil; it is silent and lacking explanation, opaque and enigmatic."²⁷ Hence, the unclear picture, or static.

This static may seem like the starting point of theological reflection. But for Bonhoeffer, the work of theology is aimed not at the "why" of fallen creation or the origin of any kind of evil in the world. Instead, "the theological question is . . . about the actual overcoming of evil on the cross."²⁸ This is a radical redefinition of the work of theology, and it directs theological questions away from the "why" of Creation and Fall and instead points them toward the "who," that is, the one who will be at work preserving what is left of the good.

Bonhoeffer is clear in pointing toward this hope in his lecture on Genesis 3:21 entitled "God's New Action." Once its eyes have been opened to good and evil, to the inherent nakedness of its own being and of the world around it, God will not leave humankind in that vulnerability but robes it with garments of restraint.²⁹ This is good news, as night comes and humankind remains in the twilight. God's new action, with this enrobing, will be to "preserve humankind in its fallen world, in its fallen orders, for death—for the resurrection, for the new creation, for Christ."³⁰ Until then, humanity will remain in the twilight of *tob* and *ra*. But God will uphold and preserve humankind in just this place.

In the Christian tradition, the eighth day is both fallen and redeemed. It is that day of the Fall, after God's labor and rest, that is quickly marred by humanity in Eden. The task of humanity is to live out our own "eighth days" in a world that is fallen and that groans for the revelation and redemption of Christ. Some Christian traditions offer an elevated view of the eighth day. Because Christ is the one who renews this fallen world, Sunday is called the eighth day, as it marks Christ's renewal of creation through the

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 115.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

Resurrection and Ascension. While Bonhoeffer does not use "eighth day" terminology, his work is consistent with eighth day theology. Yes, the world is fallen on the eighth day, but it is also redeemed in Christ on the eighth day. Creation is marred, but order is preserved through Christ. Bonhoeffer will go on to say that our work, as much as the work of Christ, matters on that eighth day.

In the film, the title *Le huitième jour* unfolds on the screen after we hear Georges recite his creation story. God indeed rested on the seventh day. But Georges continues to narrate the creation story by saying, "On the eighth day, God created Georges." This simple line resonates with the question the viewer asks, as we all do. Is Georges a distortion of the created order? What will happen to Georges and his world on the eighth? This is the day on which Georges will befriend a gentleman named Harry. Harry struggles amid the mandates of the eighth day. The spheres of vocation, marriage, parenting, and meaning-making have all fallen short. He is a salesman with no passion to sell. One reviewer describes his situation well: "Harry has a 'colorless existence.'"³¹ In other words, his creation is bland. It could be said that static buzzes in every sphere of his life.

V. THE ORDERS OF PRESERVATION

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

—2 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV)

To understand Bonhoeffer's stance on "the orders of preservation," it is important to acknowledge the work of his contemporaries in this area. According to Jordan Ballor, Karl Barth rejected both the orders of creation and the orders of preservation, while Emil Brunner affirmed both. Bonhoeffer, in response, rejected the orders of creation and affirmed the orders of preservation.³² This distinction is important to note within the Protestant tradition, wherein we all too often believe Barth's approach is the only way. Following his rejection of both orders, one would come to the conclusion that God cannot reveal Godself through either creation or anything preserved within creation. God's revelation would occur only through an infusion of that revelation into the natural world. Protestant affirmation of this approach is so thorough that Bonhoeffer's work is often interpreted

³¹ David Rooney, review of *The Eighth Day*, *Variety*, May 16, 1996, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117905271?refcatid=31>.

³² Jordan J. Ballor, "Christ in Creation: Bonhoeffer's Orders of Preservation and Natural Theology," *Journal of Religion* 86 (2006): 1-22, at 3.

in the same vein as rejecting both. Bonhoeffer's position, however, holds a middle ground between Catholic and Protestant thought.

The prelude to the full development of Bonhoeffer's position occurred during the talks for peace at the Youth Peace Conference in July 1932. The orders of preservation emerged from a question that had distinct implications for the work of theology in practical ministry: "How can the Gospel and how can the commandment of the church be preached with authority, i.e., in quite concrete form?"³³ While Bonhoeffer answers his rhetorical question only briefly at this point with the orders of preservation, he develops his response more fully toward the end of *Creation and Fall*:

The Creator is now the preserver; the created world is now the fallen but preserved world. In the world between curse and promise, between *tob* and *ra*, good and evil, God deals with humankind in a distinctive way. "He made them cloaks," says the Bible. That means that God accepts human beings for what they are.³⁴

The orders of preservation will be developed from here with two key threads. First, they are God's ongoing work to uphold and preserve what is good within creation. Second, in a move differing from traditional Catholic theologies of natural law, the orders of preservation acknowledge that the original order in creation no longer exists. What can be identified after the Fall is what has been preserved toward Christ. God's work now will be to preserve, now that creation is complete.³⁵

For all people, Christ is the one who is origin, essence, and goal. While humanity lost its center at the Fall, Christ becomes the new center for beginning, living, and ending all of human life. Bonhoeffer's theology on the nature of Christ is so radical that Christ "exists" only in relationship. For a fallen creation, where brokenness reigns over all relations, here is the possibility not only for a new creation but also for a new relation. There is a radical social aspect to the Christology presented by Bonhoeffer. He writes, "Christ can never be thought of as being for himself, but only in relation to me."³⁶ For humanity, which has known only the duality of *tob* and *ra*, in Christ a new possibility for unity is revealed. Could this be a clearer picture emerging from the static on the screen?

³³ Ibid., 6, citing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Theological Basis for the World Alliance?", in *Rusty Swords*, 157–73, at 162.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 139.

³⁵ Ballor, "Christ in Creation," 7.

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 47.

VI. A THEOLOGY OF ABILITY

The mission of ThisABILITY is to offer support and encouragement to families who have or are expecting children with special needs, to ensure they have the resources and information they need available to them, to educate and advocate, and to create awareness and acceptance. Our goal is reach out to families who have special needs children to help make their journey a little easier. . . . There are lots of questions and concerns, other families with special needs children can help with some of these.

—Statement from website of Virginia-based ThisABILITY, a nonprofit special-needs support group³⁷

Nancy Eiesland offers a compelling view of a “disabled God” who comes alongside physically disabled humanity. Yet perhaps her conclusion leaves both God and humanity too disabled. The greatest hope for humanity resides in meeting that broken God at the table and receiving strength from the Communion elements. Bonhoeffer helps to strengthen Eiesland’s argument by abling humanity and offering a strong call to human utility in a broken world. This strength is found in Christ, present and preserved within our bodies. All humanity may share in a varying spectrum of disabling bodies, minds, and spirits, and yet what is preserved within us is the strength of Christ.

To switch the channel of conversation from the “how” of creation to the “who” of Christ is a radical descrambling of the transmission signal for theology. “How” is a *dis*-abling question, while “who” is an abling question. Through Christ, all humanity is able to find unity and utility. Thomas E. Reynolds describes this move from judgment to justice for all quite well:

Jesus transforms what it means to be human, reversing conventional standards of human worth. The integrity of the human is neither a function of exchange value and productive ability nor a spiritualized body, but rather is based on God’s unconditional regard. And this is manifest most powerfully in a vulnerability infused with creative, relational, and available power.³⁸

Life is preserved in Christ. In response to that preservation, our lives deserve the fullest direction of our utility pointed toward the service of Christ. To develop these thoughts, Bonhoeffer navigates several themes in his ethical writing: the preservation of all life, the inherent ability of all life, and the

³⁷ <http://thisability.org/>.

³⁸ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 202.

call of each life to live into the “mandates” of creation by fulfilling its vocation in each sphere.

In his ethical work on “the natural,” Bonhoeffer explores issues related to suicide, euthanasia, abortion, and disabled life. Here, his ethic is consistent. Within each life, there is a preservation of the good pointed toward Christ. He uses the language of “the natural” to speak of “the form of life preserved by God after the Fall, with reference to the way in which it is directed towards the coming of Christ.”³⁹ This assurance forms the basis for protection for all bodies from any “arbitrary infringement” and preserves all of life from any unnatural death.⁴⁰ These rights must be protected, or all orders of society will be perverted.

In developing his ethics, Bonhoeffer remains true to his deepening thought on the orders of preservation but adds another dimension that both adds and complicates. He uses the phrase “mandates of creation” to describe the way Christ relates to the world through concrete structures that connect to the good that has been preserved. The mandates are labor, marriage, government, and the church.⁴¹ These are the spheres in which the preservation of the good will point toward specific purposes in the world, drawing on their strength in Christ. To add “for the sake of Christ” would be a helpful descriptive for each of the mandates. Humanity labors for the sake of Christ, marries for the sake of Christ, governs for the sake of Christ, and is the church for the sake of Christ. The human vocation in these areas seeks to work alongside the “Creator and Preserver of life” by seeking preservation over destruction. Bonhoeffer offers a high calling to those who live in the eighth day: “The strong will see in the weak not a lessening of their strength, but an incentive to higher deeds.”⁴² While I would challenge his use of “strong” and “weak” in this sentence as problematic language for disability, his high moral call to “higher deeds” is an abling challenge and command for all. He makes this challenge absolutely clear:

Something must still be said about the real social utility of seemingly useless, meaningless life. We cannot get around the fact that precisely this so-called worthless life of the incurably ill has elicited the greatest amount of social readiness for sacrifice and true heroism among the healthy, including physicians, caretakers, and relatives. Values of the highest real utility for the community have emerged precisely from such dedication of healthy life to sick life.⁴³

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 194.

In the context of the time and the oppressive structure of the German state, the word "utility" is a loaded one, since such lack of utility might be cause for death. Today, the words "strong" and "weak," as well as "meaningless" and "worthless," seem counterproductive to Bonhoeffer's argument. Despite this, Bonhoeffer moves us to a clearer picture of a life well lived. Able and disabled alike have a high calling to preserve life, to live into joy, and to seek the unity that Christ demands within self, among others, and in relationship to a life lived in response to God. Once we have spoken of what has been preserved, we name the gift and give thanks for it. Then, we live lives in grateful response to what is demanded of that gift.

In this way, a clearer picture forms for theology, ministry, vocation, and ethics: a clearer picture of the human person, the creator God, the preserving work of Christ in creation, and the demand of humanity to come alongside that redemptive work in the mandates of creation and the high call to vocational responsibility. This is the work to which both Georges and Harry are called in *Le huitième jour*. In the created order, each has a mandate to respond by working toward preserving what is good and what is otherwise. Without this, their faithful response to the high calling might be lost. This is what makes the film anything but sentimental. In fact, their relationship leans toward the sacramental, so much so that in a final scene Georges, in the presence of Harry, walks on water.

VII. FROM STATIC TO SACRAMENT

The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. Visitor and visited in loneliness recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body; they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other's benedictions as the benediction of the Lord Jesus Christ.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*⁴⁴

Bonhoeffer understood the unclarity of *to be* and *to have* of life in the real world. The preservation of the good in Christ, even in this breaking-apart world, is sacramental. We see that order of preservation in a picture that comes into focus in the words quoted above that form the basis of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. Static becomes sacrament when we tune into Christ in the real world, which is filled with all sorts of surprising abilities and disabilities for all

⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 20.

people. Bonhoeffer calls this reality “the sacrament of [the ethical] command.”⁴⁵

His words make the reader pause: *reality is the sacrament of the ethical*. Bonhoeffer asks us to consider that what is broken open as sacrament is the real. The real is the lived lives—the broken-open, imperfect, *tob/ra*, abled/disabled realities—of living human beings. Sacrament then is not a sacred other, but rather *this* life, *this* world, *this* broken reality. Bonhoeffer and Eiesland echo each other in this incredible claim. God’s reality is most realized in the midst of this breaking-apart life. Bonhoeffer might even use the word “twilight” here to signal that “twilight” is the sacrament of the ethical. The command to love God and neighbor is drawn into this ‘breaking-apart’ life and met with the sacramental love of a God who makes Godself known in this *tob/ra* world. God’s sacrament is seen even in the static.

Bonhoeffer’s move from “orders of creation” to “orders of preservation” names a foundation for ethics. To start an ethical conversation from the Doctrine of Creation is impossible because “creation and sin are so bound up together that no human eye can any longer separate the one from the other.”⁴⁶ A starting point of creation would lead to the same misrepresentation drawn by other sectors of Protestant theology that had used the orders of creation to rationalize division, war, and segregation. For Bonhoeffer, the starting point of ethics is preservation, discerning what has been preserved that is good and of God and pointed to Christ, within this fallen world. Discussions from the starting point of creation leave the theologian with static. But turning to preservation not only provides the foundation for ethical discourse but, even more, reveals reality to be the sacrament of ethics.

This view is refreshing in that reality is filled with static and is broken. But so too are the sacraments. Ethics, with its starting place in Christ, recognizes the brokenness of “this cross, this blood, this broken body.”⁴⁷ What is preserved within reality may appear broken, but this is the brokenness of, for, and toward the one who, by breaking his body, breaks open his love for the world.

With this high view, reality as sacrament of the ethical may sound disconcerting and perhaps even blasphemous. But in the area of theology and disability, reality is where expectations have fallen short. The ethical is a call to live a high calling, to respond to what in the past could have been construed as only an unreal possibility. Sacrament is the way that God breaks through,

⁴⁵ Stephen Plant, “The Sacrament of Ethical Reality: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Ethics for Christian Citizens,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 3 (2005): 71–87.

⁴⁶ John de Gruchy, afterword to Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 149.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 146.

blessing the situation. James Burtness comments that "it seems incongruous to place the words 'sacrament' and 'ethical' together. 'Sacrament' refers to a purely gracious act of God. 'Ethical' refers to a purely human act. 'Sacrament of the ethical' is a surprising, even a strange, phrase."⁴⁸ Ethics is intimately connected to the reality of creation as well as to what has been preserved within that creation. The gracious acts of God are perceived not only in the bread and wine, but also in human acts broken open as they model the forgiveness of Christ, preserving that salvific act of his through their own vocation. The ethicist then works toward a specific purpose. Bonhoeffer states this very specifically: "In the sphere of Christian ethics it is not what ought to be that effects what is, but what is that effects what ought to be."⁴⁹ What *is* is Christ. Human perception of disability then changes from "ought" to "is," reframing the picture by naming the good that already exists and inviting society to see that goodness preserved in Christ.

Eiesland, in *The Disabled God*, interprets beautifully the image of the "broken body" of the resurrected Christ as a powerful image of the "disabled God." For her, God's very being, God's own person, *is* disabled. We meet that God in the Eucharist where we all participate in the broken body. While her work does liberate those who have until now been considered disabled and creates new ways of thinking about the institution of the church, Eiesland focuses solely on a God who is fundamentally disabled. This assertion certainly may be affirmed through exegesis and theological reflection, but in the end, is this what we want to articulate about God? Bonhoeffer's theology affirms a God who is vulnerable and knows suffering, but who in the end is the affirmer and preserver of all of life.

VIII. THE ABLING OF ALL LIFE

Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," he said.

—John 20:26 (NIV)

For those who doubt their ability to navigate the complexity of life on the eighth day, Bonhoeffer offers hope and consolation. But even more so, he offers a directive charge to begin living and "shaping the future"⁵⁰ through that high calling, in order to utilize the best of our abilities in nurturing and

⁴⁸ James Burtness, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 43.

⁴⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 146.

⁵⁰ Burtness, *Shaping the Future*, 43.

caring for all of our life. This is a call to move beyond the locked doors of imagination, fear, and circumstance, and live into the peace of Christ present as origin, essence, and goal.

When I first saw *Le huitième jour* in my twenties, having my own child with Down syndrome was beyond my wildest imagination. But by age thirty, this was exactly my story. Every projection of what would be “the real” in my life radically changed. At that time, in the midst of palpable grief, all was static. One word that broke through in the noise was the voice of Amy Laura Hall in a book review in *The Christian Century* that I happened upon providentially. Her review, “Making Prenatal Choices,” began with an invitation to the high calling of “hospitality,”⁵¹ to receive the unexpected reality of the disabled into our own lives so that we do not reject the “Adams” in our prenatal choices. At that time, her words were both balm and the basis for a high calling. We received Caitlyn, espousing that rejection Hall named, with open arms and the deepest love.

Hall’s invitation to hospitality formed my response to the first decade of Caitlyn’s life. This spiritual practice is blessing and balm. Still, questions have remained regarding God’s ordering of creation and whether Caitlyn’s scrambled genetics are the work of a creator God or a creation gone awry. With this question, Bonhoeffer’s invitation to perceive the orders of preservation in all of life reduces prior questions to the unknowable, and allows a new way of seeing Christ’s activity in Caitlyn’s unique being.

Now, the theological task I learn in my living with Caitlyn is to see her clearly as a picture of God’s “preservation of creation” in Christ. Seeing her clearly in this manner, as wholly a mystery of all that is good and right in this world, helps me to tune out the static I so often let myself fall into by the way I see others. Through a new lens, the picture of that beauty becomes more clearly the way I see each person. Bernd Wannewetsch recognizes this transformation as the point “when people find the courage to resist distancing themselves from their disabled brothers and sisters and thus resist distancing themselves from the truth about all human life.”⁵²

Resisting distance and renewing relationship are the high commands for all of us who find ourselves living in the reality of the eighth day. We learn in Scripture that the eighth day is a day of sanctification. References in the Old Testament encourage us to consider the divine blessing and commissioning that occur on that day. The eighth day is the fulfillment of priestly ordination, the day for dedication of the firstborn, a day to mark in circumcision the covenant relationship, a day of gratitude and offering. A conversation that began

⁵¹ Amy Laura Hall, “Making Prenatal Choices,” *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2003, 32–36.

⁵² Wannewetsch, “My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness,” 361.

in the static discussion of what was created (or not) through creation and fall is then transformed into a sanctified commission by the preservation of Christ who blesses and upholds the eighth day.

In the creation story narrated by Georges in *Le huitième jour*, he tells us over and against the noisy buzz of a television set with a scrambled signal that on the first day there was nothing; there was only music. Perhaps he heard something deeper than most of us allow ourselves. A full octave is completed by the eight-note count from C to C. Music would be incomplete without that eighth note. Perhaps so too would we. Each note ascending to C points to that completion, just as each of us pointing to Christ witnesses to his preservation within our lives and his completion of all that is, bringing perfection and completion to all the *tob* and *ra*. Christ as origin, essence, goal, is Bonhoeffer's vision for the abling of all life. Christ's presence in creation, persisting in the orders of preservation, is the first note. Christ's redemption of creation is the eighth. Christ as origin, essence, and goal makes that octave complete. Georges and Harry in *Le huitième jour* tune out the static and live into this clear, full-bodied sacramental picture. Bonhoeffer's natural theology is an affirmation of Christ's presence amid this preserved reality that makes life for all of us sacramental.