

## BONHOEFFER'S MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Patrick Franklin  
McMaster Divinity College

### *Abstract*

This article provides a detailed exposition of the missional features of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. Three major insights are explored. First, the Church engages in mission by proclaiming and embodying the gospel. Secondly, the Church accomplishes its mission by faith, not by "religion." Thirdly, the Church pursues its mission by existing-for-others in a life of costly discipleship and responsible action in the midst of the world.

### *Introduction*

Although numerous features of Bonhoeffer's theology have drawn the attention of theologians, pastors, and lay people (such as his ecclesiology or Christology), the missiological elements of his thought, while compelling, have not been explored thoroughly. According to Richard Bliese, "Bonhoeffer's relationship to missiology has rarely interested the theological community."<sup>1</sup> This lack of interest is probably due to an absence of a systematic treatment of mission in Bonhoeffer's writings. However, it ignores the fact that Bonhoeffer often contemplated missiological themes, as he confronted the pressing theological and practical issues of his time. As Bliese notes, "it is surprising how often Bonhoeffer ends up addressing the same pertinent questions as his mission colleagues, both past and present."<sup>2</sup>

1. Bliese, "Bonhoeffer and the Great Commission," 253.
2. Bliese, "Bonhoeffer and the Great Commission," 256.

Thus, Bliese identifies Bonhoeffer as a missiologist, if only an unconscious one.

I suggest that another reason for this lack of attention is that his missiology is not explicit, nor is it expressed in the language of twentieth-century Western evangelicalism. Rather, every aspect of his theology, and particularly his understanding of the Church, is quietly infused with a *missional* perspective due to the incarnational quality of his thought. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is a missional ecclesiology. But what does the term "missional" mean?

The term "missional" was coined to reflect the understanding that mission is not simply a sub-category of ecclesiology, but belongs to the essence of what it means to be the Church. The Church does not "do" mission; rather, the Church "is" mission.<sup>3</sup> The Church does not "have" a mission; God has created a sent-Church, a missional Church. This view is based on the missional or sending nature of God (i.e., the *missio Dei*) as God sends his Son, his Spirit, and his Church into the world. The concept of the missional Church has its roots in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, particularly with respect to his observations of modern Western culture and his proposal that the Western Church become a "missionary Church," which exists as the living "hermeneutic of the gospel" before God in the midst of the world.<sup>4</sup> In part, this view of the Church has arisen out of a renewed emphasis on the need for the gospel to confront and convert Western culture and to alert the Church to the ways in which it has uncritically or unwittingly assimilated Western cultural assumptions into its theology and life.<sup>5</sup>

3. Guder, "Missional Theology," 5.

4. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227–32; See also his *Foolishness to the Greeks*.

5. One such assumption, which is challenged by the missional view of the Church, is the belief in a (thoroughly or foundationally) Christianized Western culture. This view is often described as the Christendom model and is usually traced back to the Constantinian era, when the Church first became a major political and religious force with a secure leadership role in society. In contrast, the missional view attempts to address the question of how we can reach our

The missional Church concept is expanded in the works of The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), a group of scholars that has developed and applied Newbigin's ideas within a North American context.<sup>6</sup> They have published their research and reflection as a collaborative series, entitled "The Gospel and Our Culture Series."<sup>7</sup> They offer a number of suggestions for reconfiguring the Church from a missional perspective, some of which include cultivating a fuller understanding of conversion (as communal, not just individualistic), embodying the gospel (as being relational, not merely propositional), promoting kingdom values (instead of consumer ones) and rejecting a Christendom mentality (the Church is not an institution of power and privilege, but a community of sent-people).

Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is missional in the sense that mission, understood incarnationally and relationally, is essential to his theology of Church.<sup>8</sup> For Bonhoeffer, mission is not something peripheral to the Church, just one of its many functions, but is in fact integral to the very being and existence of the Church. Thus, Bonhoeffer does not merely have a theology of mission, which is subordinate to or separate from his theology of Church; instead, he has a *missional ecclesiology*.<sup>9</sup> This article will demonstrate the missional nature of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology by examining several missional themes in his writings. They can be categorized broadly under the following headings: 1. The Church proclaims and embodies the gospel; 2. The

own culture, which is actually post-Christian or post-Christendom, as missionaries in our own land.

6. The most prominent writers of the GOCN are George Hunsberger, Darrell Guder, Craig Van Gelder, Alan Roxburgh, and Lois Barrett.

7. The most important of these books is Guder, *Missional Church*.

8. For an account of Bonhoeffer's relational approach to theological anthropology and ecclesiology, see Green, *Bonhoeffer*. For the importance of Christology for Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, see, for example, Palmer, "The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 132, and Pangritz, "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?" 134.

9. For Bonhoeffer, neither missiology nor ecclesiology is subordinate to the other, but both of these are determined by Christology.

Church practices “religionless” Christianity; and 3. The Church exists-for-others.<sup>10</sup>

*Missional Theme # 1: The Church Proclaims and Embodies the Gospel*

For Bonhoeffer, the Church’s mission includes both proclamation and action. According to Thomas Ogletree, in Bonhoeffer’s thought, the primary business of the Church is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> This is a fair assessment, since Bonhoeffer frequently stresses the sovereignty of the Word of God and the proclamation of that Word.<sup>12</sup> He claims that the first demand God places upon the Church is to be witnesses of Jesus Christ before the world.<sup>13</sup> This proclamation comes in the form of an announcement. It should be simple, lucid, and concrete, not complex, ambiguous, and abstract. Bonhoeffer writes, “[The disciples’] proclamation is clear and concise. They simply announce that the kingdom of God has drawn nigh, and summon men to repentance and faith.”<sup>14</sup> In its proclamation of the gospel, the Church ought not to rely on methods of persuasion or techniques of emotional manipulation. “Those who have ears to hear have heard all there is to hear.”<sup>15</sup> The

10. I do not claim that Bonhoeffer’s theology fully endorses the ecclesiology of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, but only its central claim that mission belongs to the essence of the Church. In fact, I would argue that Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology provides an important corrective to some problematic tendencies and claims made by the GOCN, for example its selection of controlling texts in Scripture to support its claims, its dichotomist and reactionary tendencies (such as movement versus institution, personal versus corporate salvation, inward versus outward spirituality, propositional versus relational truth, etc.), and its use of mission as a controlling metanarrative. I explore these themes in detail in my unpublished Th.M. thesis: “Bonhoeffer for the Missional Church.”

11. Ogletree, “The Church’s Mission,” 468.

12. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 250.

13. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 200. For the importance of witness for the concept of the missional Church, see Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 44, 50, 109, 233.

14. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 210.

15. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 211.

gospel is not to be proclaimed in a manner that promotes cheap grace, which appeals to people's emotional needs but does not make a costly claim on their lives.

Bonhoeffer argues that such cheapening of grace is inevitable when preachers focus exclusively on the weaknesses and faults of sinners. It is too easy to manipulate people into a "decision" for conversion when they are feeling feeble, destitute, and guilty. He asks, "Are we to fall upon a few unfortunate people in their hour of need and exercise a sort of religious compulsion on them?"<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer refuses to do this. As James Woelfel comments, "Bonhoeffer cuts through the church's traditional formulaic descriptions of the necessary ingredients in repentance and conversion."<sup>17</sup> Not that he dismisses the seriousness of sin. On the contrary, his position implies that the only way to take sin seriously enough is to recognize its all-encompassing pervasiveness in human lives. Sin is present not only in what is apparently "evil," but also in what is apparently "good" (humanly speaking). God's concern for human sinfulness reaches beyond outward appearances and obvious shortcomings to the very being or nature of humanity. Therefore, the gospel concerns the centre of humanity's existence and not merely the periphery (sin is not just what humanity-in-Adam *does*; it is what humanity-in-Adam *is*).<sup>18</sup> God's concern for human sin cannot be restricted to deficiencies in human psychology, spirituality, morality, or ability.

Consequently, Bonhoeffer argues that the gospel must be contextualized and proclaimed to "good" and "happy" people, just as it is to "evil" and "despairing" people. Unfortunately, according to Bonhoeffer, traditional Lutheran forms of proclamation, which focus on human weakness and misery, simply do not address such "good" people.<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer laments, "But if [the 'good' person] cannot be brought to see and admit that his happiness is really an evil, his health sickness, and his vigour

16. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 280.

17. Woelfel, "Bonhoeffer's Portrait," 349.

18. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 311.

19. It is important to note here that Bonhoeffer's criticism of Lutheranism is not directed at Luther *per se*, but at the Lutheran tradition that followed him, particularly in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms.

despair, the theologian is at his wit's end."<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer faults Lutheranism for narrowly directing the message of the gospel toward the "evil man" without considering how the "good man" might find Christ.<sup>21</sup> Such an approach espouses a narrow view of conversion and tends to give preference to one particular religious experience (solace from guilt) while ignoring the richness and diversity of conversion narratives in the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses humanity in the totality of its existence—its strengths and weaknesses, its joy and suffering, its wisdom and ignorance, its affluence and poverty, and in the richness of its diversity in gender, ethnicity, and culture. The gospel concerns not only what people are being saved *from* (sin, guilt, death, etc.), but casts a vision of the new life that people are being saved *for* (God's missional purpose for them). The gospel calls people to become participants in something much bigger than themselves, namely the Kingdom of God.

While proclamation is crucial to the Church's mission, it must never be separated from embodiment of the gospel in concrete action and loving service. Bonhoeffer notes that when Jesus says to his disciples, "You *are* the salt of the earth," he means they will be his witnesses in the totality of their existence, both in word *and* deed, proclaiming *and* acting. The disciples do not possess the salt; they themselves are the salt, their lives being characterized by the beatitudes (Matt 5:1–12).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in calling the disciples the "light of the world," Jesus means, "The light is not an instrument which has been put into their hands,

20. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 341.

21. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63. See also Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 125.

22. Woelfel provides several examples, including the call of Jesus' disciples in Matt 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20, and Luke 5:1–11; the conversion of Zacchaeus; the woman who anointed Jesus' feet; the shepherds and the wise men who were present at Jesus' birth; the centurion of Capernaum; the eunuch whom Philip baptized (Acts 8:26–39); Cornelius and his household (Acts 10); Nathanael (John 1:47); Joseph of Arimathea; and the women at Jesus' tomb ("Bonhoeffer's Portrait," 348).

23. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 116.

such as their preaching. It is the disciples themselves.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Jesus’ analogy of a “city set on a hill” implies that the disciples are a visible community which lives out its counter-cultural faith before a watching world. Christ commissions the Church to exist as salt, light, and a city set on a hill, and empowers Christians to bring his presence to others in their words and deeds, through which Christ speaks and acts.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Christian mission implies being-sent by the initiative, direction, and efficacy of the Living Christ. Our mission is, first and foremost, Christ’s mission. In reflecting upon the commission Christ gives, Bonhoeffer writes, “‘Behold, I send you.’ For this is no way they have chosen themselves, no undertaking of their own. It is, in the strict sense of the word, a *mission*.”<sup>26</sup> Since mission means being-sent by the initiative of Christ, Christians do not choose their own mission field. Rather, in obedience to Christ, they must be his witnesses in whatever context he places them. Furthermore, being-sent implies that Christians do not rely on their own resources, but on the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup> Reliance upon our own powers and methods of argumentation, salesmanship, and emotional manipulation is not only futile, but also potentially harmful. Bonhoeffer contends, “Every attempt to impose the gospel by force, to run after people and proselytize them, to use our own resources to arrange the salvation of other people, is both futile and dangerous.”<sup>28</sup>

Bonhoeffer believes that the gospel must be proclaimed and embodied in such a way that preserves the mystery of Christ’s presence in the world in his Church.<sup>29</sup> Sharing the mystery of the Christian faith arises as an overflow of disciplined waiting and

24. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 117.

25. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 117–18, 184.

26. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 214.

27. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 193. Bonhoeffer writes, “St Paul says: ‘No man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit’ (I Cor. 12.3). It is impossible to surrender our lives to Jesus or call him Lord of our own free will.”

28. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 186.

29. Mathews, “Responsible Sharing,” 21.

praying, which leads to acting.<sup>30</sup> In order to be an authentic and effective witness, the Church must first be apprehended and directed by the Word of Christ and infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Bonhoeffer exhorts the Church to regain an emphasis on the practice of arcane or secret discipline, which is prayer and righteous action.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, since Christian mission depends on the initiative and efficacious action of God, its success or failure cannot be deduced according to human standards.<sup>32</sup> Concretely, this means that success cannot be assessed by the numerical growth of the Church. Bonhoeffer warns, “The disciples are few in number, and will always be few. This saying of Jesus forestalls all exaggerated hopes of success. Never let a disciple of Jesus pin his hopes on large numbers.”<sup>33</sup> In a passage concerning success in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer adamantly rejects the following two propositions: (1) success is identical with good; and, (2) only good is successful. To identify success with “good” is to pursue success as an end in itself. This leads to totalizing ideologies and practices, in which successful ends justify the means employed to achieve them. Precariously, when enamoured with success, people tend to emphasize the benefits associated with a given goal and often underrate or minimize the problems and compromises associated with the means necessary to achieve that goal. To support this view, Bonhoeffer makes the following comment about the “successful man”:

30. Paul Ballard notes that, for Bonhoeffer, such waiting protects the Church against both pragmatism and despair. In addition, waiting would be important for constructing a faithful “non-religious” interpretation of the gospel (Ballard, “Worship in a Secular World,” 35).

31. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 281, 286, 300. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of ethical reality is relevant here. The “ethical reality” does not concern timeless and absolute rules, but is about “being drawn in into the form of Jesus Christ.” Such formation is not simply one’s efforts to follow Jesus’ example, but involves being apprehended by the Living Christ, being re-created in his image, and being filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Christian ethics do not establish and defend universal principles; they serve the revealing ministry of Christ through his Church. See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 81–82.

32. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 193, 195.

33. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 190.



The successful man presents us with accomplished facts which can never again be reversed. What he destroys cannot be restored. What he constructs will acquire at least a prescriptive right in the next generation. No indictment can make good the guilt which the successful man has left behind him. The indictment falls silent with the passage of time, but the success remains and determines the course of history.<sup>34</sup>

To affirm the second proposition, “only good is successful,” is to endorse a form of Christianity without the cross. Bonhoeffer protests, “The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success as its standard.”<sup>35</sup> Judged by human standards of success, the life and teachings of Christ seem backward and impractical, even foolish.<sup>36</sup> Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the successful,” but “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “the mourning,” “the meek” (Matt 5:1–12). In contrast, pragmatic and success-driven mission models avoid the beatitudes and the burden of the cross. Consequently, the inevitable outcome of such missionary efforts is the peddling of cheap grace, which contradicts the New Testament’s teaching about Christian mission and “simply bores the world to disgust.”<sup>37</sup>

Christians should not attempt to be strong and triumphant when the Word of God chooses to be clothed in weakness and humility, for “To try and force the Word on the world by hook or by crook is to make the living Word of God into a mere idea, and the world would be perfectly justified in refusing to listen to an idea for which it had no use.”<sup>38</sup> We must never forget that the gospel does not originate from the stagnant, confined, and impotent words of humans, but from the living, free, and efficacious Word of God. Only Christ can address people at the centre of their being; therefore, Christian mission points only to Christ.

34. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 77. This extract reminds one of Hegel’s “world historical individual” (Hegel, *Philosophy of History*).

35. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 78.

36. Consider, for example, Jesus’ teaching in such passages as Matt 5:38–39, 43–45a, or Luke 9:23–24.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 186.

38. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 187.

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the transcendent question “Who is Jesus Christ?” must continually awaken, shock, and redirect our thinking, proclaiming, and enacting of the gospel of Christ.<sup>39</sup> In a letter from prison he writes:

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.<sup>40</sup>

*Missional Theme # 2: The Church Practises Religionless Christianity*

The passage from *Letters and Papers from Prison* quoted above begins with the question, “Who is Christ for us today?” and ends with some exploratory thoughts about Christian faith in a “religionless” time.<sup>41</sup> By connecting these two ideas, Bonhoeffer interweaves a christocentric critique of religion with the following missiological questions: Who is Jesus Christ? And what is he saying to the world right now? Thus, his reflections concerning religionless Christianity inherently contain a distinct evangelistic thrust.<sup>42</sup> In the present section, I will investigate some missional features of Bonhoeffer’s notion of religionless Christianity.

To understand Bonhoeffer’s conception of religionless Christianity, we must first examine what he means by “religion”.

39. In a recent discussion of the significance of Bonhoeffer’s question for contemporary cultural engagement, Stackhouse poses the complementary question: “Who are we for Jesus Christ today?” (Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*).

40. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 279.

41. Was Bonhoeffer’s prediction of a coming “religionless” time premature, given the apparent resurgence of spirituality today? Not if we interpret carefully what he meant by religion, according to Heinz Eduard Tödt (*Authentic Faith*, 40–55).

42. Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” 64.

To explain his view, I will elucidate the distinctions he makes between religion and faith.

*Natural Religion versus Revelatory Faith*

One distinction Bonhoeffer makes is that while religion is based on human means of knowing, Christian faith is revelatory and comes from God alone. Along these lines, Bethge suggests that Bonhoeffer “drew a distinction, learned from Luther, between faith and religion—religion coming from the flesh, but faith from the Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> Humans cannot exercise faith through their own knowledge and effort because they are trapped within themselves, having a *cor curvum in se* (heart turned in upon itself). Thus, Bonhoeffer argues, “Natural religion, too, remains flesh and seeks after flesh. If revelation is to come to human beings, they need to be changed entirely. Faith itself must be created in them.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, Jesus did not found a new religion but recreated and renewed a part of the world, namely, his Church—the new humanity. While religion is concerned with human efforts and human piety, faith is oriented toward the reality of God. While religion originates with human words, faith comes only from God’s Word (apart from the Word of God, religious words are superfluous).<sup>45</sup>

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer continues his polemic against natural religion. He discusses, and subsequently rejects, a variety of attempts to know God and to act ethically, including reason, fanaticism, conscience, duty, freedom, and private virtue. All such attempts rely on human potential and capabilities, not on the simple Word of God. Thus, in employing these means, people rely on their own knowledge of good and evil, rather than God’s Word, and judge themselves and others by that

43. Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” 66.

44. Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 58.

45. Bonhoeffer, *Way to Freedom*, 47, 230. Elsewhere, Bonhoeffer differentiates between human community and community of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, the differences he highlights in this early work correspond closely to his later thoughts concerning the distinction between religion and faith. See *Life Together*, 38–42.

knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, true faith is exercised in simple obedience and devotion to Christ. Bonhoeffer writes, “It is not by astuteness, by knowing the tricks, but only by simple steadfastness in the truth of God, by training the eye upon this truth until it is simple and wise, that there comes the experience and knowledge of the ethical reality.”<sup>47</sup>

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer employs the Apostle Paul’s criticism of “the circumcision group” (Gal 2:11–21) in his attack on religion. He writes, “The Pauline question whether περιτομή [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from περιτομή is also freedom from religion.”<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer refers to Paul’s contention that, in coercing new Christians to be circumcised, the Judaizers were making circumcision a condition of grace. Thus, they were erecting a contractual system of works-righteousness in place of the gracious covenantal action and calling of God. For Paul, true circumcision (true faith) has nothing to do with outward appearances, but concerns the heart and is accomplished by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:5; 6:15; Rom 2:25–29). In applying these passages, Bonhoeffer argues that religion is humanity’s attempt to reach God on the basis of its own intentions, efforts, and capabilities. It does not set people free-for-God-and-others, but imprisons and enslaves them in human expectations, laws, systems, and ideologies. In contrast, true faith is based on the gracious and unconditional love and action of God.

#### *Two Spheres versus the Wholeness of Reality*

A second distinction Bonhoeffer makes is that while religion is always something fragmentary, faith is always something whole. It involves the whole of one’s existence, because Jesus calls

46. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 22–33, 67. Bonhoeffer notes that these options all failed to empower the German Evangelical Church in his day to critique and resist the Third Reich.

47. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67.

48. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 281.

people not merely to a new religion but to new life.<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer maintains a conscious effort to avoid dichotomist thinking, which he refers to as “thinking in terms of two spheres.” He seeks to expose the danger in Christian thought and practice of separating the sacred sphere from the secular.<sup>50</sup> Such a division creates the possibility for people to compartmentalize their lives into disconnected and fragmentary categories. On the one hand, they attempt to practice a “spirituality” which does not impact their “secular” existence. Or, on the other hand, they attempt to live a “secular” existence which claims autonomy from and supremacy over their “spiritual” lives.

Bonhoeffer identifies a number of false dichotomies that typically infiltrate the Church. For example, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, he confronts the tendency of the Lutheran Church during his time to divide inward faith from outward practice. This division originated from a misunderstanding and miscontextualization of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, which resulted in the promotion of “cheap grace” and the separation of faith from action, and belief from holiness. In a later section of *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer criticizes the dichotomization of private and public life. This critique stems from his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, in which he argues that Jesus’ precept of non-violence applies equally to both private and public life. For, “He [Jesus] is the Lord of all life, and demands undivided allegiance.”<sup>51</sup> The problem with dichotomist thinking is that it assumes there are realities in the world that exist outside of the reality of Christ.<sup>52</sup> But this ignores the Incarnation, which demonstrates that Christ is the unifying centre of *all* reality. For Bonhoeffer, “The New Testament is concerned solely with the manner in which the reality of Christ assumes reality in the present world, which it has already encompassed, seized, and possessed.”<sup>53</sup> True faith is founded upon the

49. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 362.

50. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 193–94.

51. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 83, 143.

52. Rochelle, “Mystery and Relationship,” 269.

53. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 195.

Incarnate Christ, who is the Centre and Mediator of all reality.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer regards “thinking in terms of two spheres” as being religious precisely because it ignores the reality of God in the Incarnation of Christ.

*Private Individualism versus Public Witness*

Thirdly, Bonhoeffer describes the individualistic handling of the gospel as “religion.”<sup>55</sup> As the political, spiritual, and racial oppression of Hitler’s Germany worsened, Bonhoeffer became increasingly frustrated with individualistic and inward forms of piety. He criticized the practice of sentimental and self-preserving spiritual activities, which did not lead Christians in Germany to stand in solidarity with the oppressed or to speak out in protest against the atrocities of the Nazis. Hence, his famous cry, “Only he who cries out for the Jews can sing the Gregorian chant.”<sup>56</sup> Complementing his attack on individualism is a polemic against exaggerating the other-worldliness of Christianity and reducing the gospel to a religion of soul-saving. Of course, Bonhoeffer recognized the importance of eternal destiny; however, he stressed that Christianity is concerned with more than just the afterlife. The Incarnation demonstrates that Christ came to reconcile and restore *this* world. Moreover, the Old Testament prophets showed a perpetual concern for the present earthly life, and thus they confronted oppression, poverty, and godlessness, and exhorted justice, charity, and holiness. Bonhoeffer writes:

Hasn’t the individualistic question about personal salvation almost completely left us all? Aren’t we really under the impression that there are more important things than that question (perhaps not more

54. See also Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 299. Bonhoeffer writes, “But this restoration of the divine image concerns not just a part, but the whole of human nature. It is not enough for man simply to recover right ideas about God, or to obey his will in the isolated actions of his life. No, man must be re-fashioned as a living whole in the image of God.”

55. Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” 67. Barry Harvey, who has learned much from Bonhoeffer, provides a helpful summary of the invention of the word “religion” as a term referring to private, internal beliefs detached from context and practice (Harvey, *Can These Bones Live*, 110–14).

56. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 441.

important than the *matter* itself, but more important than the *question!*)? . . . Does the question about saving one's soul appear in the Old Testament at all? Aren't righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth the focus of everything, and isn't it true that Rom. 3.24ff. is not an individualistic doctrine of salvation, but the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous? It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist *for* this world; I mean that, not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystic pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup>

#### *God of the Gaps versus God at the Centre of Existence*

Fourthly, Bonhoeffer contrasts genuine faith with the religious concept of the *deus ex machina*.<sup>58</sup> This concept has basically two components. First, Bonhoeffer refers to the tendency of religious people to invoke the name or presence of God when human knowledge and strength are exhausted. Typically, such people present the gospel in a manner that is emotionally manipulative or psychologically appeasing. Bonhoeffer writes:

Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail—in fact it is always the *deus ex machina* that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure—always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, people appeal to God as the explanation for some unsolvable problem (an appeal to the mysterious unknown, etc.), or, in Bonhoeffer's words, they employ "God" as a "stop-gap for

57. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 285–86.

58. Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 67. *Deus ex machina* (literally "god out of a machine") was a literary device that ancient poets and playwrights used to untangle their characters from difficult tensions of fate in the story's plot. Essentially, they would summon a deity to the scene in order to resolve such conflicts easily and instantly.

59. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 281–82.

the incompleteness of [human] knowledge.”<sup>60</sup> However, when such needs are not felt, they push God out of the centre to the periphery of their lives. For example, ancient civilizations did not possess modern scientific knowledge of the natural world and the universe. Thus, to make sense of their world, they deified various aspects of nature and worshiped them as gods. The problem with such thinking, according to Bonhoeffer, is that as humanity matures and attains more knowledge of itself and the natural world, it reinterprets rationally what it formerly found mysterious and unexplainable—and it does this “without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis called God.’”<sup>61</sup> Consequently, humanity pushes God further and further to the periphery of its existence and increasingly lives as if God does not exist. As Clifford Green comments, “[Religion] denies the lordship of Christ. It confines Christ to the margins of existence, refusing his place as the ‘center’ of life, and his being as the Mediator of all human experience.”<sup>62</sup>

The other component of *deus ex machina* is the tendency of religious people to appeal to God when their resources are spent. God is expected to appear suddenly and miraculously to save the day like an obedient genie that must appear at the beckoning call of its master. As a contemporary example, we may think of people who are seduced by a “health and wealth” gospel, which promises happiness, riches, power, influence, security, and privilege.<sup>63</sup> They become blinded to the fact that God commands blessing *and* curse, affirmation *and* discipline, prosperity *and* struggle. They are not prepared for desert experiences or the dark night of the soul. They easily become entangled in triumphalist ideologies that support their own agendas and concerns. They forget that God’s calling is not a guarantee for earthly security, but includes the responsibility to identify with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed. They are impressed with God’s

60. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 311.

61. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 325.

62. Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 266.

63. For example, see Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* and Roberts and Montgomery, *God's Formula for Success and Prosperity*.



abstract, powerful, and dazzling attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence), appealing to them to justify their own pursuits for glory and dominion, but they underrate or even deplore the concreteness, weakness, and shame of the Incarnate Christ. They forget that the way of the disciple is the way of Christ, and the way of Christ is the way of the cross.

*Privilege and Status versus a Servant Posture*

A fifth characteristic of “religion” is that it “has shaped Christianity in such a way that it developed the privileged class of the initiated over the outsiders.”<sup>64</sup> The Church in Christendom achieved an honoured status and assumed a position of guardianship and tutelage over society. Christian religious institutions became powerful and influential, fostering dependency in their members. To correct this trend, Bonhoeffer insists that (religion-less) Christianity must come to terms with the world’s coming-of-age and its ensuing rejection of the patronage of the Church (of Christendom, to use contemporary missional parlance). Paradoxically, he writes that the world’s coming-of-age “leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him.” This is not to deny the presence of God in our lives, but to affirm it radically: “The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.”<sup>65</sup> God does not want Christians to remain dependent upon the Church, enslaved in religiosity and manic-depressive cycles of mountain-valley emotional or spiritual experiences.<sup>66</sup> Rather, God wants Christians to be connected to others in the Church in committed and responsible relationships, and to be mutually

64. Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” 67.

65. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360.

66. However, as Bonhoeffer discovered in the Afro-American churches he visited in the United States, there is an important place for emotional experience. See, Zerner, “Bonhoeffer’s American Experiences,” 261–82.

edified, strengthened, and set free for their existence in the world as Christ's body, witnesses, and ambassadors.<sup>67</sup>

*Cultural Retreat versus "Worldly" Engagement*

While authentic faith leads to a transformative encounter with the real world, religion encourages a ghettoizing or sect mentality. Bonhoeffer often commends the "worldliness" of Christianity, but in so doing he is not promoting an irresponsible, careless, or hedonistic attitude or lifestyle. He is careful to distinguish between genuine and false forms of worldliness. As Anthony Wesson remarks, "It is worth noting first of all that Bonhoeffer's use of this phrase suggests that he thought that there was a *spurious* worldliness."<sup>68</sup> For Bonhoeffer, worldliness can only be genuine when it is grounded in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup> Thus, according to Wesson, true worldliness is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ and it includes embracing the world as the object of God's love.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, true worldliness implies a necessary tension of being-in-the-Church *and* being-in-the-world. In other words, it does not imply the elimination of the visible Church. Bonhoeffer exhorts:

Let the Christian remain in the world . . . for the sake of the Body of the incarnate Christ and for the sake of the Church. Let him remain in

67. During his captivity in prison near the end of the war, Bonhoeffer began to think more radically about the form and function of the Church of the future. He was confident that Nazi rule would soon be over, either as a result of being overthrown by the resistance movement or by losing the war. Thus, he pondered the potential shape and function of the Church in a shattered and aimless post-war Germany. It was during this time that his ideas about "religionless" Christianity in a "world-come-of-age" came into being, out of his meditation upon the question "Who is Christ for us today?" While these thoughts were generally fragmentary and explorative, Bonhoeffer was nevertheless sure of one thing: the Church of the future would be different, because the old issues, traditions, and structures would no longer be relevant in a "religionless" era. Thus, there would be no sure and infallible methods or techniques to reconfigure the Church. Only radical discipleship to the Living Christ and obedience to the simple will of God would lead the Church forward into the future.

68. Wesson, "The Impact of Bonhoeffer," 290.

69. Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 68–69.

70. Wesson, "The Impact of Bonhoeffer," 291.

the world . . . and let him live the life of his secular calling in order to show himself as a stranger in this world all the more. But that is only possible if we are visible members of the Church.<sup>71</sup>

Because of the Incarnation and the reconciling work of Christ, the world is granted renewed dignity and value, as it is restored to be what God originally intended. Thus, genuine worldliness and genuine spirituality coexist inseparably in and through Christ, who is the Centre and Mediator of all reality. As Bonhoeffer reflects in *Ethics*, “In Christ the reality of God meets the reality of the world and allows us to share in this real encounter . . . Christian life is participation in the encounter of Christ with the world.”<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, the Church’s mission is to demonstrate before the world what it means to live in the reality of Christ, through its being, proclaiming, and acting. There are no easy shortcuts or strategies the Church can employ to accomplish its mission. Christian life is not about following a series of unchanging principles, but being oriented toward the Living God, who is the only foundation and Reality.<sup>73</sup> By faith, the Church must live before God in a world of changing contexts and circumstances, constantly asking the fresh and transcendent question, “Who is Christ for us today?” It is only by living in the reality of Christ that human existence becomes truly human and creaturely. As Bonhoeffer writes, “The real man is at liberty to be his Creator’s creature.”<sup>74</sup> Through the Incarnation, Christ redefined the meaning of “natural” to refer to what is oriented and directed toward the reality of God and the return of Christ. Conversely, to be “unnatural” and “unworldly” is to resist the

71. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 264–65.

72. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 132. Elsewhere, Bonhoeffer employs the musical concept of polyphony to illustrate the harmony of Christian spirituality and worldly existence. As a musical work incorporates many diverse parts and voices into an over-arching theme, in such a way that the parts contribute to the main theme without losing their individual distinctiveness, beauty, and significance, so Christian life is composed of many diverse aspects, which receive a richer, more comprehensive meaning when they are tuned to the voice of Christ. See Kemp, “The Polyphonous Christian Community,” 6.

73. Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, 14, 33–34.

74. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 82, 143, 148.

coming of him who is the Origin, Centre, and Mediator of all life. Such defiance can only mean the continuation of life in a state of untruth, decay, and, ultimately, death.

*Missional Theme # 3: The Church Exists-for-Others*

Bonhoeffer's notion of existence for others occurs early in his work and is based on his relational theological anthropology. According to Bonhoeffer, a human person is a being-in-relation, because he or she is made in the image of the triune God who exists in a dynamic and ecstatic relationship (three distinct persons, directed toward one another and united in perichoretic union). In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the intrinsic sociality of the human person and the harmony of the primal community in being oriented toward God and others. In *Act and Being*, he points to the freedom of God for others in binding and committing himself to the Church community. And, in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer interprets the creation of humanity in the *imago Dei* (image of God) in relational terms, as being-free-for God and others.<sup>75</sup> At the Fall, Adam and Eve (humanity) usurp God's place as the centre and source of life, freedom, and truth. In so doing, they re-define freedom as freedom-for-self and unwittingly become slaves to sin, slaves to their own corrupt nature. Henceforth, their existence is no longer characterized by freedom for God and each other, but by enslavement to self, having a *cor curvum in se* (a heart turned in upon itself). Salvation, then, involves redeeming human beings from this self-absorbed state. It means awakening in believers true freedom for God and others. The Church, which is the new humanity redeemed in Christ, is the community in which this other-centeredness is realized and practised with the hope of being finally consummated at the *eschaton*. Moreover, this newly constituted unity of the Church is not the oneness of uniformity, in which communal-absorption simply replaces self-absorption; rather, it is a oneness built upon the distinction of persons united in one Spirit.

75. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer further develops his notion of being-for-others, by incorporating his maturing theology of the cross. He insists upon the Christian's obligation to participate in the sufferings of Christ in and for the world. Genuine discipleship is not existence in a detached spiritual bliss; it means following Christ in the way of the cross. Just as Christ bears our burdens, so we are called to bear the burdens of others. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."<sup>76</sup> However, such suffering is not an end in itself, as in extreme forms of asceticism, but is a means for bringing God's reconciliatory love to a needy and hostile world. Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross is evident in a number of his subsequent works as well. In *Life Together*, he argues that once someone has experienced the grace and mercy of God, that person will henceforth aspire not to judge others but only to serve them. Moreover, his discussion of the ministry of bearing the burdens of others is grounded in a theology of the cross.<sup>77</sup> In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer reflects upon Matt 5:10<sup>78</sup> and argues that Christ supports those who suffer for just causes, even if their suffering does not explicitly concern the proclamation of the gospel, because such suffering identifies Christians with Christ.<sup>79</sup>

Bonhoeffer's reflections concerning the Church's existence-for-others are most developed (yet still explorative) in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. He argues that genuine obedience to Jesus includes a willingness to suffer for others. Such being-for-others and suffering in solidarity with others is the supreme expression of our freedom in Christ. Bonhoeffer's most radical ideas about the Church's existence-for-others arise from his fervent and disciplined meditation upon the mystery of the Incarnation. As he contemplates the full divinity and humanity of Christ, he realizes that Jesus' weakness and suffering in finite, bodily, human existence was the supreme expression of the

76. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 87–89.

77. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 96, 101.

78. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

79. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 62.

victory and supremacy of God. In his Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus shows us that the true nature of both God and humanity (in the *imago Dei*) is being-there-for-others. Thus, Bonhoeffer refers to Christ as the “man for others.” In his *Outline for a Book*, Bonhoeffer writes:

It is only this “being there for others,” maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a “religious” relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in “existence for others,” through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation. God in human form—not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying, nor in the conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc., nor yet in the Greek divine-human form of “man in himself,” but “the man for others,” and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.<sup>80</sup>

Since the Church’s being and mission are created and defined by the being and mission of the Incarnate Christ, the fact that “Jesus is there only for others” implies that “The church is the church only when it exists for others . . . Its mission is to tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.”<sup>81</sup> It accomplishes this mission by being the reconciled and free community of Christ and by proclaiming and embodying his gospel as it engages the world. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer argues that all of the traditional Christian doctrines must be reinterpreted in light of an incarnational foundation of existence-for-others (i.e., creation, fall, atonement, repentance, faith, the new life, the last things, etc.). In this way, every area of Christian belief and practice is infused with a missional quality.

80. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 381–82.

81. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 381–83.

*Concluding Reflections*

Being missional is not primarily a matter of function, task, or organizational structure; it is fundamentally a mode of being. The Church does not merely *do* mission; the Church itself *is* missional. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology both exemplifies and clarifies what it means for the Church to be missional. First, being missional means proclaiming and embodying the gospel. Both speaking and doing the Word are crucial to the Church's existence and should not be separated or dichotomized. Speech without action amounts to cheap grace. It becomes preoccupied with ideas and means of persuasion rather than orienting people to the Living Lord who summons and commissions with the words "Follow me" (e.g., Matt 4:19) and "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Conversely, actions without Word lose their reason for being, and can quickly become moralistic, pragmatic, and frantic, rather than being "spirit and life" (John 6:63). A Church that simply busies itself is not thereby being missional. Being missional means participating in the *missio Dei*, which is *God's mission* of sending Christ and subsequently the Church ("in Christ" as Christ's body) into the world. The Church proclaims Christ because he alone has the "words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Jesus Christ is the source of true and complete justice, peace, righteousness, love, and indeed, life itself. To proclaim and embody Christ is to signify him with our words and actions. It is to exist, as Lesslie Newbigin put it, as a living "hermeneutic of the gospel" before the world. To do this effectively, the Church must resist the modern temptation to use words in a manner that is mechanistic and reductionistic. For example, the gospel is not a formula, reducible to a set of spiritual laws or principles governing one's private beliefs about God.<sup>82</sup> While the gospel certainly includes spiritual truths about

82. I refer, of course, to the popular but now passé evangelistic tool (the Four Spiritual Laws) that is mass-produced and then distributed by door-to-door or street evangelists in often random, one-time encounters. There are

one's personal relationship with God, it also (perhaps more fundamentally) includes a call to costly discipleship and kingdom living. This point is crucial for the contemporary Church to grasp, because today's culture is sceptical about the integrity of the Church's message. In the eyes of many, the Church is just another business seeking to attract buyers to consume its (religious) goods and services in order to have their spiritual needs met. It appears to be a self-serving organization, concerned primarily with its own interests, growth, and influence.<sup>83</sup> A renewed emphasis on understanding and living out the gospel in light of the kingdom of God through costly discipleship could help the Church refocus its priorities and overcome this unfortunate perception. Jesus' exhortation for the Church to be "salt," "light," and a "city built on a hill" (Matt 5:13–16) is not a call to attract seekers to Church gatherings by all available means, but rather to cultivate a distinctive character and way of life (as outlined in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount) that points the world to the presence of Jesus in its midst and exemplifies his character and teachings.

Secondly, being missional includes practising religionless Christianity. In essence, religionless Christianity means life re-oriented to the reality of God and subject to the lordship of Christ in a holistic or integrated way.<sup>84</sup> This has at least three implications for the mission of the Church in our contemporary post-Christendom culture. First, the Church must have a visible and public presence in the world in order to bear faithful witness to Christ. It must resist the temptation to retreat into inwardness, individualism, and security, thus dividing its private spiritual life

many Internet sites that explain the Four Spiritual Laws. See, for example: <http://www.godlovestheworld.com/>. Accessed September 9, 2008.

83. This is one of the critiques that the Emerging Church has levelled at modern (especially so-called "seeker") churches. See Franklin, "John Wesley in Conversation with the Emerging Church," 75–93.

84. A key aspect of this notion is that while religion is ritualistic and attempts to appease or even manipulate a deity by human action or devotion, Christian faith is about participating in the triune God's prior and ongoing activity "in Christ" by the Spirit. Thus, by faith, disciples of Jesus point to Christ, see all things in relation to Christ, and find their security only in Christ.



from its public voice and vocation. Instead, it must heed Christ's call to embrace and engage the world as the object of God's love and redemptive activity, subject to God's sovereign reign. It must wrestle deeply with the social and political implications of the gospel as it relates to public issues, such as poverty, injustice, racism, and social disintegration. And it must take seriously the need to pursue and advocate responsible stewardship and care of the earth as God's good creation. Secondly, to fulfill its mission the Church must have the courage to meet God at the centre of human existence, not merely at the periphery or in "the gaps." It will need courage to address genuinely the pressing questions, issues, and needs of contemporary people. Such courage will take the form, not of hasty compromise or stubborn traditionalism, but of faith in Christ, who is the source and centre of reality. With and before Christ, Christians can mine new insights from the sciences and social sciences, the arts and humanities, in order to understand and relate the gospel to the existential concerns of today (thus continually asking Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ, *for us, today?*" [both emphases mine]). Such dialogue will, no doubt, enrich our understanding of human nature and existence, and hence also our understanding and appreciation of the depth and scope of the gospel's message and summons. Thirdly, a religionless approach will lead the Church away from a posture of status and privilege toward one of humility and service. For Bonhoeffer, "religion" ignores the reality of God's presence and action, and focuses instead on human traditions, efforts, and initiatives. This tends to foster a dependency on worldly power and influence, which deceives Christians into pursuing their ends (however noble and valuable) by employing inappropriate means. This deception lies behind the socio-political temptations of triumphalism and utopianism, as well as their ecclesiological counterpart—Christendom. To be clear, the issue is not whether God ever draws and/or employs powerful and influential people to accomplish God's plans (biblical examples such as Joseph, Daniel, Esther and Mordecai suggest that God does). What is important to emphasize is that God does not use them *by virtue of their power and status*. The key is following Christ faithfully and unreservedly whatever

one's context and vocation (though it also means following Christ faithfully whatever the cost to one's status and reputation). If Christ brings one into a place of influence, one must serve him faithfully there. Problems arise when we reverse the order, when we assume that in order to influence people and structures for Christ *we must first secure* power and influence, and consequently we preoccupy our thoughts and efforts with gaining them. If we succeed, we can lose sight of our calling and then compromise our witness to Christ and our commitment to Christ's priorities and values. If we fail, we can become discouraged and paralyzed, retreating back into the security of a Christian subculture or ghetto. In contrast, God's call comes both to the powerful and the lowly. In so doing, it always involves both God's "no" and God's "yes," both cross and resurrection, death and rebirth. As Bonhoeffer puts it, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," and yet Christ's call also means, paradoxically, "living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities."<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the Church should seek to influence the world, but it must do so by serving, loving, sacrificing, healing, reconciling—in short, by costly discipleship to Christ and by proclaiming and embodying the good news of God's reign in and before the world.

Thirdly, being missional means being a Church that exists for others, not merely in the sense of being outward-focused or outreach-driven, but more foundationally in the sense of being by nature a relational, ecstatic entity. The Church is a part of God's plan to deliver women and men from the destructive social consequences of the Fall. Originally created in God's image to be free-for-God-and-others, human beings were corrupted at the Fall and henceforth became ensnared in idolatry and self-centredness. Originally created with a heart oriented toward God and others, fallen human beings now possess a heart turned in upon itself. Redemption from sin, consequently, includes redemption from self-captivity, self-isolation, and the self's attempt to have absolute dominion over others (including

85. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 87–89; *Letters and Papers*, 370.

God). The Church is the place where God turns people inside-out, binding them to Christ and to other people in one Spirit, and thus reversing their self-orientation and freeing them to love and serve God and others. To be sure, the Church is not the final consummation of God's plan. It is not the full realization of the kingdom and its people are far from being morally and relationally perfect. Nevertheless, God intends the Church to be a sign and foretaste of what is to come, a sacrament and catalyst of the kingdom.

This aspect of missional ecclesiology challenges certain popular depictions of the nature, purpose, and mission of the Church. I have already touched on the deficiencies of a consumer approach to Church, which attempts to attract and cater to potential "buyers" or consumers of religious goods and services.<sup>86</sup> Another popular but misleading approach is to depict the Church as a kind of social contract, in which individuals unite themselves together to pursue a common goal. Such an approach tends to downplay the inherent value of Christian community and views the Church merely as a means to an end. It tends to see the Church not as something intrinsic to Christian existence (and salvation) but as something peripheral or secondary to it. This error occurs in both modern and postmodern approaches to Church. Examples of the former include the seeker-driven church (the common cause is to proselytize), the "health and

86. Common language often betrays our consumerist assumptions. Churches sometimes talk about defining target markets and tailoring their services accordingly. When people are seeking out a church, they sometimes refer to their seeking as "church shopping". Churches create mission and vision statements, and then ask members (existing or potential) to "buy in" to their ethos and activities. People often choose a church on the basis of what goods and services that church provides, rather than out of a sense of calling and a desire to contribute and serve. Church growth sometimes trumps faithfulness, character, and deep relationships as the most important criterion of health and/or success. To be sure, consumer techniques such as niche marketing can be helpful if a church employs them in order to understand its local context and then proclaim and embody the gospel appropriately. Unfortunately, however, consumer approaches tend (by nature) to create homogenous groups of like-minded and common-caused people, thereby undermining the richness and diversity of genuine, biblical Christian community.

wealth” gospel, and some versions of the social gospel. Examples of the latter sometimes occur within the missional-church discussion. For instance, one popular missional thinker argues that *cause creates community*. He insists, “We build community incidentally, when our imaginations and energies are captured by a higher, even nobler cause . . . Christian community results from the greater cause of Christian mission.”<sup>87</sup> The intention behind this statement is a good one, namely to caution the Church against becoming inwardly fixated and viewing its communal life as an end in itself. However, I suggest that the author overstates his case; he maintains the end-means dichotomy and simply reverses the trend by reducing the Church to a means instead of an end.

Bonhoeffer’s missional ecclesiology provides a helpful corrective to this line of thinking. Following the logic of the Creation-Fall-Redemption narrative, he demonstrates that the Church must exist *simultaneously* for the sake of its own community *and* for the sake of others. To illustrate his point, Bonhoeffer distinguishes the Church community from two other types of social gathering. First, he distinguishes it from “society.”<sup>88</sup> Society is “an association of rational action,” for which people accept responsibility only out of their own self-interest in pursuing a common goal. Community, by contrast, is part of the social structure of *life* and, as such, is an end willed by God. Moreover, while personal bonds in society are expressed in looseness or indifference, in community they are expressed in closeness or intimacy. In addition, while society is joined voluntarily and secured contractually, Christian community is created and preserved by God. Secondly, community should not be confused with the concept of the “mass.”<sup>89</sup> In a “mass,” people are brought together by some common stimulus (a theatre

87. Frost, *Exiles*, 108. For similar statements by other authors in the missional church discussion, see Guder, *Missional Church*, 4–6, 8, 19, 227; and *Be My Witnesses*, 44.

88. Bonhoeffer draws on Ferdinand Tönnies’s distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*). See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 89–91.

89. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 94.

audience, a literary circle, etc.), such that community is the by-product of a common experience. While the mass represents the simplest form and most powerful feeling of unity (and thus can be deceptively idealistic), it is not built upon the separateness of persons and cannot last beyond the common experience.

In sum, Bonhoeffer shows that the Christian Church community exists *both* as an end in itself *and* as a means to a greater end in the eschatological reality of already and not-yet. It exists for the sake of itself, because God's missional intention is to establish a new creation, a community of love and new life, in which people live in restored communion with God and one another.<sup>90</sup> Yet, the Church also exists for others because its Lord, Jesus Christ, the "man for others," is conforming it to his own image (the *imago Dei*), which means being-free-for others.<sup>91</sup> In this relational sense, everything the Church does is indeed mission. The Church exists to experience and share the reconciliation and intimate communion with God and others that the gospel of Christ makes possible; everything it does embodies and bears witness to this. Thus, Bonhoeffer locates mission within the essence of the Church without thereby reducing the latter to instrumental or functional categories.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, his missional ecclesiology is able to provide theological grounding for understanding the Church both as a community of love and worship *and* as an agent of social justice that stands in solidarity

90. See Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 273; *Way to Freedom*, 44, 151–52, 178; and *Ethics*, 110.

91. To employ an Augustinian Trinitarian analogy, divine community within the Godhead does not derive from some impersonal, instrumental cause, law, or mechanism, but from God's nature as love. Augustine thus uses the image of Lover, Beloved, and Love to depict the Trinity (*The Trinity* [5.5.14], 255). Divine community is primarily a perichoretic union of love, not an instrumental association of common purpose (though the former does flow from the latter).

92. Bonhoeffer's version of missional ecclesiology accounts for the richness of relational images of the Church in the New Testament, such as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the family or household of God.

with the “the least of these” (Matt 25)—the poor, hungry, sick, rejected, oppressed, and suffering other.<sup>93</sup>

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93. For an exploration of Bonhoeffer’s christological critique of oppression and injustice, see Franklin, “Bonhoeffer’s Anti-Logos,” 2–9.

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