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BONHOEFFER FOR THE MISSIONAL CHURCH:  
AN EXPOSITION AND CRITIQUE OF  
THE MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENT'S ECCLESIOLOGY  
IN LIGHT OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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Patrick S. Franklin

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the question: what are the implications of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology for the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement? It begins with a discussion of the development of the Missional Church Movement, showing that it built upon the foundational ideas of Lesslie Newbigin regarding the gospel and Western culture. Next, it includes an exposition of the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement, followed by an exposition of the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (particularly the relational, Christological, and *missional* elements of his ecclesiology). Subsequently, the congruencies between Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement are discussed. Finally, a critique of the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement is offered, in light of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology.

The findings of this paper demonstrate that Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology supports the Missional Church Movement advocates in their efforts to embody the gospel and to rethink it in light of current cultural shifts. However, Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology also exposes the following weaknesses in the Missional Church Movement's conception of the church: i) the methodology employed by the Missional Church Movement is highly contextual and not sufficiently grounded in the Word of God; ii) the movement's literature emphasizes certain biblical metaphors for the church while neglecting others; iii) in its critique of the North American church, the Missional Church Movement creates or intensifies a number of false dichotomies; iv) by subjugating church to mission, there is a danger of the Missional Church Movement conception leading to an overly

functional or task-oriented ecclesiology, in which the church is regarded merely as a means to an end; and v) in its development of a *missional* ecclesiology, the Missional Church Movement does not sufficiently address multicultural, multiethnic, or minority voices.

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## INTRODUCTION

### A. Prologue

In recent years, much has been written about relating the gospel to a post-Christian or postmodern culture. I became interested in this topic a few years ago and began to read about postmodernity—its characteristics, trends, and historical development.<sup>1</sup> This interest led me to the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, a group of scholars who are inspired by Lesslie Newbigin and currently lead the Missional Church Movement. This group is committed to rethinking the gospel, the church, and Christian mission in light of current cultural shifts. Particularly, they maintain that Western nations are no longer fundamentally Christian, but are instead pagan or even anti-Christian, and thus are in need of conversion. In times past, when Christianity was the dominant (or even sole) religion and churches had a significant leadership role in society, ministry could take the form of a sort of chaplaincy or soul-care. However, in the post-Christian era the church is no longer a dominant moral, spiritual, or political force and is pushed increasingly to the margins of society. It can no longer be assumed generally that Westerners are Christians. Therefore, it is much more appropriate (according to the Missional Church Movement) to envision a missionary-oriented church, in which Western Christians are missionaries in their own land.

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<sup>1</sup> For a good introduction to this topic, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1996) and Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989). See also bibliography.

Subsequent to my introduction to the Missional Church Movement literature, I also became interested in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, being drawn initially by his challenge for Christians to embody the gospel, as well as his ideas regarding Christology and Christian community. As I read him, I was fascinated to discover the extent to which he seemed to address a contemporary post-Christian culture. His theological approach is incarnational, emphasizing relationality, submission and devotion to Christ (our thoughts, ideas, and lives), embodiment of the gospel, and the theological significance of community. In Bonhoeffer's work, I noticed many similarities with the Missional Church Movement.

In this thesis, I will investigate and explore some of the similarities between Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement, particularly those concerning ecclesiology. However, I will also demonstrate that Bonhoeffer differs from the Missional Church Movement in a number of important respects and can provide it with some needed constructive criticism. My hope is that an exposition and application of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology will be beneficial for the Missional Church Movement, offering to it a richer, more balanced view of the church, while preserving its intentions to reach out to contemporary culture.

## **B. Thesis Statement**

*Thesis Question:* What are the implications of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology for the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement?

*Provisional Answer:* While Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology supports the Missional Church Movement advocates in their efforts to embody the gospel and to rethink it in light of current cultural shifts, nevertheless his ecclesiology serves to critique the

Missional Church Movement advocates' conception of the church. Particularly, I propose that Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is helpful in correcting the following weaknesses of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology: i) the methodology employed by the Missional Church Movement is highly contextual and not sufficiently grounded in the Word of God; ii) the movement's literature emphasizes certain biblical metaphors for the church while neglecting others; iii) in its critique of the North American church, the Missional Church Movement creates or intensifies a number of false dichotomies; iv) by subjugating church to mission, there is a danger of the Missional Church Movement conception leading to an overly functional or task-oriented ecclesiology, in which the church is regarded merely as a means to an end; and v) in its development of a *missional* ecclesiology, the Missional Church Movement does not sufficiently address multicultural, multiethnic, or minority voices.

### C. Definitions

**Missional Church:** A view of the church initiated by Lesslie Newbigin, which regards mission as being central to the essence of the church (i.e., mission is a defining feature, perhaps *the* defining feature of the church). This 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. In part, this view of the church has arisen out of a renewed emphasis upon 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. One such assumption, which is challenged by the *missional* view of the church, is the belief in a (thoroughly or

foundationally) Christianized Western culture.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, there is a renewed focus on the need for mission to occur within Western culture, as opposed to the traditional understanding, which depicts mission as something Western Christianized nations accomplish in foreign countries.

**Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN):** a group of scholars<sup>3</sup> which has further developed Newbigin's ideas regarding the Missional Church and Western culture, specifically with the North American context in view (especially the United States). They have published their research and reflection as a collaborative series, entitled *The Gospel and Our Culture Series* (see section F—Methodology and Sources). The stated mandate of the GOCN is as follows:

The GOCN is a collaborative effort that focuses on three things: (1) a cultural and social analysis of our North American setting; (2) theological reflection on the question, What is the gospel that addresses us in our setting? And (3) the renewal of the church and its *missional* identity in our setting.<sup>4</sup>

**Missional Church Movement:** This is the phrase I will use throughout the paper to refer generally to the entire development of Missional Church thought. While this movement includes the inaugural work of Newbigin, most of my focus (particularly when I exposit and critique Missional Church Movement ecclesiology) will be directed at the published work of the GOCN, which has both assimilated and gone beyond Newbigin. Since the GOCN represents the latest, most developed stage of this process, the terms

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<sup>2</sup> 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 with this view, the Missional Church view attempts to address the question of how we can reach our own culture, which is actually post-Christian or post-Christendom, as missionaries in our own land.

<sup>3</sup> The most prominent leaders of the GOCN are George Hunsberger, Darrell Guder and Craig Van Gelder.

<sup>4</sup> George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, United Kingdom: Eerdmans, 1996).

GOCN and Missional Church Movement could be used interchangeably in most instances.

#### **D. Significance of the Thesis**

The proposed thesis is significant for at least three reasons. First, the Missional Church Movement has had a significant impact on contemporary missiology, particularly regarding the way mission in our own cultural setting is viewed. It has influenced the thinking of many pastors, theologians, and lay church members, changing the way they conceptualize the church. However, in my judgement, the movement has not engaged in sufficient critical theological reflection, particularly in ecclesiology—hence this thesis.

Second, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a theologian who continues to intrigue and stimulate the thinking of many. Currently, Fortress Press is in the process of publishing a new English addition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works with the aim of providing "the English speaking world with an entirely new, complete, and unabridged translation of the written legacy of one of the twentieth century's most notable theologians...."<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Cambridge Companion series has recently published a book on Bonhoeffer. In this thesis, Bonhoeffer's ideas will be brought to bear on a significant contemporary movement, namely, the Missional Church Movement. Bonhoeffer reflects on similar issues, bringing to them considerable theological and ecclesiological depth. He is regarded by many as a creative and stimulating ecclesiological thinker.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., "General Editors Foreword to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works," *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), viii.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Karl Barth appraised Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological work, *Sanctorum Communio*, a "theological miracle" (see John de Gruchy, *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 122) and acknowledged: "I openly confess that I have misgivings whether I can even maintain the high level reached by Bonhoeffer, saying no less in my own words and context, and saying it no less forcefully, than did this young man so many years ago." See Karl Barth, "Jesus Christ, the Servant as Lord," vol. 4, no. 2, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (1960): 641.

Third, the Missional Church Movement itself acknowledges its own need for ecclesiological reflection. For example:

[There is a need for] recovering a practical missionary ecclesiology, a self-understanding of and by the churches that envisions our missionary character and guides us in faithful living.<sup>7</sup>

We urgently need biblical scholarship that will probe the scriptural record, using a missiological hermeneutic, to enable the church in North America to structure itself in radical obedience to God's mandate to be Christ's witness.<sup>8</sup>

### E. Previous Research

To date, no one has linked the ideas of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to those of the Missional Church Movement in a significant or systematic way. Missional Church Movement writers are aware of Bonhoeffer and quote him occasionally (i.e., in the *Gospel and Our Culture* series there are a few quotations from *Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*), but do not engage his ecclesiology. Bonhoeffer scholars have written fairly extensively on Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, but have not applied his ideas to the Missional Church Movement.

In one recent article, Peter Barrett compares some of Bonhoeffer's ideas (from *Letters and Papers from Prison*) with those of Lesslie Newbigin. Barrett found the following themes to be consistent between the two thinkers: i) the challenge for the church to break out of stagnation and engage the world intellectually; ii) Bonhoeffer's requirement that Christ be at the centre of life, not at its periphery as corresponding to

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<sup>7</sup> George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1998): 228.

Newbigin's notion of gospel as public truth; and Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation as corresponding to Newbigin's dialogue with science.<sup>9</sup>

In another recent article, Larry Rasmussen discusses the relevance of some of Bonhoeffer's ideas for contemporary North America (particularly with regards to the (post)modern situation). He finds especially helpful Bonhoeffer's emphasis on small, disciplined church communities and his "cell-and-movement" ecclesiology, in which an inward-directed concentration corresponds to an outward-directed conduct. The former without the latter is unreal and self-righteous; the latter without the former "has no staying power to see beyond the present passing age."<sup>10</sup>

Clifford Green's book, entitled *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, will be an important source for tracing Bonhoeffer's famous Christological and ecclesiological phrases in *Letters and Papers from Prison* back to their roots in his early ecclesiology (i.e., phrases such as Christ, the "man-for-others," Christian existence as "existing-for-others," the church "is only the church when it exists for-others," etc.). Furthermore, Green's book is significant because it expounds the social nature of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, which is a crucial factor in my critique of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology.

## **F. Methodology and Sources**

In this thesis, I will exposit the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement, with a view to critiquing the latter via the former. Thus, I will engage in a close reading of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works and the

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Barrett, "The Gospel and Western Culture: On the Ideas of Lesslie Newbigin," *Missionalia* 27, no. 1 (April 1999): 62-72.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Rasmussen, "A Theologian for Transition: Middle America and Bonhoeffer," *Church and Society* 85 (July/August, 1995): 101-113.

writings of the GOCN (where they pertain to ecclesiology), including the inaugural work of Lesslie Newbigin. The logic of the thesis proceeds as follows: i) the present introduction; ii) Chapter One: outlines the Missional Church Movement's development from Newbigin to the GOCN; iii) Chapter Two: expounds the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement and introduces Bonhoeffer, commending his ecclesiology to the movement; iv) Chapter Three: expounds the relational and Christological elements of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology; v) Chapter Four: expounds the *missional* elements of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology and discusses congruencies between Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement (showing their mutual concerns); vi) Chapter Five: offers a critique of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology in light of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology and concludes.

Relevant works by Bonhoeffer include *Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *Creation and Fall*, *Temptation*, *Christology/Christ the Center*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, *No Rusty Swords*, *The Way to Freedom*, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and *Ethics*. Primary Missional Church Movement literature will consist of the four books included in the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* and relevant works by Newbigin. These include: i) GOCN: *Confident Witness—Changing World*, *Missional Church*, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, and *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*; ii) Newbigin: *The Household of God*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, *Truth to Tell*, and *The Open Secret* (see Bibliography).

**G. Limitations**

In this thesis, I will not endeavour to exposit or account for the entire theology of either Bonhoeffer or the Missional Church Movement, but will focus on their ecclesiology. Thus, I will limit the research to those works (or portions thereof) that are relevant to this topic, as the previous section indicates.

## CHAPTER ONE

### MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENT DEVELOPMENT

#### A. The Movement's Roots

##### 1. Lesslie Newbigin

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) was educated at Cambridge University, and subsequently commissioned for missionary service by the Church of Scotland in 1936.<sup>1</sup> For the next four decades, Newbigin served as a missionary in India, where he sought to communicate the gospel of Christ faithfully and respectfully within a Hindu setting. He also worked passionately to unify the church, which at the time existed in various scattered groups of Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, and Lutherans.<sup>2</sup> To this end, Newbigin's work was crucial in the forming of the Church of South India (CSI—a venture that joined the aforementioned groups together), which elected him a bishop in 1947.

Newbigin returned to England in 1974 and for the next two decades he published a number of books and articles dealing with the question of how an authentic encounter between the gospel and Western culture could take place. His extensive experience as a missionary in a non-Western country provided him with keen insights into the way in which the gospel had become assimilated into the Western worldview, so that it was read and proclaimed as determined by modern Western assumptions. As Lamin Sanneh writes:

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<sup>1</sup> George R. Hunsberger, "Biography as Missiology: The Case of Lesslie Newbigin," *Missiology* 27, no. 4 (October 1999): 523.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Newbigin's theological critique drew its power from his own rootedness in English life and culture and his own experience of having lived for a long time in another culture, learned its language, expressed his faith in that new medium, and subsequently reflected on its implications for other cradle Christians in the West.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly, Newbigin noticed immediately upon his return to England the seeming inability of Christians to avoid accommodating the reigning assumptions of “rational objectivity” and “personal choice.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Newbigin began his project of exposing the underlying presuppositions of modern Western culture, many of which rested on ultimate assumptions or faith commitments that were incompatible with the biblical worldview. In so doing, he encouraged Christians to live out their faith in confident humility, knowing that there could be no other ultimate authority but Jesus Christ himself.

I begin this investigation into the roots of the Missional Church Movement with an overview of Newbigin's key ideas regarding modern Western culture. These insights are important to identify if we wish to understand the development of the movement, since they play a significant role in shaping Missional Church Movement ecclesiology.

## 1.1 Key Ideas Regarding Culture

### *The Private-Public Dichotomy*

According to Lesslie Newbigin, one of the fundamental characteristics of modern Western culture is the separation of public and private spheres of life, and, corresponding with this, the separation of facts and values.<sup>5</sup> The public world, which includes among other things the workplace or professional setting, the legislature, and the educational

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<sup>3</sup> Lamin Sanneh, “Lesslie Newbigin, 1909-1998: Mission to the West,” *Christian Century* 115, no. 8 (March 11, 1998): 278.

<sup>4</sup> Hunsberger, “Biography as Missiology,” 527.

<sup>5</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 14.

system, operates with what we call facts or truth claims. There is an assumption that decisions in the public realm are made reasonably in accordance with verifiable evidence. Truth claims can be proven right or wrong, true or false, by examining the facts. It is inappropriate to appeal to religious values or beliefs in the public arena, because such appeals cannot be validated scientifically. Conversely, the private world of values, opinions, and beliefs is governed by personal choice or desire. Just as it is considered inappropriate to apply personal categories of values and beliefs to the public realm, so is it unacceptable to apply public categories of truth or fact to the private realm. The implication of this public-private dichotomy is that religious claims are divorced from truth claims. Consequently, it is perceived as improper or even offensive to evaluate as right or wrong, true or false, the values and religious beliefs of others. Whereas for public life the ruling principle is truth, for private life “the operative principle is pluralism.”<sup>6</sup>

Newbigin writes:

It is one of the key features of our culture, and one that we shall have to examine in some depth, that we make a sharp distinction between a world of what we call “values” and a world of what we call “facts.” In the former world we are pluralists; values are a matter of personal choice. In the latter we are not; facts are facts, whether you like them or not.<sup>7</sup>

This public-private dichotomy is inherited from Enlightenment thought, as typified in Immanuel Kant’s separation of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds,<sup>8</sup> and is ultimately rooted in classical Greek thought, which “for all its splendid achievements, had been unable to overcome dichotomies between being and becoming, between reason and will, between the intelligible or spiritual world and the material world known by the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 77.

senses.”<sup>9</sup> According to Kant (1724-1804), we have no way of accessing the noumenal realm (the unseen world, beyond sensual perception), which is to say that we have no means for gaining direct knowledge about the essence of something (i.e., a *thing in itself*). We have access only to our perception of it, which is mediated to us by our senses. Thus, the perceptual world as we experience it is a mediated world, which has been re-created for us by our senses. Kant calls it the phenomenal realm.<sup>10</sup> Since knowledge of this realm is derived from sensual perception, each individual, using her or his innate capacity for reason, plays a crucial role in discovering and determining truth. Kant’s insight provides the individual with a new sense of intellectual freedom and autonomy. One does not need to rely on intermediaries, such as tradition or revelation in order to know what and how to think and believe. Indeed, each of us has the responsibility to discover the truth for ourselves and to heed Kant’s exhortation, “Dare to know!”<sup>11</sup>

Our only measure for determining whether or not our perceptions of this world are accurate is to verify them with the perceptions of others. Such interaction guards us against a radical subjectivism, in which each of us constructs our own truth based on our own sensual interpretations without regard for the observations of others. The necessity of perceivable and repeatable observations for the discerning of truth is, of course, a fundamental insight upon which the scientific method is based. It also accords well with Western democratic ideals for the governance of public life. However, there is a problem when attempting to employ such criteria to values, opinions, and beliefs. Since these belong to the world of ideas, the realm of the noumenal, they cannot be observed or

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<sup>9</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (London: SPCK, 1991), 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 25.

perceived scientifically with the senses and, therefore, cannot be verified or agreed upon publicly. Rather, they are relegated to the sphere of private choice, hence the great divide between public facts and private values.

### *Abandonment of Teleology*

Newbigin's second observation in his analysis is that modern Western culture has abandoned notions of teleology or purpose, which dominated the medieval worldview, and focuses instead on cause and effect relationships. Newbigin describes this feature as the "central citadel of our culture" and explains it as follows:

... the belief that the real world, the reality with which we have to do, is a world that is to be understood in terms of efficient causes and not of final causes, a world that is not governed by an intelligible purpose, and thus a world in which the answer to the question of what is good has to be left to the private opinion of each individual and cannot be included in the body of accepted facts that control public life.<sup>12</sup>

This movement away from teleology also has roots in the Enlightenment. Since efficient causes can be observed with the senses while final causes cannot, the former belongs to the phenomenal world while the latter belongs to the noumenal world. Thus, the public-private dichotomy and the abandonment of teleology go hand in hand, as both are rooted in the phenomenal-noumenal dichotomy. Newbigin also notes that the ideas of Isaac Newton (1642-1747) fueled the abandonment of teleology in Enlightenment thought. Newton viewed the universe as a machine with consistent and observable laws and mechanisms that could be discovered through human investigation.<sup>13</sup> By discovering the immediate cause of something, one could sufficiently explain it. "All causes, therefore, are adequate to the effects they produce, and all things can be in principle

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, "Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology: Star Trek and the Next Generation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18, no. 4 (1994): 324.

adequately explained by the causes that produce them.”<sup>14</sup>

The movement away from teleology provided the modern world with a number of benefits, as Newbigin admits. “The breakthrough in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that gave birth to modern science would have been impossible without the methodological elimination of purpose from the study of physics and astronomy.”<sup>15</sup> This is particularly true in regards to Greek teleology, which was infused with Platonic ideals and the notion of fate. For example, motion could be explained only with reference to purpose, as “a movement from the less good to the good.”<sup>16</sup> From a scientific standpoint, such an explanation is obviously inadequate. Instead, we are required to identify the immediate cause that produced the effect in question. For, if we are successful in finding direct causes, we can then reproduce their effects upon demand. This has obvious implications for the area of medicine. Rather than attempting to postulate the ultimate purpose for a sickness (i.e., it is the curse of God, demonic activity, etc.), which is not observable, one should attempt to isolate a direct causal link through trial-and-error observation. Likewise, rather than attempting to find a cure through speculative or superstitious means, which are devised in order to respond to non-observable purposes, one should search methodically and empirically for treatments that produce direct positive results. Thus, one makes the transition from medieval medicine to modern medicine.

However, Newbigin points out that a complete abandonment of teleology is not only inaccurate but also detrimental. First of all, to explain something solely in terms of

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<sup>14</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

direct causal relationships is insufficient. For example, while one could describe a lecture solely in terms of vocal function, explaining the biomechanics of speech, muscular changes, and the physics of sound, “no intelligent person would accept it as the explanation of what was happening.”<sup>17</sup> A meaningful explanation would have to include a discussion of the purpose or intention of the speaker to communicate something to an audience. Similarly, after listening to a great pianist one could intelligibly describe the event “simply as an example of the operation of mechanical, chemical, and electrical principles,” but surely something would be missing! Indeed, such a description could even be given “by a person who is tone-deaf and for whom a Mozart sonata is merely a jumble of noises.”<sup>18</sup> Again, one must refer to purpose (not to mention such intangible or non-empirical effects like the moving of one’s affections or spirit) in order for the recounting to be complete. As a final example, proper functioning of machines or tools cannot be identified, nor can we ascertain whether a device is working properly, without referring to purpose. Thus, Newbigin makes the following remark:

From the factual statement “this watch has lost only five seconds in two years,” it is proper to move to a judgment of value: “this is a good watch;” provided—and only provided—that the word “watch” defines an object whose purpose is to keep time and not a collection of pieces of metal to be used for any purpose its owner as a private person may care to entertain, such as decorating the living room or throwing at the cat.<sup>19</sup>

Newbigin goes on to expose a disturbing implication of the abandonment of purpose, namely, that without reference to purpose, value judgments cannot be explicated from facts.<sup>20</sup> If this is true, Newbigin argues, values are necessarily driven out of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

public sphere. Each person has the freedom to define purpose in his or her own way. Ethical decisions in various areas—bioethics, sexual conduct, family values, and the development of new technologies, to name a few—are reduced to an egocentric pragmatism, whether individually or corporately. Consequently, we create methods for reaching our goals simply because we *can*, and because we stand to make a profit. “We display astounding brilliance in devising means for any end we desire, but we have no rational way of choosing what ends are worth desiring.”<sup>21</sup> We become specialists in answering how-to? questions, but rarely ask the question why?

A second problem associated with the loss of teleology, and the mechanistic world corresponding with it, is the increasing fragmentation of life.<sup>22</sup> Newbigin remarks:

Western European civilization has witnessed a sort of atomising process, in which the individual is more and more set free from his natural setting in family and neighbourhood, and becomes a sort of replaceable unit in the social machine... He is in every context a more and more anonymous and replaceable part, the perfect incarnation of the rationalist conception of man.<sup>23</sup>

A typical example of this in the industrial age is the factory worker who is removed from larger questions of purpose and must focus on some particular task, which is usually menial and sometimes even dangerous. In addition, the modern worker spends most of his or her time removed from home, family, and local community.<sup>24</sup> This, in turn, has implications for gender roles, parental responsibility, and the division of labour in the home. One might ask whether this mechanistic view of work is effective or desirable. However, the answer to this question depends upon how one defines the end or purpose

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<sup>21</sup> Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1957), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 32.

of work.

A third problem with dismissing questions of purpose as irrelevant or unnecessary is that it leads to the belief that life ultimately has no meaning and is not directed toward a final goal. Prior to the modern era there was a widespread belief in the provision of God and the eventual consummation and perfection of all things according to His design. In other words, eschatologically speaking, there was an expectation that God would bring the world to an end, at which time humanity would realize its final destiny in heaven. However, in the mechanistic world, which is devoid of purpose and beyond the direct intervention of God, the importance of human action in the present life is conclusive. The Enlightenment's confidence in humanity's ability to employ reason (apart from tradition and religion) in accomplishing its own ends has led to the modern doctrine of progress, the belief that human mastery of the world will eventually conquer all forms of evil.<sup>25</sup> Rather than placing its hope in a future heaven, humankind is deemed capable of achieving a present heaven on earth. "No longer would it be a gift of God from heaven; it would be the final triumph of the science and skill of the enlightened peoples of the earth."<sup>26</sup> This belief became particularly dangerous when the hopes of a heaven on earth, combined with the doctrine of progress, were vested in the modern nation-state. Such an expectation placed upon a corporate entity, which could take on its own personality and outlive its human inhabitants, "opens the way for the kind of totalitarian ideologies that use the power of the state to extinguish the rights of the living for the sake of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28.

supposed happiness of those yet unborn.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the twentieth century witnessed some of the worst atrocities imaginable, including oppressive regimes, devastating world wars, and the creation of weapons of mass destruction.

### *Captivity to Western Culture*

Newbiggin’s third observation of the modern Western world is that its understanding of Christianity and the nature and function of the church are shaped, even determined, by its own cultural assumptions. To illustrate his point he invokes Peter Berger’s concept of a plausibility structure, which is defined as “a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, a plausibility structure is a network of basic assumptions upon which a society builds its view of reality. These assumptions have been enshrined within a culture through its history and traditions, and continue to govern what is acceptable in the present. Presently in the West, the reigning plausibility structure for public life is the modern scientific worldview, while for private life the reigning plausibility structure is *that there is no plausibility structure* (i.e., no guiding system to evaluate claims of values, opinion, and beliefs). Newbiggin clarifies: “...not that there is no plausibility structure and thus we make our own choices. This *is* the ruling plausibility structure, and we make our choices within its parameters.”<sup>29</sup> Typically, the church’s response has been to adapt its witness of the gospel in light of these plausibility structures. One tendency is to accept the public-private dichotomy and, consequently, to retreat into the private sphere of life. One of the most influential advocates of this

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 14.

position was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who sought to protect private religious affections from the critical and empirical questions of “the objective consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> For him, statements made about the “attributes and acts of God or about the constitution of the world” do not properly belong to theology, but to metaphysics and the natural sciences.<sup>31</sup> The other tendency is to attempt to explain or defend the gospel in terms acceptable to the dominant culture. Here, an attempt is made to show how unexplained facts of the Christian faith (those which seem to be at odds with the culture) actually fit into the culture’s worldview.<sup>32</sup> For example, many attempts have been made to demonstrate how miraculous events that are recorded in the Bible may be explained scientifically.<sup>33</sup>

For Newbigin, the problem with the two aforementioned responses is that not only do they fail to address the foundational assumptions of our culture, they even reinforce them. Yet, this error seems somewhat inevitable. We are predisposed to bringing our own questions and issues to the gospel, and these predispositions have been shaped by our culture and the reigning plausibility structures operative within it. Therefore, our interpretation and presentation of the gospel is predetermined by the terms and conditions of our culture and by the kinds of questions it deems acceptable. But what if it is precisely these terms, conditions, and questions that are being called into question?

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Stephen Jay Gould’s discussion of Creationism in his essay, “Creationism: Genesis vs. Geology,” in *Science and Creationism*, ed. Ashley Montagu (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 126-135.

Is it possible to speak of a genuine encounter between the gospel and our culture?<sup>34</sup>

Newbigin asks, “The Bible and the church are part of our culture. How shall a part of our culture make claims against our culture?”<sup>35</sup> His response to these questions lays the foundation for his concept of the Missionary Congregation (a precursor to the Missional Church). In order to comprehend his response, and subsequently his depiction of the church, it is necessary first to examine his understanding of mission.

## 1.2 Newbigin’s Understanding of Mission

When the Christian church engages in mission, according to Newbigin, it is not merely following a command (though mission is imperative, i.e., the Great Commission in Mt 28:16-20). Such a narrow view of mission “tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel.”<sup>36</sup> Primarily, mission results from an explosion of joy in the church community, which overflows into the world.<sup>37</sup> It is the manifestation of the church’s experience of the presence and empowering of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, it is a natural response to the supernatural activity of God. When the church has been granted a taste of God’s presence, His power, His grace, and His reconciliatory and unifying love, it is transformed into a living testimony to the gospel. When it exhibits the selfless and sacrificial love of Christ, living not for itself but for the sake of its neighbours, it lives provocatively as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.<sup>38</sup> When God makes His presence known in this manner

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>36</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 116.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 229. See also Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 129: “The life of the Church is a real participation in the life of the Triune God, wherein all life and all glory consist in self-giving, a *koinonia* wherein no one will ever say

people start asking questions, and Newbigin finds it striking “that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church.”<sup>39</sup>

There are a number of components to Newbigin’s missiology. Crucial among them are his views concerning the doctrine of election, the nature of conversion, the distinction between the agent and the locus of mission, and the place of discipleship. I will now examine each of these in turn.

### *The Significance of Election*

For Newbigin, election is at the core of the biblical story.<sup>40</sup> According to George Hunsberger, there are three reasons why election is necessary in Newbigin’s missiology. The first reason is that the nature and destiny of humanity is relational. “Human nature is by nature historical and social, each person intimately connected to each ‘other.’”<sup>41</sup> The goal of election, therefore, is not to preserve a concept or system of ideals, but to create a holy community. This community is not a human-made group of individuals, in which each has chosen to associate with other like-minded people, but is the result of the gracious and sovereign act of God. As such, it is a foretaste of the world to come, in which people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9 NIV) will be gathered together as a community of perfect love. Newbigin is insistent on this point:

The thread which binds the whole Bible story together is emphatically not the history of an idea but the history of a people. Let me put this sharply by saying

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that aught of the things which he possesses is his own. The ultimate mystery of the Church’s being is the mystery of love, and love ‘seeketh not its own.’”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>40</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 103.

that, in the Bible, the people of God is at no time conceived of as a voluntary association of those who have agreed with one another in accepting and carrying out certain convictions about God. It is conceived of as something which has been constituted by the mighty act of God, an act springing from His pure grace, and preceding the first dawns of man's understanding of it and acceptance of its implications.<sup>42</sup>

The second reason for the necessity of election is that the nature and character of God is relational. As a personal being, God can be known only in a manner conducive with personal knowing, which “comes by the free choice to entrust such knowledge of oneself to another.”<sup>43</sup> Since God is a person, we cannot come to know Him by reading books about Him, nor by conjecturing and philosophizing ideas about Him, nor even by searching for and praying to Him. All of these may be fruitful if—and only if—God makes Himself known to us, which is a choice that He alone can make. God is not an object to be studied, quantified, and manipulated. He is the divine Subject, the One who calls all things into being. For support of this relational view of God, Newbigin appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity. He notes that God is not understood as “a timeless, passionless monad beyond all human knowing, but as a trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>44</sup> Further, “this understanding is not the result of speculative thought. It has been given by revelation in the actual historical life and work of the Son.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, in reflecting upon the personal nature of God, Newbigin weaves together the themes of mission, election, and Trinity, such that his missiology becomes, in the words of Hunsberger, “virtually an exposition of election.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 62.

<sup>43</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 26.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 67.

The third reason for the necessity of election is that the nature of salvation, according to God's intention, is relational. In Newbigin's writings, "salvation means 'wholeness,' which must include the restoration of social justice and interpersonal relationships."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, in the West, the way in which the gospel is often conceived and portrayed betrays a form of reductionism. For example, Western Evangelicalism has been inclined to reduce the gospel to the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of the soul. Conversely, Newbigin asserts that the gospel is *personal* in nature, a revelation of God Himself, not "the revelation of a timeless truth, namely, that God forgives sin."<sup>48</sup> The popular interpretation of the gospel tends also to be individualistic, emphasizing one's relationship with God as the crux of the gospel, while considering relationships with others and action for social justice as being of secondary importance or even superfluous. Such a narrow emphasis results from an unbiblical view of humanity, in which "each human being is to be ultimately understood as an independent spiritual monad..."<sup>49</sup> In addition, it neglects the corporate nature of both Fall (i.e., alienation from God and others) and redemption (i.e., restoration to wholeness).<sup>50</sup> If such an individualistic view of humanity were true, election would not be necessary; God could approach each person as an isolated individual, outside of a community context, to reconcile that individual to Himself.

However, as Newbigin reminds us, we must recognize "...that Christianity is, in its very heart and essence, not a disembodied spirituality, but life in a visible

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>48</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>50</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 140-141.

fellowship... nothing less than the closest and most binding association of men with one another....”<sup>51</sup> In a relational view of humanity, election is intrinsic to the transmission of the gospel. Hunsberger points out that this is Newbigin’s “inner logic of salvation,” in which “by the very transmission of [the gospel] from one person to another, reconciliation between the partners in communication takes place.”<sup>52</sup> For Newbigin, the purpose of election is that those who are chosen are called to be a blessing to others,<sup>53</sup> to make God’s saving intentions known to all, but “the blessing itself would be negated if it were not given and received in a way that binds each to the other.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, for Newbigin, election plays both a reconciliatory and a constitutive role in the creation of the church, and is “at the heart of his ecclesiology.”<sup>55</sup>

### ***The Nature of Conversion***

Although Newbigin is cautious of overly individualistic interpretations of the gospel, he nevertheless believes that personal conversion is a crucial component of mission. He writes, “The calling of men and women to be converted, to follow Jesus, and to be part of his community is and must always be at the center of mission.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, his understanding of conversion plays an important part in his formulation of the Missionary Congregation concept. This understanding has three major components. First, conversion

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>52</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 50.

<sup>53</sup> A consistent theme in Newbigin’s works is that the purpose of election is for service, not for privilege (see Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 101). It is the process of choosing and narrowing, of calling a particular people, to be a blessing to all and not to be exclusive beneficiaries. It is a particular act with universal intentions (see Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 31-32, 68-71). Whenever the doctrine of election has been misused, having been interpreted as granting exclusive benefits and privileges to the elect, it has fallen into disrepute (see Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17). Newbigin notes that the Old Testament prophets were constantly chastising the people of Israel for holding such a view (see Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 32-33, 73).

<sup>54</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 121.

is a radical shift in a person's mindset or understanding. It is not merely turning away from the things that a society regards as evil (these views are founded on society's values and plausibility structures), but reveals a new vantage point, which proves "that the world's idea of what is sin and what is righteousness is wrong (John 16:8)."<sup>57</sup> This new vantage point rests on an entirely different foundation (i.e., Christ) than that of the world. Therefore, there is no way to traverse reasonably from the old worldview to the new by means of logical deduction, because the two worldviews rest on entirely different commitments and ultimate assumptions. By way of illustration, Newbigin likens conversion to a paradigm shift (terminology borrowed from Thomas Kuhn<sup>58</sup>) similar to the movement in physics from Newton to Einstein. He explains:

My point here is simply this: while there is a radical discontinuity in the sense that the new theory is not reached by any process of logical reasoning from the old, there is also a continuity in the sense that the old can be rationally understood from the point of view of the new.<sup>59</sup>

While it is impossible to make sense of Einstein's physics within the framework of Newtonian assumptions, the newer, "more inclusive rationality" of Einstein is capable of accounting for the observations and theories of Newton.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Newbigin argues that, through a radical conversion of the mind, the gospel provides a "more inclusive rationality," which can make sense of the world but cannot be deduced from the world's assumptions.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately this radical shift amounts to a revolutionary change in a

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<sup>57</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 239.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press: 1970).

<sup>59</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 52.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

person's loyalty or allegiance. For the believer, Jesus is the ultimate or foundational commitment; His claim upon the believer cannot be validated by appealing to some other authority.<sup>62</sup> One does not reason oneself toward Christ, but from and through Him one uses reason to make sense of the world. "Indeed, the simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point."<sup>63</sup> It is easy for the church to forget "how strange, and even repelling, the Gospel is to the ordinary common sense of the world,"<sup>64</sup> to forget that it is indeed "foolishness to the Greeks," and to presume that its methods and efforts can bring about the conversion of others. Such forgetting commonly takes place in the Western church.

How then is conversion accomplished? According to Newbigin, "it is primarily and essentially a personal event in which a human person is laid hold of by the living Lord Jesus Christ at the very center of the person's being and turned toward him in loving trust and obedience."<sup>65</sup> Thus, a second major component of Newbigin's understanding of conversion is that it is achieved by the revealing action of God. Accordingly, Newbigin underscores the importance of two factors, namely, revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>66</sup>

John Williams notes that "Newbigin's proposals rely heavily on an understanding of biblical revelation as an interpretive key to all of experience and to the meaning and

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<sup>62</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "Context and Conversion," *International Review of Mission* 68 (July 1979): 301.

<sup>65</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 139.

<sup>66</sup> For Newbigin, the Holy Spirit is intimately involved as the means through which a person is laid hold of by the living Christ. He writes, "It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ." See Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 118-19.

purpose of history.”<sup>67</sup> I agree with this assessment, and would further point out that his view of conversion is very much interrelated with his elucidation of the doctrine of election and the personal nature of God. Since God is a personal being, He must provide us with the means, the content, and the context for knowing Him. And since the nature of humanity and salvation is communal and relational, knowledge of God comes to us from other people through whom God has chosen to reveal Himself. Furthermore, it is *biblical* revelation that Newbigin emphasizes (though he avoids Fundamentalist-Liberal debates over inerrancy, which he feels are overly rationalistic) as opposed to various forms of natural religion. His disdain for natural religion reveals similarities to Hume’s attack on arguments for the existence of God based on analogy or design.<sup>68</sup> Newbigin writes:

There is a very long history to remind us of what happens when nature is our ultimate point of reference, from the Ba’al worshippers of the Old Testament to the worshippers of blood and soil in Nazi Germany. Nature knows no ethics. There is no right and wrong in nature; the controlling realities are power and fertility. Nature sometimes has a charming smile, but her teeth are terrible.<sup>69</sup>

The decisive prominence Newbigin gives to revelation does not imply on his part a naïve stance against reason, nor does it negate the necessity of logical argument. “It is not (as so often said) a question of reason versus revelation. It is a question of the data upon which reason has to work.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, “reason can only work with the data that it is given.”<sup>71</sup> It is a means, not an end; it is a tool, not a final product.

Newbigin further argues that the work of the Holy Spirit is essential in

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<sup>67</sup> John Williams, “The Gospel as Public Truth: A Critical Appreciation of the Theological Programme of Lesslie Newbigin,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 1994): 371.

<sup>68</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. with an Introduction and notes by Martin Bell (London: Penguin Books, 1990). See especially pp. 77, 88-91.

<sup>69</sup> Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

conversion. “It is the Spirit who brings about conversion, the Spirit who equips those who are called with the gifts needed for all the varied forms of ministry, and the Spirit who guides the church into all the truth.”<sup>72</sup> The Spirit is the agent of God’s electing, calling, and revealing. Therefore, conversion is a supernatural work and not a human accomplishment, always involving an element of mystery and a taste of the miraculous.<sup>73</sup> It is the Spirit who creates the church, indwells it, builds it up and knits it together, and sends it into the world as a witness for Christ.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the Holy Spirit has a fundamental place in Newbigin’s missiology.<sup>75</sup> For Newbigin, mission is not primarily something the church does, rather “it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey.”<sup>76</sup>

A third major component of Newbigin’s view of conversion is that it should be understood holistically, affecting the whole person. As mentioned previously, salvation for Newbigin is a “making whole, a healing, the summing up of all things in Christ.”<sup>77</sup> This has a number of implications. First, conversion affects both soul and body. Christian mission, therefore, must be committed to caring for both spiritual and physical needs. There is no biblical warrant for endorsing a Gnostic dichotomy between body and spirit, and Christian mission is undermined whenever these are separated, and special (or even exclusive) emphasis is given to one over against the other (i.e., the soul-saving versus

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<sup>72</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 130.

<sup>73</sup> Newbigin, “*Context and Conversion*,” 304, 306.

<sup>74</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 99, 104.

<sup>75</sup> “The Spirit has a decisive place in the doctrine of the church.” See Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 92.

<sup>76</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 56.

<sup>77</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 140.

social justice conflict is a form of this fallacy). Second, conversion encompasses both belief and obedience. “It is a total change of direction, which includes both the inner reorientation of the heart and mind and the outward reorientation of conduct in all areas of life.”<sup>78</sup> Not that Newbigin prioritizes obedience over belief or espouses a type of salvation by works. Rather, for him, faith incorporates both believing and obeying simultaneously. There is “no limiting of its range, no offer of a ‘cheap grace’ which promises security without commitment to that mission for which Jesus went to the cross.”<sup>79</sup> It must be remembered that, in Newbigin’s understanding, conversion leading to salvation is the result of election, which is never intended merely to grant security and privileges but also a costly and sacrificial responsibility to be bearers of Christ’s blessing to others. What is given to the believer upon conversion is the call to follow Jesus, and this call “is spelled out in his teaching and example.”<sup>80</sup> Third, conversion includes both personal and corporate dimensions. It “embraces within its scope the restoration of the harmony between man and God, between man and man and between man and nature....”<sup>81</sup> It requires committing oneself to Christ, but also to His visible fellowship on earth—His Body, the church. Furthermore, it entails a reorientation in regards to all of God’s creation, a realization that Christ has reconciled all things to himself through His blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:20). In this sense there is an eschatological dimension to conversion, in which believers must live in tension between the ‘already’ of the present and the ‘not yet’ of the *eschaton* when all things will be brought under the Lordship of

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<sup>78</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 135.

<sup>79</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 239.

<sup>80</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 135.

<sup>81</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 140.

Christ.

***The Agent and Locus of Mission***

As previously mentioned, Newbigin argues that the agent of God's electing, calling, and revealing is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who accomplishes the will of the Father in the hearts and actions of humanity, the Spirit who affects conversion, who creates, indwells, builds up, and sends the church into the world as a witness for Christ. As the *firstfruit*, who assures the church that the full harvest is still to come (Ro 8:22-24), the Spirit is a taste and guarantee of the present-yet-coming kingdom of God. As Newbigin notes, the Spirit brings the church into an eschatological reality, making manifest the new world-to-come in the midst of the old world-that-is.<sup>82</sup> So, for Newbigin, mission is first and foremost an action of the Triune God, in which the Holy Spirit carries out the will of the Father in drawing people to the Son. In fact, in his book, *The Open Secret* (which he describes as an introduction to missiology), Newbigin depicts the nature of mission in threefold Trinitarian terms, as follows: mission is proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son, and bearing the witness of the Spirit.<sup>83</sup> This Trinitarian portrayal is no mere homiletic device, nor is it a convenient philosophical package, but is rather the foundation of Newbigin's understanding and experience of God, who is revealed in Scripture as a relational being who reaches out in love to creatures who have alienated themselves from Him. As Philip Butin comments:

Every facet of Newbigin's theology is suffused with a personal sense of connectedness with the Triune God, whom we sense he knew by direct pastoral experience as living and active in every individual life and in every corner of the world. When Lesslie Newbigin's writings speak of the Trinity, we are in the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 29.

realm, not primarily of ideas, but of the living, tripersonal God who stands above, comes within, and goes before the people of God as the purpose, pattern, and power of their shared life and mission.<sup>84</sup>

This Trinitarian basis means that mission is not ultimately a project of the church. Success in mission does not depend upon human effort, nor can it be measured by human standards. In an age that specializes in efficient problem solving, that shows brilliance “in devising means for any end we desire,” Newbigin’s emphasis here is particularly relevant.<sup>85</sup> He urges:

It seems to me to be of great importance to insist that mission is not first of all an action of ours. It is an action of God, the Triune God—of God the Father who is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the hearts and minds of all human beings whether they acknowledge him or not, graciously guiding history toward its true end; of God the Son who has become part of this created history in the incarnation; and of God the Holy Spirit who is given as a foretaste of the end to empower and teach the Church and to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, the church’s role in mission must not be reduced to human efforts of designing campaigns, marketing strategies, or attractive packaging for its worship services. Primarily, it must be understood that, in mission, the church is granted the privilege and responsibility of participating in the action and life of the Present, Living, Triune God. In Newbigin’s words, mission is “the whole way of living, acting, and speaking . . .” that results from having received the *firstfruit* of the Spirit, and is thereby characterized by the Spirit’s life-giving power and presence.<sup>87</sup> In this manner, the church is not the *agent* of mission but its *locus*. It does not have the responsibility of *achieving*

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<sup>84</sup> Philip W. Butin, “Is Jesus Still Lord? Lesslie Newbigin on the Place of Christ in Trinitarian Ecclesiology,” in *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. David S. Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle, and Lucas Lamadrid (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201.

<sup>85</sup> Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24.

<sup>86</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 134-135.

<sup>87</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 63.

mission or of *actualizing* conversion (these things belong to the Spirit), nor should it take responsibility for defending its faith on terms set by the world. Newbigin warns, “The world’s questions are not the questions which lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer.”<sup>88</sup> The church must exist as an authentic community of Christ, which proclaims and embodies the gospel in its life, actions, and words through the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. As such, the church is the *locus* of mission because within it resides the Spirit, who is the *agent* of mission.<sup>89</sup>

The fact that the church is the *locus* of mission, not its *agent*, has a further implication. Since the Holy Spirit stands over both the church and its converts, both of these are affected and experience change in the conversion process. Mission is, therefore, a two-way encounter between the church and a particular culture (especially foreign cultures). As experienced Christians and new converts learn to dialogue with each other, approaching the Bible together under the guidance of the Spirit, the preunderstandings, prejudices, and plausibility structures of *both* cultures become manifest. This leads to a deeper understanding of the gospel, a “more inclusive rationality,” in which affirmation and negation of elements *in both cultures* takes place. Thus, a three-way dialogue occurs between church, culture, and God’s Word/Spirit such that the missionary action of the church becomes “the exegesis of the gospel.”<sup>90</sup> Hunsberger summarizes this process as follows:

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<sup>88</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.

<sup>89</sup> Newbigin, “*Context and Conversion*,” 304.

<sup>90</sup> Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 35.

By conversion, persons of the new culture join the same reciprocal relation to the Bible that other Christians have held. They bring new pre-understandings to the interpretation and ‘hearing’ of the Bible, while they also join the whole community as those under the Bible’s authority and determined by it....This leads to the conclusion that the church’s missionary witness can never rightly be a one-way conversation. It is always dialogic, including both the church’s inner dialogue with its own culture and its outward dialogue with all others and their respective cultures.<sup>91</sup>

An implication of this dialogical relationship between the church and culture under the Word is that domination of one culture by another is prohibited. The church is required to reject as false all notions of ethnocentrism and colonialism; such ideologies are contrary to the diversity and depth of the kingdom of God. To ensure that this takes place, missionaries must be willing to entrust newly formed churches into the care and providence of God. As Hunsberger comments, “the gospel, in this understanding, must be *given into* another culture with the trust that the Holy Spirit will fashion the form which both conversion and the church must take.”<sup>92</sup>

### ***Mission as Discipleship***

“Mission is not just church extension.”<sup>93</sup> Newbigin points out that while growth is certainly desirable, as we see in the book of Acts, there is a deep concern in the New Testament (particularly the epistles) for the integrity and authenticity of the Christian witness.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, anxiety and enthusiasm for rapid growth is not a biblical outlook. “In no sense does the triumph of God’s reign seem to depend upon the growth of the

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<sup>91</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 270.

<sup>92</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 170. Italics author’s. Throughout this thesis, I will indicate when I am using italics to emphasize a portion of a quote by the designation (emphasis mine). Wherever italicized font appears without this designation, the italics belong to the original author.

<sup>93</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 59.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

church.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, such an emphasis can even be dangerous: “When numerical growth is taken as the criterion of judgment on the church, we are transported with alarming ease into the world of the military campaign or the commercial sales drive.”<sup>96</sup> In such cases we forget that the church is not the agent of mission and regress back to our own efforts. Such a movement away from the personal reality and presence of God renders mission functional, rather than relational, and leads us to focus on methods and techniques for reaching our goal of making converts. Success becomes defined by the ‘bottom-line’ of numbers and statistics.

For Newbigin, mission is primarily the work of God and “ministerial leadership is, first and finally, discipleship.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Christ did not send out the church to make converts in the narrow sense of the term, but disciples—followers of Jesus! (Mt 28:19). Of course, true conversion embraces discipleship and requires a radical shift in one’s life, which is accomplished and applied holistically by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it is not merely a private act of the soul in relation to God, but extends to every sphere of one’s life. The church’s mission, therefore, includes leading people into a deeper relationship with God, teaching them the Scriptures, and equipping them to be witnesses of the gospel and bearers of the Spirit in their own spheres of influence—their neighbourhoods, workplaces, and extra-curricular activities in the greater community. Newbigin remarks, “A preaching of the gospel that calls men and women to accept Jesus as Savior but does not make it clear that discipleship means commitment to a vision of society radically

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>97</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 241.

different from that which controls our public life today must be condemned as false.”<sup>98</sup>

Discipleship is costly because it embraces a public way of life that challenges the reigning plausibility structures of culture. Accepting Christ’s call to be His witnesses is not a guarantee of strength and privilege, but of weakness and suffering. It means proclaiming and living out a different set of priorities, ethics, and convictions about the way society should be. Sometimes this will involve confronting oppressive elements in culture, whether these are laws, institutions, or powerful leaders. As Newbigin reminds us:

[Jesus’] ministry entailed the calling of individual men and women to personal and costly discipleship, but at the same time it challenged the principalities and powers, the ruler of this world, and the cross was the price paid for that challenge. Christian discipleship today cannot mean less than that.<sup>99</sup>

### 1.3 A Missionary Encounter Between Gospel and Culture

Having identified some of the key elements in Newbigin’s analysis of Western culture and explained Newbigin’s understanding of mission, we can now inquire: what would a missionary encounter with our culture look like? Or, to pose the question differently, what must the church be in order to proclaim the gospel faithfully in the present context? A preliminary answer is that the church must exist as a public assembly, which seeks both to relate to the world and to confront it. In the New Testament the word used for ‘church’ is *ecclesia*, which is commonly used to refer to an assembly attended by all citizens to deal with public affairs.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the *ecclesia theou* (God’s assembly) is the assembly of all God’s people and implies the public commitment “to act out in the whole

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<sup>98</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 132.

<sup>99</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 220.

<sup>100</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 16.

life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all.”<sup>101</sup> It must do this in such a way that avoids the two extremes of syncretism and irrelevance. In the former the church embodies the gospel in the language, forms, and trends of culture but fails to challenge it, while in the latter the church challenges culture without sufficient embodiment or communication in ways the culture can understand.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the people of God must live authentically before God and others in loving outreach to the world; in short, it must be a *missionary or misional* church.

#### 1.4 The Beginnings of the Missional Church Concept

##### *The Missionary Church*<sup>103</sup>

There are a number of aspects to Newbigin’s conception of the Missionary Church. Primary among these is the relational character of the church, which is based on the nature of God, humanity, and salvation. “Humans reach their true end in such relatedness, in bonds of mutual love and obedience that reflect the mutual relatedness in love in the being of the Triune God himself.”<sup>104</sup> This mutual relatedness, moreover, is not “merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, the Christian church is not a collection of self-sufficient individuals, each one embarking on his or her quest for spiritual enlightenment. If this were the case, there would be no real purpose for the church, since each person could pursue God in

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>102</sup> Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 240.

<sup>103</sup> While Newbigin employed the terminology of ‘missionary congregation’ or the church’s ‘missionary encounter with culture’ (see, for example, chapter 11 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 234-241: ‘Ministerial Leadership for a Missionary Congregation’), the GOCN reshaped and developed Newbigin’s ideas and formulated the term ‘missional church’.

<sup>104</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 118-119.

<sup>105</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 82.

isolated fashion. The church is about a relationship with God *and* others; it is about spiritual *and* physical realities; it is concerned with individuality *and* togetherness, private *and* public life. Along these lines, Newbigin notes that the vision of the *eschaton* given in the book of Revelation is not that of a purely ‘spiritual’ existence, but that of a city.<sup>106</sup> In addition, he writes, “In the final consummation of God’s loving purpose we and all creation will be caught up into the perfect rapture of that mutual love which is the life of God Himself. What is given to us now can only be a foretaste, for none of us can be made whole till we are made whole together.”<sup>107</sup>

Relatedness is fundamental to the Christian church also because the life of Christ is evident in it or, as Newbigin puts it, “Christ is the life of believers.”<sup>108</sup> Christ is present with and in His people, and He reveals himself to the world through them.<sup>109</sup> Through the Spirit, Christ binds His people together with the same love shared by the Trinity, and this foretaste of the divine life among God’s people is a sign and evidence of the gospel to the world. For this reason, Newbigin strongly stresses the importance of unity in the church and argues for the expansion of the ecumenical movement.<sup>110</sup> He states, “These two tasks—mission and unity—must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation one with another.”<sup>111</sup> For, “The Church’s unity is the sign and the instrument of the salvation which Christ has wrought and whose final fruition is the summing-up of all things in

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<sup>106</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 69-70.

<sup>107</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 130.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-152.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Christ.”<sup>112</sup> This is in keeping with Christ’s words, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35).

Another aspect of the Missionary Church is that it is called to announce the kingdom, reign, and sovereignty of God. Both the content and the mode of this announcement are important to Newbigin. Its content involves calling men and women to repent of false loyalties to all other powers, to recognize Christ as the only ultimate authority, and to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the coming kingdom.<sup>113</sup> The form the announcement takes is that of personal and corporate testimony. The church exists to testify that God is a reality, that He and His purpose for us can be known, and that we can direct our lives accordingly.<sup>114</sup> As a testimony, or witness, the message is born out of the church’s lived experience of the power and presence of God in its midst. The church does not ‘market’ the gospel in the manner of a common sales pitch, nor uses modern means of propaganda, manipulation, and pressure tactics to win people over.<sup>115</sup> Its role is to announce the coming kingdom, not to establish it (this is done by the Holy Spirit).

Furthermore, the announcement of the gospel must not be confined to the private sphere—it is to be presented in public like all other truth claims and evaluated as such. In support of Newbigin’s conception of the gospel as public truth, James Brownson points out that the very word used for ‘gospel’ in the New Testament (*euangeliou*) evokes a

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>113</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 124.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>115</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229.

public meaning similar to the modern word ‘news’ (particularly ‘good news’).<sup>116</sup> Even in its usage outside of the New Testament the term “almost always refers to some message that comes as ‘news’ or ‘announcement’ to those who hear it.”<sup>117</sup> Many other Greek words were available and could have been employed. However, the New Testament generally does not associate the Christian message with such words as ‘illumination’, ‘knowledge’, or ‘mystery’, which were popular in private Greek and Roman religious cults. Nor does it employ the terms ‘law’, ‘instruction’, or ‘wisdom’ which were popular Jewish notions. Thus, the gospel or ‘good news’ of the kingdom of God is meant to be communicated to all by means of public proclamation. At many points in history, carrying out this public ministry has been a dangerous calling for the church. However, it is a responsibility that cannot be avoided; the church is not permitted to retreat to the private sphere. As Newbigin often notes, “the earliest church never availed itself of the protection it could have had under Roman law as a *cultus privatus* dedicated to the pursuit of a purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members. . . . It knew itself to be the bearer of the promise of the reign of Yahweh over all nations.”<sup>118</sup>

To summarize what he means by a missionary encounter between gospel and culture, Newbigin posits seven essentials for the Missionary Church. We will observe these briefly, for my analysis in this chapter has already anticipated most of them.

First, there must be a recovery and firm grasp of a true doctrine of eschatology.<sup>119</sup> Having a clear sense of direction, and being guided by a sure goal and future, the church

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<sup>116</sup> James V. Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic,” *International Review of Mission* 83 (July 1994): 497.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 99-100.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 134.

lives in contradiction to the purposelessness and aimlessness of the world. By their witness, Christians proclaim the gospel with a confident humility, aware of the fact that they live in a time period caught between the tension of ‘already’ but ‘not yet’. While the church is not permitted to retreat into the private sphere, it also must avoid being egotistical or forceful, expecting to establish the fullness of the kingdom in the present.<sup>120</sup> Second, we must articulate a Christian doctrine of freedom, which is capable of distinguishing tolerance from indifference.<sup>121</sup> Such a doctrine would help the church to transcend the public-private dichotomy by making universal claims for truth while simultaneously listening to and respecting the views of others. Third, Newbigin argues for a “declericalized” theology.<sup>122</sup> The church must discard the notion that mission is the work of professionals that are paid to care for souls. While pastors are necessary for equipping the church, ministry must be given back into the hands of lay people, who can subsequently bring the gospel to their respective spheres of influence.

Fourth, there must be a radical critique of the theory and practice of denominationalism.<sup>123</sup> This relates very closely to Newbigin’s emphasis on the importance of church unity and the integrity of the gospel. Furthermore, Newbigin argues that the concept and practice of denominationalism is “the social form in which the privatization of religion is expressed.”<sup>124</sup> The existence of denominations reinforces the view that the church is merely an association of individuals who share the same private

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 145.

opinions.<sup>125</sup> At the very least, denominations should begin to engage in joint ministry and ecumenical discussion. Fifth, there is a necessity for hearing feedback regarding our own culture from Christians whose minds have been shaped by other cultures.<sup>126</sup> Such a dialogical relationship with other cultures would help to safeguard the multiculturalism envisioned in the bible (i.e., passages like Rev 5:9) and protect us from naïve idiosyncratic or ethnocentric interpretations of the gospel.<sup>127</sup> Thus, intercultural dialogue would be fruitful in freeing the church and the Bible from captivity to Western culture and allowing the gospel to confront culture afresh. Sixth, the Missionary Church must have the courage to hold to and proclaim a belief that cannot be proven in the terms set out by our culture.<sup>128</sup> It must remember that conversion is a radical paradigm shift, which can only be accomplished by the Spirit. Finally, the church's mission must be the "spontaneous overflow of a community of praise."<sup>129</sup>

### ***The Congregation as the Hermeneutic of the Gospel***

The congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' is an important image in Newbigin's conception of the Missionary Church. The congregation is the place where believers rehearse the words, deeds, and sacraments of Christ. By constantly envisioning, reenacting, and proclaiming the gospel, the people of God are placed within the plausibility structure of the Biblical 'worldview'. When the church does this faithfully, people find that the gospel gives them "the framework for understanding, the 'lenses'

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love," 485, 483.

<sup>128</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 148.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 149.

through which they are able to understand and cope with the world.”<sup>130</sup> The gospel is God’s answer to the human condition of being alienated from Him, from one another, and from Creation. Through it, humanity comes to know and realize its purpose and destination. However, the gospel is not merely a collection of facts, ideas, or eternal truths. It is much more than this—it is the personal revelation of a relational God! Thus, it must be embodied and lived out in a living community, indwelled and enacted, not simply spoken or understood. This is what it means for the church to exist as Christ’s body on earth. As Newbigin is fond of pointing out:

It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community... It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought—and is seeking—to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary: the understanding of what it is comes second.<sup>131</sup>

In addition, the congregation as the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’ becomes an important sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God for the surrounding unbelieving culture. Since most people in Western culture today possess very little knowledge of the Bible and of basic Christian doctrines, their only experience of Christianity is likely to be their encounters with Christians from a local congregation. Thus, a congregation of men and women, who believe, embody, and enact the gospel in their everyday lives, provides culture with the lens through which it interprets and understands the message of Christ. In this manner, the church becomes the “living

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<sup>130</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227. On a similar note, Newbigin writes, “... our use of the Bible is analogous to our use of language. We indwell it rather than looking at it from outside... But for this to happen it is clear that this ‘indwelling’ must mean being part of the community whose life is shaped by the story which the Bible tells.” See Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 47.

<sup>131</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 27. See also Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

epistle.”<sup>132</sup> James Brownson points out that Newbigin intends his ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’ concept to transcend the public-private dichotomy and provide a way for the gospel to become public truth. It thereby overcomes our culture’s relativism, which espouses that “religious speech can never be true, but only ‘true for you.’”<sup>133</sup> He provides an excellent summary of Newbigin’s vision, as follows:

*How* we speak is as important to our missional vocation as *what* we speak. In this sense, Newbigin is quite right to speak of the local congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel. It is ultimately through our lives, in all of their contingency and local particularity, that the universal claims of the gospel will find a credible voice in the midst of our fragmented and suspicious world. It is only when the announcement “Jesus is Lord” is spoken by someone who takes the posture of a servant that it can ever be heard as the gospel. It is only through the convergence of word and deed that the fragmented suspicion of our postmodern world will be able to discover a new Way that is also Truth and Life.<sup>134</sup>

There are six main characteristics of the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel. First, such a congregation will be a community of praise and thanksgiving, rather than of doubt and suspicion.<sup>135</sup> This will occur as the congregation learns to embody and ‘indwell’ the gospel, and to see the world through it.<sup>136</sup> Second, it will be a community of truth governed by a plausibility structure shaped according to the Christian understanding of human nature and destiny.<sup>137</sup> It will not speak this truth forcefully or through modern

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<sup>132</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 51.

<sup>133</sup> Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” 503.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 503-504.

<sup>135</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

<sup>136</sup> Newbigin borrows the term ‘indwelling’ from the philosopher Michael Polanyi. Polanyi uses the term to explain the function of tacit knowledge. We come to grasp something by turning from subsidiary clues to the reality we are exploring. As an example, when we first learn to read and write we focus on individual letters and sounds in order to recognise and assemble words and sentences. Eventually this primary skill becomes part of our make-up, our tacit knowledge, and we no longer devote our attention to the preliminary details. Rather, we work through them, placing our focus on the meaning or reality to which they point. Thus, we *indwell* the clues rather than focus on them. Similarly, Christians do not primarily look *at* the gospel but understand themselves and the world *through* it. See Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 45-47.

<sup>137</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 228-229.

means of propaganda, but with the “modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus.”<sup>138</sup> Third, it will be a community that lives not for itself but is deeply concerned for its neighbours.<sup>139</sup> Fourth, it will be a place where men and women are equipped and disciplined to be ministers of the gospel, making full use of the multiplicity of gifts God has given to the church.<sup>140</sup> For, “the exercise of priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world.”<sup>141</sup> Fifth, it will be a community of mutual responsibility. Resisting the individualism of the surrounding culture, its people will enter into a committed, loving relationship with one another. Thus, the community will not be primarily the promoter of programs, but the foretaste of a new social order.<sup>142</sup> Finally, in contrast to the pessimism, hopelessness, and aimlessness of modern Western culture, it will be a community characterized by the hope of the gospel of Christ, which it indwells and lives out.<sup>143</sup>

## **B. The Missional Church Movement**

### **1. The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) Introduced**

The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) emerged in North America in the late 1980s as the continuation of the Gospel and Our Culture discussion, which originated

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>143</sup> In *Truth to Tell*, Newbigin cites the Carver Yu’s observation that Western culture is characterized by “technological optimism and literary despair.” He explains, “On the one hand he sees the unstoppable dynamism of our technology, always forging ahead with new means to achieve whatever ends—wise or foolish—we may desire. On the other hand he looks at our literature and sees only scepticism, nihilism, and despair. Life has no point. Nothing is sacred. Reverence is an unworthy relic of past times. Everything is a potential target for mockery.” See Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 19. See also Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 232.

in Great Britain under the influence of Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>144</sup> The membership of the American branch consists largely of Protestants of the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, but also includes a minority of Mennonites, Episcopalians, Lutherans, non-denominational Christians, and others.<sup>145</sup> The GOCN has continued Newbigin's assessment of modern Western culture, particularly his insights regarding the private-public dichotomy and the captivity of the gospel to the Western worldview, and has sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of North American cultural trends and characteristics. Moreover, in an attempt to construct a missional ecclesiology, the GOCN has built upon a number of Newbigin's themes regarding the church, including the following: the church is the *locus* of mission; the church should embody the gospel and form personal relationships with unbelievers; the church's role is to announce the kingdom, reign, and sovereignty of God; and, the church must engage in a missionary encounter with our culture, existing as the hermeneutic of the gospel in the North American setting. However, generally speaking, the GOCN has not incorporated into its understanding of the church Newbigin's emphases on election, conversion, and discipleship.<sup>146</sup>

### 1.1 The Aim of the GOCN

According to George Hunsberger, the aim of the GOCN is as follows:

The GOCN is a collaborative effort that focuses on three things: (1) a cultural

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<sup>144</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 3.

<sup>145</sup> David Mills, "The Devil is a Good Sociologist," *Touchstone: A Journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 1.

<sup>146</sup> An exception to this statement is George Hunsberger's book, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), in which he expounds Newbigin's understanding of both election and conversion. Strangely though, Hunsberger's insights into these matters do not seem to influence the ecclesiology of the GOCN generally. For more on this, see my critique of Missional Church Movement ecclesiology in the fifth chapter of this work.

and social analysis of our North American setting; (2) theological reflection on the question, What is the gospel that addresses us in our setting? And (3) the renewal of the church and its missional identity in our setting.<sup>147</sup>

Thus, the GOCN's methodology is to engage in an analysis of North American culture in order to understand its trends and characteristics, subsequently, to read the gospel in light of these discoveries, and finally, to build an ecclesiology for the Missional Church upon the preceding analyses of culture and gospel. Darrell Guder argues that such a missional ecclesiology would be biblical, historical, contextual, eschatological, and translated into practice.<sup>148</sup> For Hunsberger, such study is undertaken so that the gospel “becomes a lived transformation within our culture’s terms” showing that “life can be lived out this way in our culture’s context.”<sup>149</sup> This methodology shapes the development of the Missional Church Movement, and is evident generally in the GOCN writings and particularly in the book entitled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.

## 1.2 Foundational Themes

Since its inception, the Missional Church Movement has made two foundational assumptions, which have influenced its development. First, the Christendom era is over and the post-Christendom or post-Christian age has begun. Darrell Guder defines Christendom as, “the system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion was the protected and privileged religion of society and the church its legally established institutional form.”<sup>150</sup> Under Christendom, North America was

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<sup>147</sup> George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 290.

<sup>148</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 11-12.

<sup>149</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 296.

<sup>150</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 6.

assumed to be a Christian continent, with the majority of its inhabitants adhering to the Christian faith. Most people had, at the very least, a tentative acceptance of the deity of Christ and the trustworthiness of the Bible. They also were likely to have had a positive view of the church and its leaders, some degree of church background, and would feel a sense of guilt or conviction when they violated the basic rules of the Judeo-Christian heritage.<sup>151</sup> The church in this era was viewed as playing a significant role in the ordering and maintenance of society, and in defining and shaping its laws, values, and goals. Thus, the church played a guardian or caretaker role. It “came to be conceived of as a ‘chapel’ providing religious chaplaincy services for what was assumed to be an essentially Christianized society.”<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, mission came to be seen as bringing the gospel to foreign countries, thus expanding Christendom into un-reached lands throughout the world.

However, in the post-Christendom or post-Christian era it cannot be assumed that most people are Christians, or that society is governed by Christian values. Rather, North Americans live in a multicultural and multi-faith setting, encountering radically different religious claims and moral views. To deal with this, contemporary culture has separated facts from values, restricting the former to the public sphere of life and the latter to the private sphere. Thus, the church has been pushed increasingly out of public life; the status and privileges it once enjoyed under Christendom are now gone.<sup>153</sup> North America is not

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<sup>151</sup> James Emery White, “Evangelism in a Postmodern World,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Grand Rapids: Bridgepoint: 1995), 364.

<sup>152</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Features of the Missional Church: Some Directions and Pathways,” *Reformed Review* 52 (Autumn 1998): 5.

<sup>153</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 2.

a Christian culture, but a mission field!<sup>154</sup> Therefore, it is inappropriate to conceive of the church as a spiritual or social caretaker and guardian. It must be envisioned as a Missional Church, its members as missionaries *in their own land*, giving public witness to the reality of the gospel in their lives. Mission is no longer something done ‘out there’ in another country; North America is in need of missionaries. Thus, the GOCN is committed to the task of helping the church to become missional. As Guder explains:

The Gospel and Culture discussion of the last ten years is developing constructive ways to move beyond critique to re-emboldened public witness. The goal is not to return to Christendom. It is to become again a church whose witness is public, whose voice challenges the context through its faithful communication of the gospel, and whose practice reveals that all the other idols have been displaced by Jesus Christ, who is Lord and Sovereign....The missional re-orientation of theology must serve the missional renewal of the churches.<sup>155</sup>

The second foundational assumption for the Missional Church Movement is that mission is not merely a project of the church, but is initiated by God—it is *His* mission, not ours. “It is not about what ventures the church sends out, but about how the church itself is a ‘sent’ community.”<sup>156</sup> As such, there is a great emphasis upon the *missio Dei*, the ‘mission of God’.<sup>157</sup> “We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”<sup>158</sup> The concept of the Missional Church, therefore, is based on the missionary nature of God. Just as God exists, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in loving outreach to an alienated humanity, so the church exists in loving outreach to the

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<sup>154</sup> For Craig Van Gelder, North America as a mission field is “a great new fact of our day.” See Hunsberger and Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 57-68.

<sup>155</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Theology for a Missionary Church,” *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (1998): 8.

<sup>156</sup> Hunsberger, “Features of the Missional Church,” 5.

<sup>157</sup> Guder, “Missional Theology for a Missionary Church,” 5.

<sup>158</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 4.

world. Just as the Father has sent the Son and the Spirit into the world on humanity's behalf, so He sends His church to accomplish His missionary purposes. "A 'missional church', then, recognizes that part of its essence is that it has been sent by the missionary God into society as both the instrument and witness of the gospel."<sup>159</sup>

### **C. Summary**

I began this chapter with an overview of Lesslie Newbigin's insights regarding modern Western culture, followed by an exposition of his understanding of mission. We then discovered how these initial observations and ideas influenced the formulation and development of the Missionary Church concept. Following Newbigin, the GOCN employed a similar analysis within the cultural context of North America, seeking to rethink the gospel and the nature and function of the church in light of its observations.

In the following chapter, I will engage in an exposition of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology as it is presented (explicitly and implicitly) in the writings of the GOCN. In so doing, I will attempt to identify the assumptions, ideas, and images that provide the foundation for the movement's ecclesiology.

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<sup>159</sup> Michael Raiter, review of *Missional Church*, ed. Darrell L. Guder, *Reformed Theological Review* 58 (April 1999): 50.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENT ECCLESIOLOGY

#### A. Methodology for a Missional Ecclesiology

In the first chapter of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Darrell Guder outlines the “components of a *missional* ecclesiology” and explains the methodology the book’s authors employed to expound their view of the church. He begins with an urgent plea for the church to re-examine its nature so that a fresh encounter with the gospel in the contemporary cultural setting can take place.<sup>1</sup> In order for this to occur, the church must achieve a clear understanding of its North American cultural context, in which it exists and by which it is shaped. Such an understanding would enable it to ask pertinent questions of its identity and mission in its current setting. Therefore, according to Guder, a *missional* ecclesiology must begin with context.<sup>2</sup> We must seek to define our cultural framework clearly so that we can determine how to be a *missional* church in North America.

Part of the reasoning behind this approach is an assumption that the church in North America is generally unaware of the extent to which its self-understanding has been shaped by culture. By beginning with context, the authors seek to deconstruct tendencies to regard the North American understanding of the church’s nature as *the* biblical view, having arisen *sola scriptura*. By social and demographic analyses, they

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent,” in *Missional Church*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

endeavour to demonstrate that particular cultural assumptions are operative in our ecclesiology (these assumptions include Newbigin's observations of modern Western culture, among others). They believe that an accurate examination of our culture will expose such assumptions (unconscious or otherwise) and reveal new insights into the meaning of 'gospel' and 'church'. Once a better understanding of ourselves and our context is achieved, a new and more fitting ecclesiology can then be constructed.

The book, *Missional Church* (and the Missional Church Movement generally), follows the methodology that Guder advocates.<sup>3</sup> Chapters Two and Three paint a portrait of North American culture and the formulation of the church within that culture. Chapters Four through Six delineate a *missional* understanding of the church, which is compatible with the socio-cultural investigation of the previous chapters. This middle section begins with a basic definition of the church as the people of God, who are called and sent to represent God's reign. The final two chapters discuss the role the church must play in reforming itself to be *missional*, particularly in regards to its leadership practices and organizational structure.

## **B. Observations of North American Culture**

The primary emphasis in the Missional Church Movement's assessment of North American culture is that it has experienced a shift from modernity to postmodernity. In order to explain this shift, the authors identify a number of characteristics of both modern and postmodern culture. Subsequently, they seek to demonstrate how a *missional* ecclesiology can thrive in the postmodern context. I will presently examine these observations in the Missional Church Movement literature.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 16.

## 1. Modern Culture

The authors' observations of modern culture generally fall into three categories. First, modern culture is characterized by an adherence to instrumental rationality, which is based upon Enlightenment epistemology and the doctrine of progress arising from it.<sup>4</sup> Modern epistemology regards truth as being accessible to the human mind, discoverable by objective rational methods. Human perception, being grounded in universal categories governed by reason, is thus capable of an accurate and measurable assessment of reality.<sup>5</sup> The individual, autonomous knower is encouraged to discover truth on her or his own, with reason—not biblical revelation or church authority—as the final arbiter (see Chapter One). In modern times, this elevation of reason has often placed the church (and its theologians) on the defensive, imparting to it the burden of proving its beliefs and doctrines through rational means and apologetic tactics.

Developing out of its epistemological starting point, modernity came to celebrate the inherent goodness of knowledge and the inevitable progress of the human condition. Much confidence was placed in humanity's ability to solve every problem through technique, method, and effectiveness (i.e., pragmatically).<sup>6</sup> In addition to technological advancement, modern discoveries were expected to improve socio-economic conditions and human life in general. Due to this modern influence, many churches assimilated

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<sup>4</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, "Pastoral Roles in the Missionary Congregation," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 323. Roxburgh quotes Charles Taylor's characteristics of modernity, which include instrumental rationality, individualism, and fragmentation into groups of self interest.

<sup>5</sup> Note: this view is sometimes called the correspondence theory of reality. It relates very closely to correspondence theories of language, which contend that human verbal representations of the world correspond accurately with reality. Words refer to real categories of meaning, which exist independent of language (Logocentricity, Structuralism). See Brian J. Walsh, "Reimagining Biblical Authority," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26, no. 2 (1996): 208 and James W. Sire, "On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody: Logocentricity and Postmodernism," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press: 1995), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Context: Understanding North American Culture," in *Missional Church*, 30.

assumptions of social progress and institutional success into their core beliefs and developed pragmatic approaches to ministry.<sup>7</sup> This ‘bottom-line’ mind-set sometimes even placed them in competition with other churches, in a manner similar to corporations competing for market share. According to Craig Van Gelder, this ‘bigger and better’ mentality fuelled the church renewal and church growth movements, as well as the recent church-effectiveness approach, which relies on market information and business smarts to determine church action.<sup>8</sup>

A second characteristic of modern culture is individualism.<sup>9</sup> Modern epistemology imparted to the individual a new freedom to decide what to believe and how to live. In addition, the modern North American understanding of self is permeated with individualistic notions. These include, for instance, being a citizen with rights and freedoms, or a consumer who is entitled to get what one pays for, or having a constructed role and identity based upon one’s achievements and status.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, what North American culture highly esteems is the individual’s right to choose, as Alan Roxburgh comments:

We highly value the right of individuals to choose for themselves their direction in life, untrammelled by hierarchy and authority. This is a canon of our culture: the individual rights of every human being are sacred so long as they do not trample on the rights of others. Our liberal democracies are built upon this fundamental presupposition of modernity.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “Defining the Center—Finding the Boundaries: The Challenge of Re-Visioning the Church in North America for the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 323.

<sup>10</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 26-28.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Roxburgh, *Reaching a New Generation: Strategies for Tomorrow’s Church* (Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 14-15) quoted by Craig Van Gelder, “A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as Mission Field,” *Missiology* 19, no. 4 (1991): 439.

Individualism has had a number of implications for the church. For example, it has induced the church into prioritizing and targeting the preferences of individuals, thereby fostering congregational passivity and tendencies toward consumerism. Thus, people come to expect that they will be catered to, or even entertained, when they attend church. Sometimes, such an individualistic self-orientation becomes an acute problem, as divergent preferences of various individuals clash. Frequently, the result is church division.<sup>12</sup> Such divisions take place over a variety of issues, such as musical/liturgical preferences, socio-economic differences, disagreements about how to be ‘successful’, disputes over church direction (i.e., which ministries to pursue and invest in)—the list goes on.

Individualism has also contributed to narrow or reductionist views of salvation in the North American church. Along with an emphasis on technique and results, modern evangelistic campaigns generally place primary (if not exclusive) focus upon the spiritual state of individuals. They devise strategies and methods for winning converts and saving souls, but often neglect the corporate aspects of salvation, not to mention the deeper issues of poverty and social justice intimately woven into biblical soteriology.<sup>13</sup> Individualism has, furthermore, affected the way churches envision leadership. On many occasions the role of pastor has been isolated and given prominence over other forms of ministry in the church. Pastors are burdened with having to meet the divergent needs of numerous individuals in their congregations. Modern pastors are expected to be therapists, technicians, chaplains, coaches, strategists, and market analysts, among other

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<sup>12</sup> Marva J. Dawn, “Worship to Form a Missional Community,” *Direction* 28 (Fall 1999): 142, 145.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Van Engen, “Mission Theology in the Light of Postmodern Critique,” *International Review of Mission* 86 (1997): 440.

things.<sup>14</sup> Like chief executive officers, pastors are expected to drive the machine of their church organization and to achieve tangible and measurable results (i.e., usually numerical growth).

A third characteristic of modernity is fragmentation into groups of self-interest.<sup>15</sup> This feature ensues from an attempt to reconcile an understanding of the autonomous, rational individual, who has personal rights and freedoms, with an acknowledgement that human life is essentially a social reality.<sup>16</sup> It is epitomised in the social contract, which is foundational for modern democratic societies. Van Gelder explains that the modern social contract arose from the ideas of such theorists as Hobbes (1588-1679), Locke (1632-1704), and Rousseau (1712-1778). It fused the assumption that people make choices according to their own self-interest with Hobbes' theory, that a collective of individuals, guided by rational self-interest, would logically promote the common good.<sup>17</sup> It also incorporated the ideas of Locke and Rousseau, who built upon Hobbes and argued that rational, autonomous persons had innate rights and freedoms, which they could affirm and protect by entering into a social contract with one another.<sup>18</sup> Underlying this development was the presumption that people should be permitted, as much as possible, to live freely without restrictions.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as Van Gelder summarizes, "Freely choosing, autonomous individuals, deciding out of rational self-interest to enter into a social contract in order to construct a progressive society, became the central ideology of

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<sup>14</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 322-325.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>16</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

modernity.”<sup>20</sup> Of course, as Van Gelder rightly points out, modern social contract theory operates with the working assumption that people share a sense of common identity and have a common set of values and aspirations.<sup>21</sup> Only with such a foundation in place can individualism and personal freedom work together for the promotion of the common good.

The notion of the social contract, combined with progress and the multiplication of choices, led to the creation of thousands of denominations in North America. Though denominations initially arose in order to “provide for the organized life of multiple congregations,” they progressed through a number of stages.<sup>22</sup> Van Gelder, citing the work of Russell Richey, identifies five stages as follows: i) ethnic-voluntarism denominations (early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries): an organizational link for immigrants from Europe, who shared a common church tradition; ii) purposive-missionary denominations (1830s): used effectively by Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples to expand the church frontier; iii) churchly denominations (late nineteenth century): vast institutional systems of ministry to maintain a functional Christendom culture; iv) corporate denominations (twentieth century): employed organizational management theory and promoted a ‘professional’ model of church leadership and pastoral roles; and, v) regulatory denominations (1960s to present): in response to the erosion of the church culture and loss of prestige in society, denominations began to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>22</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “Missional Challenge: Understanding the Church in North America,” in *Missional Church*, 63.

focus on administering rules and securing compliance from membership congregations.<sup>23</sup>

In present times, many congregations organize themselves according to a set of distinctive lifestyle choices.<sup>24</sup> They are intentional about their purpose, devising strategic mission and vision statements to clarify their local ministry plan. Often, they have a diverse membership of people from various traditions and geographic locations, who are attracted by the programs offered.<sup>25</sup>

## **2. Postmodern Culture**

In his discussion of the current postmodern context, Van Gelder highlights three primary themes. First, in contrast to modernity's view of truth as objective, accessible, and measurable, postmodernity adopts the position that truth is relative. The Enlightenment's rationalistic epistemology has proven to be inadequate for explaining the process of knowing. In his writings about modern Western culture, Lesslie Newbigin employs the insights of Michael Polanyi and others to criticise Enlightenment epistemology.<sup>26</sup> He demonstrates that all means of knowing, scientific or other, are subjective because knowing always involves an act of faith. All knowing builds upon a commitment to ultimate presuppositions, which are accepted without proof. Hunsberger takes up the point: "Along with a focal dimension, [the knowing process] includes a tacit dimension of frames of reference and tools for knowing (including language) that are

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 64-66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See especially the following works: *Foolishness to the Greeks*, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, *Truth to Tell*, and *Proper Confidence*.

relied upon, at least for the moment, as investigation proceeds.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, postmodern theorists have shown that modernity’s autonomous and objective subject simply does not exist. Knowing is not a neutral or disinterested endeavour, but often is motivated by vested personal interests or the desire for influence and power. Thus, the modern view of the person, as a disinterested subject guided by objective reason, is discarded. It has been replaced with the postmodern view that a person actively participates in predetermining and shaping ‘truth’, motivated by a ‘will to power’ as Nietzsche (1844-1900) called it.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, as Van Engen points out, modern rationalism is unable to provide a comprehensive account of the Christian faith: “Biblical faith is based on more than logical affirmations, it consists of more than giving assent to a set of propositions. Biblical faith involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> As Newbigin reminds us, Jesus Christ Himself is the only ultimate authority for Christians. Jesus Christ, as *the way, the truth, and the life* (Jn 14:6), resists our efforts to possess the truth for ourselves, according to our own questions and conditions, and calls our limited understanding into judgement. As Van Engen contends, the view that we can know God through rational processes fails because it ignores the biblical reality of human sin, depravity, and spiritual blindness.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, as we saw in the previous chapter, Christians are dependent on revelation for their knowledge of God.

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<sup>27</sup> George Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Van Engen, “Mission Theology,” 444.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Corresponding with its rejection of modern epistemology, postmodernity possesses an acute distrust of metanarratives or totalizing systems, a second theme that Van Gelder highlights.<sup>31</sup> Postmodern thinkers (i.e., Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and others<sup>32</sup>) charge that metanarratives maintain a coherent picture of ‘truth’ by constructing a single dominant story, narrative, or system. This is accomplished by appealing to certain voices, ideas, or evidences while, simultaneously, disregarding or suppressing others (consciously or unconsciously). Many aspects of the modern worldview are upheld and justified by appealing to metanarratives (i.e., colonialism by the doctrine of progress,<sup>33</sup> reductive naturalism by the mechanistic universe,<sup>34</sup> etc.). Typically, the factor separating the acknowledged evidence from the ignored evidence is power. The rich, powerful, and ‘normal’, inevitably force their understanding of the ‘truth’ on the poor, oppressed, and ‘abnormal’ people groups.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Michel Foucault

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<sup>31</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 88-159.

<sup>33</sup> Note: Hegel’s understanding of the necessity of the progress of history, as the divine Spirit actualizes itself in the phenomenal world, is a metanarrative that has contributed to biased preferences of future over present / present over past, new over old, ‘enlightened’ over ‘savage’, strong over weak, etc. Others have employed his philosophy to lay the foundations for a number of modern colonial, totalitarian, and racist ideologies. For Hegel’s understanding of history, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc.; Toronto: General Publishing Company, Inc., 1956).

<sup>34</sup> Note: this perspective evolved from Newton’s mechanistic worldview, in which the world operates according to strict laws of physics and chemistry. Atheists argued, along with David Hume, that divine action in the world in the form of miracles is not possible because the laws of nature cannot be suspended. Such divine interference would disrupt the cause-and-effect nature of the universe and create catastrophe. Some theists overstated Newton’s ideas and fell prey to Deism, the belief that God created the world to be self-sufficient according to His foreknowledge of what would occur; subsequent interference is unnecessary (for Deists, interference would imply a flawed design). See Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 38-39.

<sup>35</sup> Thus, postmodern philosophers and critics employ what Derrida has called *deconstruction*. Part of what deconstruction does is to expose totalizing tendencies, which have been immersed in language, by demonstrating that the logic of a particular text or idea undoes itself in the paradoxes and contradictions inherent within it. Every presentation (i.e., of an idea) contains within it various ‘absent-ation(s)’, or ideas which have been repressed. While the traditional mode of reading (and of being) attends to that which is presented, deconstruction attempts to extract what is absent or latent. Thus, when applied to literature, deconstruction seeks to set texts free from traditional structures and modes of reading (especially those which claim to be *the* authoritative method—*the* final word). When applied to social structures and ideologies, it acts to undermine or de-throne the dominant (totalitarian) voice and, in so doing, allows minority voices to be heard. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of

(1926-1984) argues that all totalizing truth claims inherently amount to an act of violence against other minority voices.<sup>36</sup>

One implication of the rejection of metanarratives is the refutation of the doctrine of progress and the complementary belief that knowledge is intrinsically good.<sup>37</sup> This philosophical shift is supplemented and supported by tangible experiences in the twentieth century. For example, modern faith in technological advancement as the answer to humanity's problems has proven to be premature, if not naïve. Two world wars, and many smaller-scale ones, have provided us with disturbing evidence of the destructive power of technology to destroy human life. Furthermore, the utopian dreams of the modern era are all but forgotten, having been replaced with the nightmares of Marxist and Nazi regimes. In addition, the twenty-first century has brought an abundance of ethical questions to the forefront in regards to technology. Genetic cloning and manipulation, artificial intelligence, internet policing, and the emergence of bio-electronics are just a few examples. In short, technology and knowledge pose at least as many questions as they answer, and probably many more.

Another implication of the rejection of metanarratives, one that is especially apposite for the Missional Church Movement, is the collapse of Christendom. Van Gelder explains the erosion of functional Christendom in North America in three general phases. He uses the terminology of *functional Christendom* to distinguish that form of Christendom operative in North America from *Constantinianism*. While the latter refers

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Chicago Press, 1982), 1-27; Jonathan Culler, "Jacques Derrida," in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 159; and Simon Walker, "Challenging Deconstruction: A Look at Persons, Texts and Hermeneutics," *Churchman* 111 no. 3 (1997): 239.

<sup>36</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 132. See also Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 28.

to a legal establishment of the church, with Christianity as *the* legally recognized religion of the state, the former refers to a condition in which Christianity, being the dominant (but unofficial) religion of the people, influences or even determines public norms and policies indirectly.<sup>38</sup>

The first phase of erosion occurred in approximately 1790, when the separation of church and state became official in the United States.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Protestant ideals and commitments (i.e., ethics, morality, commitment to the Bible, etc.) still formed the foundation for the shaping of society at that time. By the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, the religious composition had changed to a mixture of people of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faith traditions. This second phase, which amounted to a form of Judeo-Christian pluralism, gradually became the new basis for social norms.<sup>40</sup> Though Protestantism was still the dominant force (as evident by Prohibition and other such laws), these traditions had a joint impact on society and provided momentum for the emergence of a civil faith, which advocated a coalescence of God, country, and democracy.<sup>41</sup> The third phase, which Van Gelder calls the ‘individualization of society’, took place in the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> Here, a great emphasis was placed upon individual rights and freedom. This era witnessed the birth of the civil rights movement, which brought a number of issues regarding human rights and choice to the forefront, including constitutional equality, the sexual revolution, the women’s movement, the ecology

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<sup>38</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

movement, the black power movement, anti-war movements, urban crises, and others.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the awareness of other cultures and religions increased, as the industrial revolution brought numerous immigrants from all over the world into North America, bringing with them their own cultural traditions and distinctiveness.

Van Gelder considers this trend toward globalization a third characteristic theme of postmodernity.<sup>44</sup> He argues that it contributed to a new awareness and acceptance of cultural and religious pluralism in North America. As the existing emphasis upon the individual was combined with a new acknowledgement of divergent moral, religious, and political views, the church began to lose its public prominence and gradually retreated to the private realm. Public policy increasingly became secularized as morals became progressively privatized. Previously shared public norms and values gave way to the personal decisions of individuals, which were guided by expediency, pleasure, and private judgement.<sup>45</sup> Truth, particularly moral and religious truth, came to be understood as being relative rather than definitive or absolute.<sup>46</sup> The church's position as a unique and authoritative religious institution, which anchors and shapes society, was challenged. On the contrary, people increasingly perceived it as being outdated and irrelevant to contemporary life. Consequently, the maintenance of a functional Christendom became impossible.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 42. See also Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 55.

## 2.1 What the Missional Church Movement Opposes

The Missional Church Movement argues that there are several deficiencies in the way church is understood and practiced in North America in the current postmodern cultural context. In short, it is not operating *missionally*. Consequently, the Movement claims to offer a corrective, “to aid North American churches in developing ‘new forms of mission-shaped churches as the Spirit calls us to be faithful people of witness.’”<sup>47</sup> Thus, in order to understand the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement, we must view it, at least in part, as a reaction against certain ideas, actions, or traditions. In other words, we must understand what the Movement is *not* advocating. Presently I will examine four thematic concepts, which the Missional Church Movement either shuns or rejects completely.

First, the Movement rejects certain aspects of modernity, including the elevation of instrumental rationality, individualism and privatization of religion, and the emphasis upon the social contract, resulting in fragmentation of people into groups of self-interest.<sup>48</sup> Generally speaking, the Movement embraces the postmodern condition. It celebrates the fact that absolute truth is available only to God and that “no one possesses a secure position on the basis of which to define [the human condition] objectively.”<sup>49</sup> Also, it rejects the narrow epistemology that modernity inherited from the Enlightenment, which insists that truth can be ascertained only by reasonable or empirical methods.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it promotes the “holistic character of the person” as being both flesh and

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<sup>47</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 27-34.

<sup>49</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 135-136.

<sup>50</sup> Allan Janssen, review of *Missional Church* by Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Perspectives* 14 (April 1999): 20.

spirit, possessing both body and soul.<sup>51</sup> And, it adopts a covenantal, rather than a contractual, understanding of the corporate nature of the church.<sup>52</sup> In relation to this latter point, Paul C. Dinolfo promotes the notion of a covenant community, which he defines as “a group of Christians who have made a stable commitment to each other and to God...a long-term, normally lifelong, commitment among the members.”<sup>53</sup> He continues, “Covenant communities are concrete, practical expressions of the spiritual reality that, as children of the same Father, we are now brothers and sisters, who are members of the same family (Matthew 12:48-50 and Ephesians 2:19-22).”<sup>54</sup>

Second, the Missional Church Movement rejects the Christendom worldview.<sup>55</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon summarize well the position held by the Missional Church Movement: “The demise of the Constantinian worldview, the gradual decline of the notion that the church needs some sort of surrounding ‘Christian’ culture to prop it up and mold its young, is not a death to lament. It is an opportunity to celebrate.”<sup>56</sup> For Missional Church Movement advocates, the marginal place the church currently occupies in society has much more in common with the portrayal of the church in the New Testament and in the early Church Fathers than does the Christendom model. As John Douglas Hall comments, “Once again, as during its first three centuries, the Christian

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<sup>51</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 135-136.

<sup>52</sup> See Roxburgh’s section, “Missional Leadership and the Formation of Covenant Communities of the Kingdom,” in *Missional Church*, 199-200.

<sup>53</sup> Paul C. Dinolfo, “Covenant Community: A Practical Approach to the Renewal of the Church,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 264.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-265.

<sup>55</sup> Janssen, review of *Missional Church*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 18.

community is being required to live outside the protective walls of power and prestige.”<sup>57</sup> 66

More normative, the church will bear its witness to the gospel in weakness, suffering, and marginality. “There is more in the New Testament about the suffering of the church than about any other single ecclesiastical theme. This has been, in many ways, the best kept secret of the Bible.”<sup>58</sup>

Another problem with the Christendom mentality is that the church’s missionary nature is understated or even forgotten. Wilbert R. Shenk writes, “The church of Christendom was a church without mission.”<sup>59</sup> Roxburgh bemoans the state of pastoral leadership under Christendom:

Pastors lead congregations that have little sense of a vocation as a people called to lives larger than themselves. So much preaching simply reflects this cultural captivity, calling parishioners to discover a personalized Jesus who acts as a guarantor of inner, personal happiness in a hazardous and dark world.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Guder criticizes Christendom church models for relegating mission to being merely one of the church’s several programs. For Guder, mission is not just a program of the church, but something that defines the church as God’s sent people.<sup>61</sup> He writes, “Such an understanding of mission moves the subject far beyond the level of program or method. It disallows any understanding of mission that makes it a sub-topic of the church. The church’s very nature is missionary.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Lois Barrett suggests,

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<sup>57</sup> Douglas John Hall, “Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 69.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>59</sup> Wilbert R. Shenk, “The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 323.

<sup>61</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 20.

“when the church in North America discards the Christendom mind-set it can become truly apostolic.”<sup>63</sup>

Third, in close relation to its rejection of Christendom, the Missional Church Movement questions the institutionalization of the church in North America. Guder, following David Bosch, argues that the transition of Christianity in early church history from a movement to an institution amounted to a reduction of the gospel.<sup>64</sup> This trend was linked to the church’s preoccupation with what distinguished it from others and its motivation to separate itself from other religious groups, thereby becoming a religious sect.<sup>65</sup> For Guder, the institutionalization of the early church was inevitable, a sort of necessary evil, to ensure its survival as a corporeal human body, as opposed to representing a mere “imaginary, non-incarnational, docetic spirituality.”<sup>66</sup> However, institutionalization later became a problem in the modern era, when the church “made institutional extension and survival its priority.”<sup>67</sup> To challenge such institutional-Christendom thinking, Van Gelder proposes a number of “new rules” for the emerging post-Christendom Missional Church, including the following changes: i) from denominational loyalty to shared vision; ii) from professional minister to missionary pastor; iii) from administrative decision making to participation planning; iv) from single cells to multiform congregations; and v) from cultural uniformity to unified diversity.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 105.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>67</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as Mission Field,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 67.

Fourth, the Missional Church Movement rejects individualistic interpretations of salvation.<sup>69</sup> Along these lines, Guder states, “The biblical record places no emphasis on the special significance of conversion stories.”<sup>70</sup> He further argues that biblical narratives do not show a concern for the well-being of the characters’ relationship with God.<sup>71</sup> He writes:

One does not find a concern for ‘the establishment of their personal well-being in their relationship with God’ in the stories of the call of Abraham, Moses, the prophets, the disciples or Paul. The issue in these encounters is not ‘the saving of their souls’ or ‘their experience of grace and salvation.’<sup>72</sup>

Now, Guder is not saying that one’s personal relationship with God is inconsequential; indeed, “The experience and significance of grace are amply expounded in the scriptural record.”<sup>73</sup> However, these are “not in connection with stories of calling.”<sup>74</sup> What Guder seems to be contending is that the personal benefits of salvation, while important, are secondary to the primary purpose of our calling, which is our mission. In other words, we are called first for mission, and only secondarily or incidentally for personal salvation. Accordingly, he states:

The spiritual experience of the benefits of salvation is to be regarded, instead, as ‘encouraging and consoling confirmation’ of one’s call. It is God’s gracious ‘preparation for the work’ to which Christians are called, a ‘radiance, a *doxa*, a

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<sup>69</sup> For example, see the following criticisms: modern notions of self as citizen with rights and freedoms, consumer, etc. (Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 26-27); in modern society individuals are abstracted from social roles (Hunsburger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 95-100); the individualism of Hobbes, Locke, and Adam Smith (Hunsburger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 117-118); individualism and freedom (Hunsburger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 148-149); and, individualism and privatization of religion as a block to a faithful and effective ecclesiology (Hunsburger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 352-356).

<sup>70</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 129.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

glory' which surprised the Christians precisely because it was neither one's goal nor one's expectation.<sup>75</sup>

Also, following Barth, he asserts that "the experience of the benefits is always subordinated to the call and its purpose."<sup>76</sup> Thus, Guder concludes, "The 'classical' emphasis upon salvation benefits as the reason for God's calling people to be his witnesses is contrary to Scripture and must be rejected."<sup>77</sup>

Now, to be fair to the context of Guder's statements, it should be noted that his intention is to overcome a false mission-benefit dichotomy, which is present in traditional soteriology and ecclesiology.<sup>78</sup> According to Guder, traditional Christian thought (i.e., since Constantine) has focused almost exclusively upon the individual believer's salvation benefits. In contrast to this, Guder wishes to give voice to the *missional* elements of salvation by defining Christian existence according to the concept of 'witness'.<sup>79</sup> However, (in my view) rather than transcending the mission-benefit dichotomy, he succeeds only in shifting the emphasis *from* the 'benefits' of salvation *to* missionary service. One might even suggest that he actually intensifies the dichotomy by downplaying 'benefits' in favour of mission, as, for example, in his contention that the vocation of Christians to serve includes "their personal blessing, experience, and endowment *as something secondary and accessory*" (emphasis mine), which "remains

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Guder based this section of his book on his reading of Karl Barth, "The Creature," vol. 3, no. 2., *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, 554-575. It is not within my present interest or scope to analyze Guder's use of Barth for the purposes of his own argument (i.e., whether he follows an accurate exposition, whether he provides an accurate portrayal of Barth that balances the tensions within his works, etc.). For the purposes of this paper, I am concerned only with the logic of Guder's own argument and its contribution to the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology. See Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 129.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 131.

bound to the primary and essential element of their status” [i.e., Christ’s commission].<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, in equating Christian existence with the *missional* function or task, he gives precedence to doing over being: “Christian existence is ‘existence in the execution of this [*missional*] task.’”<sup>81</sup>

Thus, Guder ultimately fails in his intention to overcome the mission-benefits dichotomy, due to his one-sided emphasis upon ‘mission’ and his tendency to frame his assertions in terms of either-or (as opposed to both-and) statements. I will come back to this critique in more detail in the fifth chapter of this work, but for the present, consider the following example (note my use of bold and italics to accentuate the dichotomies present in Guder’s comments; while **bold** indicates the ‘mission’ element, *italics* indicate the ‘benefits’ element):

We must conclude that the *church as an ‘institute of salvation’* (Heilsanstalt) has had a greatly **diminished sense of mission** to the world. It has been far more *preoccupied with its inner life*, thereby failing to grasp the essential linkage between its internal life and its **external calling**. Rather than understanding **worship as God’s divine preparation for sending**, it has tended to *make worship an end in itself*. Rather than understanding **preaching as the exposition of God’s Word to equip the saints for the work of ministry**, for the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11ff), it has become the *impartation of clerical wisdom to help the saints* prepare for heaven while coping with this ‘vale of tears’. In fact, where the *concern for individual salvation* grew and the **focus upon missional calling** decreased in the early medieval church, **preaching** lost its importance and the *sacraments as holy, reified rites* became central.<sup>82</sup>

As a final point, Missional Church writers also contend that, given the rampant individualistic and nihilistic tendencies of contemporary North American culture, the promotion of an individualistic view of salvation is both irresponsible and dangerous. As

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 130. Again, Guder quotes Barth to support his argument. See Karl Barth, “Jesus Christ the True Witness,” vol. 4, no. 3/2, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 573-574.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 135.

David Lowes Watson maintains, “To place personal salvation at the cutting edge of the gospel in such a setting is therefore a clear miscontextualization. Anyone even vaguely familiar with American congregational life knows only too well the effects of such spiritual amphetamines.”<sup>83</sup> The impact of this view is that the church comes to be regarded as an “external objectification of the private needs or ideas of individuals,” thus reinforcing the egocentric consumerism that its members have inherited from culture.<sup>84</sup> Such a church, having regressed back into a Christendom model, exists as an “institute of salvation,” being preoccupied with its inner life and negligent about its outward mission.<sup>85</sup>

## 2.2 Mission in the Postmodern Context

In the book, *Missional Church*, the authors offer three suggestions for the church as it reflects upon its *missional* calling in the postmodern world. These three suggestions are developed, supplemented, and expanded in various ways throughout the *Missional Church Movement* literature, though not in a systematic fashion. Therefore, while I will mention them briefly in the present section, we will encounter them in greater detail when we examine *missional* images for the church (Section C).

First, in response to the fragmentation in the lives of autonomous individuals, churches must envision themselves as *communities* of the reign of God.<sup>86</sup> Hunsberger describes this church community as follows:

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<sup>83</sup> David Lowes Watson, “Christ in All: The Recovery of the Gospel for Evangelism in the United States,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 192.

<sup>84</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich, “A Particular People: Toward a Faithful and Effective Ecclesiology,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 353.

<sup>85</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 135.

<sup>86</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church*, 108.

Churches are called to be bodies of people sent on a mission rather than the storefronts for vendors of religious services and goods in North American culture. We must surrender the self-conception of the church as a voluntary association of individuals and live by the recognition that we are a communal body of Christ's followers, mutually committed and responsible to one another and to the mission Jesus set us upon at his resurrection.<sup>87</sup>

Second, in response to the increasing privatization of religious faith, the church must live out its calling as *servants* of the reign of God in the public realm. In a society that no longer imparts power and privileges to the church, we must find new and creative ways to express our Christianity faithfully in our daily lives. We must orient our efforts away from attempting to impose our moral will onto society and toward “giving tangible experience of the reign of God that intrudes as an alternative to the public principles and loyalties.”<sup>88</sup> Just as Christ came into the world “to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28), so the church must live out its calling in service to others.

Third, in a pluralist culture of relative perspectives and loyalties, the church must “learn to speak in post-Christendom accents as confident yet humble messengers of the reign of God.”<sup>89</sup> As messengers, Christians do not have the burden of proving the truths of Christianity to the world, but simply pointing to and living out the reality of God's reign in their midst. As one of the Missional Church Movement authors asserts, “The Western church, in particular, must relinquish its dogmatic hold on propositional truth as the basis for witnessing to those of other religions. It must learn to emphasize the ‘who’ rather than the ‘what’ of Christianity.”<sup>90</sup> Guder suggests, accordingly, that Christians ought to perceive themselves primarily as witnesses. He explains, “The early Christian

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Lou Codman-Wilson, “Witness in the Midst of Religious Plurality: The Model of E. Stanley Jones,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 212.

communities understood themselves to be witnesses to what God has done. . . . Mission is witness. In particular, evangelistic ministry, as the core of mission, is most appropriately defined and explained in terms of witness.”<sup>91</sup> The role of a witness is not the same as that of a teacher, or an advocate, or a salesman; in essence, a witness is someone who gives testimony to what they have personally observed or experienced. Thus, David Lowes Watson suggests that the dominant metaphor for evangelism be changed from ‘salesmanship’ to ‘journalism’.<sup>92</sup> In summary, Christians have been appointed with a mission to testify to the presence and reality of God in their lives, through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. As Hunsberger affirms:

[The church] speaks boldly and often so that the signs of the reign of God in the Scriptures, in the world’s history, and in the present may be clearly seen. It speaks so that the signposts to the reign of God evidenced in the church’s own deeds will not be misunderstood.<sup>93</sup>

### **C. Missional Images for the Church**

I will now explore the metaphors that the Missional Church Movement employs to depict a *missional* understanding of the church in North America. I will begin with the most prominent theme in the literature, and then examine other supplemental themes.

#### **1. The Church as Representing the Reign or Kingdom of God**

George Hunsberger argues that one of the problems with the North American church is that it has been shaped by functional Christendom and by modern notions of voluntary association and rational organization.<sup>94</sup> Thus, it has been domesticated into

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<sup>91</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 197.

<sup>93</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 109.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

American life in such a way that “discipleship has been absorbed into citizenship.”<sup>95</sup>

However, in the postmodern, post-Christendom era, society no longer esteems the church as its privileged chaplain. In addition, the Scriptures do not encourage the church to accomplish its mission through the means of political power, popularity, or worldly success, though it will be tempted to do so. Therefore, in order to aid us in rethinking the church’s nature and purpose, Hunsberger offers the image of the church as *representing the reign or kingdom of God*.<sup>96</sup>

To clarify what he means by ‘representing the reign of God’, Hunsberger contrasts it with two other common views, which are incompatible with his understanding of the church. First, the church is not a place, but a people.<sup>97</sup> According to Hunsberger, the misunderstanding that church is the ‘place where things happen’ was initiated by the Reformers, who emphasized the Word and sacraments—but not the people—as the essential and constitutive elements of the church.<sup>98</sup> In addition, at the time of the Reformation the church’s mission was assumed to be virtually complete; thus, mission did not receive much attention and was subordinated to ecclesiology. However, in the present post-Christendom era, theologians have realized the significance of mission as being essential to the nature of the church as a “sent people.”<sup>99</sup> This realization results from a theocentric understanding of mission, as opposed to an ecclesiocentric one. In other words, rather than being developed within the framework of ecclesiology, Christian

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>96</sup> See his chapter, entitled “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church*, 77-109.

<sup>97</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 79.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 81.

mission is based upon the missionary- or sending-nature of God. As God the Father sent the Son and Spirit, so He sends the church into the world to announce His reign.

Second, Hunsberger asserts that the church is not a “vendor of religion,” but a “people sent.”<sup>100</sup> The church as a “vendor of religion” is a distinctly North American version of the aforementioned view of the church as the “place where things happen.” “Indeed, even when not referring to a tangible building, we tend to relate ‘church’ to a meeting or activity, a set of programs, or an organizational structure.”<sup>101</sup> This misunderstanding arose out of the modern ideal of constructing a progressive society of autonomous individuals who, guided by rational self-interest, enter into a voluntary social contract.<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately, when people view the church as one such voluntary association, its mission is inevitably compromised, since it “lives off the willingness of its members to remain in it,” and thus “gaining the loyalty of members and retaining that loyalty takes priority in a voluntary organization.”<sup>103</sup>

In addition to the notion of “member as volunteer,” churches were influenced by models of order, efficiency, progress, and growth, prominent in the North American free market economy. To support this claim, Hunsberger cites a study conducted by Finke and Stark, in which the authors argue that an economic understanding of religious life and practice in North America was inevitable, given its choice not to have an established religion early in its history.<sup>104</sup> Influenced by these trends, the church became a vendor of

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. The study cited is entitled *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark.

religious products and services, with the clergy as its sales representatives, religious doctrines and experiences its products, and evangelism strategies its marketing techniques.<sup>105</sup> For Hunsberger, this understanding of the church's purpose and nature portrays the church as a thing, rather than as a *missional* people, and is therefore inappropriate. He asserts, "Members are ultimately distanced in this model from their own communal calling to be a body of people sent on a mission."<sup>106</sup>

After contrasting these false views of the church with his own comprehension of it, Hunsberger proceeds to elucidate what it means to represent the reign of God. First, to ensure that it is being faithful to its mission, the church itself must constantly re-hear the gospel.<sup>107</sup> As the church encounters the gospel on an ongoing basis, it is confronted with its own false loyalties and beliefs, becoming aware of the cultural norms and values that it has assimilated into its self-understanding and life. Thus, it is in need of continual repentance and reorientation to its Lord, so that it acts faithfully on His behalf in representing His reign in the world. Therefore, the church must undergo a "continual conversion," being constantly "re-evangelized" in its re-hearing of the gospel.<sup>108</sup> For this reason, it continually rehearses the gospel story in its worship services. In the church's singing, reading of Scripture, preaching, and enactment of the sacraments, the gospel narrative comes alive in its midst. Thus, the gospel begins to shape the life and thought of the church, and provides it with a new foundation for understanding itself and the world.

As Marva Dawn writes:

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 87.

We gather together in worship to speak our language, to read our narratives of God at work, to sing authentic hymns of the faith in all kinds of styles, to chant and pour out our prayers until we know the truth so well that we can go out to the world around us and invite that world to share this truth with us. In our worship, we are formed by biblical narratives that tell a different story from that of the surrounding culture.<sup>109</sup>

Second, representing God's reign involves announcing the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. This announcement does not take the form merely of words, though it includes them; it is something that people can hear, see, and experience through the church as God makes Himself present in and through it. Accordingly, Hunsberger points out the significance of Jesus' citation of Isaiah 61 at the beginning of His public ministry. In this passage, Isaiah proclaims good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, the release of the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:17-19). By citing Isaiah, Jesus foreshadows His own ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God, implying that it will include not only preaching and teaching, but also healings, exorcisms, and confrontations with the powers (spiritual and political).<sup>110</sup> Importantly, in identifying Himself with Isaiah 61, Jesus demonstrates a keen awareness of His own calling—of the fact that He was *sent* to accomplish God's mission. In like manner, the church must recapture a conviction of, and fervour for, its own calling as a sent-people, entrusted with God's mission of proclaiming and representing the reign of God in the world by its words and deeds.

Third, Hunsberger asserts that although the church is called to represent the reign of God, it must not be *equated* with God's kingdom.<sup>111</sup> Or, stated differently, the

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<sup>109</sup> Dawn, "Worship to Form a Missional Community," 141.

<sup>110</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 90.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

kingdom of God is not defined by, nor restricted to, the church. Rather, the church is a sign and foretaste of the kingdom, its agent, instrument, servant, and messenger.<sup>112</sup> These two ideas—that the church represents the reign of God and yet must not be equated with it—must be held in an eschatological, already-but-not-yet, tension. The church is spawned by and directed toward the present-yet-imminent kingdom of God. As a *sign and foretaste* of the kingdom, the church savours and imparts to the world heavenly morsels, as the Lord of all creation makes Himself present in its life and mission. For Guder, this eschatological outlook is crucial for a *missional* ecclesiology.<sup>113</sup> An eschatological already-but-not-yet tension is a central theme for the structuring of the Missional Church’s ministry and witness.<sup>114</sup> As Cheryl Bridges Johns says:

Because of the fusion of time and space, there is a corresponding fusion of witness and worship. Worship spills into the streets and draws a crowd. Witness may lead to worship. In light of the end the people of God worship. In light of the end the people of God witness.<sup>115</sup>

When this tension is not maintained and the kingdom of God is defined according to the visible boundaries of the church, which has happened many times in the church’s history, mission invariably is conceived in terms of ‘building’ or ‘extending’ the kingdom.<sup>116</sup> As the church performs its work, as it evangelizes and plants new churches, and as it extends its borders into unchurched regions and cultures, it is actively expanding the frontiers of God’s kingdom on earth. However, according to the Missional Church Movement, there are at least two problems with such a view. First, it overemphasizes

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 101, 104, 106.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Cheryl Bridges Johns, “When all God’s People are Prophets: Acts and the Task of Missional Preaching,” *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 4 (1999): 20.

<sup>116</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 93.

human action in the establishment of God's kingdom and in the outworking of His mission. In contrast, the theology of the *missio Dei* stresses emphatically that the church's mission is, first and foremost, *God's* mission and is directed by the Holy Spirit (see Chapter One). Second, the metaphors of 'building' and 'extending' are foreign to the kingdom language and thought of the New Testament. Instead, the normative kingdom metaphors are 'gift' and 'realm', which implies that the kingdom is something one must receive and enter.<sup>117</sup>

The implications of this shift in meaning for mission are as follows: while the former images suggest that mission is colonial or militaristic, institutional, and the result of human initiative and effort, the latter images imply that mission is invitational or relational, personal, and the result of God's gracious activity. Thus, the church is the locus for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God on earth, where the supernatural infiltrates the natural, where the future (*eschaton*) penetrates into the present, and where the Revealing God makes Himself present in and through His people. Hunsberger concludes:

In summary, the church in mission may be characterized as the sign of Messiah's coming. Our being, doing, and speaking are signs that his coming is 'already' and 'not yet.' He is here already or the signs would not be present. He is coming still or the signs would not be muted. Broken though they may be, the signs persist in the world by the Spirit's insistence, and they spell hope for the renewal of the human community in the final reconciliation of all things to God through the Lord Christ. In this respect, the church is the preview community, the foretaste and harbinger of the coming reign of God.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 108.

## 2. The Church in Exile

The Missional Church Movement suggests that the image of *the church in exile* is also appropriate for describing the church's nature and mission in the postmodern context.<sup>119</sup> The word 'exile' alludes to the Old Testament narratives that describe the experiences of Israel as it suffered defeat, expulsion from its own land, and captivity to foreign nations. Exilic Israel was a nation without power to create its own laws and structure its own society, in accordance with the values and religious beliefs of its own people. On the contrary, Israelites in exile were often subjected to abuse, injustice, and relegation to a place of inferiority. In addition, they were pressured, and sometimes even forced, to compromise their commitment to Yahweh, to worship the gods of their captors, to bow to foreign rulers, and to forfeit their rights to engage in their own social and religious practices and traditions. Along these lines, one thinks immediately of the Israelites under slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt; the Babylonian captivity and the experiences of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; and the experiences of Queen Esther and Mordecai during the Persian Empire.<sup>120</sup> Or, simultaneously, one thinks of the trials and persecutions of the early church under the oppressive Roman Empire.

In the postmodern setting, the contemporary church exists in comparable (though less extreme) circumstances, according to Missional Church Movement writers. It is no longer the dominant moral and spiritual voice in North America, nor does it possess the power it once had, under Christendom, to shape culture through social and political means. As Douglas John Hall observes:

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<sup>119</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Although, we must note that God often placed representatives of His people in key positions of influence during times of exile (i.e., Joseph, Daniel, Esther, etc.), as these examples reveal.

Once again, as during its first three centuries, the Christian community is being required to live outside the protective walls of power and prestige. Once again, the church finds itself being pushed to the sociological periphery, where its message and mission must authenticate themselves quite apart from any external props and pressures, rewards and punishments.<sup>121</sup>

Yet, in the view of Missional Church Movement advocates, the relegation of the church to a place of marginality in society should not be, for Christians, an occasion that elicits fear or regret. During exilic times, God did not release His people from their covenant with Him, nor did He alter His purpose for them to be a light to the nations and a blessing to all families of the earth. He still expected and enabled them to live as His people, just as He now directs and empowers His church to represent His present-but-coming kingdom faithfully in the world. In addition, it is often during such times of tribulation and marginality that the church thrives and impacts the lives of many. It becomes less oriented around the trifles, petty concerns, and self-satisfaction associated with a privileged life, and more concerned with the needs of others and the ultimate questions of existence and destiny. Perhaps this is why Jesus warned His disciples about the dangers of wealth and status, as when He said, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:24); and, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mk 10:31). Indeed, as Lawrence Turnipseed argues, wealth and prestige have the tendency of making people self-righteous and self-focused, blinding them to the misfortune of others. Jesus, however, promotes a lifestyle characterized by the way of the cross:

There is an almost unconscious willingness on the part of those of us who ‘have’ to sacrifice those who ‘have not’, although few of us would acknowledge

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<sup>121</sup> Van Gelder, ed., *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 69.

it... Jesus totally rejected this view, choosing instead to sacrifice himself, and calling on his followers to follow his example: to ‘take up your cross and follow me.’ He also defined radical disciplines of loving strangers, loving enemies, caring for the poor and sharing wealth.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, the metaphor of the church in exile serves as an exhortation for the church to live in faithfulness to its Lord in unfavourable circumstances. It reminds the church of its dependence upon Christ, as He calls it to a life of radical discipleship and love. And, it encourages the church that, despite the current state of affairs, God is in sovereign control of human history. He will not leave His people in exile forever, but will lead them into decisive victory—albeit in an unexpected and unworldly manner.<sup>123</sup>

### 3. The Church as Resident Aliens

In close relation to the previous metaphor of the church in exile, Hunsberger approvingly cites the work of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, who propose an image of the church as *resident aliens*, based upon Paul’s discussion of heavenly citizenship in the third chapter of Philippians.<sup>124</sup> In their proposal, Hauerwas and Willimon exhort the contemporary church to envision itself as a colony of heaven, and to live out its life in faithful loyalty to its King, whose arrival it eagerly awaits. They press the church to cease from accommodating the gospel to its surrounding culture. They point out that, since the days of Schleiermacher and his *Speeches to [Religion’s] Cultured*

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<sup>122</sup> Lawrence R. Turnipseed, “Turning to God: Missional Responses in the Changing US Context,” *International Review of Mission* 87 (October 1998): 532.

<sup>123</sup> See Mt 16:13-28. After affirming Peter as the “rock” upon which the church would be built, and against which the gates of Hades would not prevail, Jesus subsequently rebukes Peter’s denial of the way of the cross as being nothing less than Satanic.

<sup>124</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 18. See also Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 11. It should be noted that Hauerwas and Willimon are not a part of the GOCN (i.e., they have not contributed to writings in the *Gospel and Our Culture Series*), nor do I consider them to be part of the Missional Church Movement proper. I cite them here simply because the GOCN makes use of their book, *Resident Aliens*, in developing one image for the Missional Church.

*Despisers*, Christian theology has been predominantly apologetic and defensive.<sup>125</sup> In an endeavour to present the gospel in a manner acceptable to modern people, theologians have attempted to separate the ‘kernel’ or essence of Christianity from the ‘shell’ or cultural baggage in which it is encased. For Hauerwas and Willimon, there are at least two problems with this. First, with such an approach, “modern interpreters of the faith have tended to let the ‘modern world’ determine the questions and therefore limit the answers,” having lost sight of the fact that Jesus Christ is the *only* ultimate authority and presupposition for Christian understanding (see Newbigin’s argument for this in Chapter One).<sup>126</sup> Second, the assumption that there is “some kernel of *real* Christianity, some abstract essence that can be preserved while changing some of the old Near Eastern labels,” inevitably “distorts the nature of Christianity.”<sup>127</sup> For, “In Jesus we meet not a presentation of basic ideas about God, world, and humanity, but an invitation to join up, to become part of a movement, a people.”<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the mission of the church is never to accommodate the gospel to people, but to accommodate people to the gospel, helping them to place themselves within its narrative and be shaped by its worldview.<sup>129</sup> Conversion is not simply about changing ideas—it is about changing lives.

Hauerwas and Willimon argue that the supreme test for Liberal theology, a movement which sought to translate the Christian faith into forms acceptable to society, was Nazi Germany. The German Liberal theologians removed from the gospel many

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 24.

things that were offensive to them, such as the importance of the Old Testament and the particularity of Jesus' Jewish ethnicity.<sup>130</sup> The result is that these theologians lacked the theological resources necessary to stand against Hitler.<sup>131</sup> Liberal theology failed to acknowledge the otherness of the gospel and the challenges to human thinking thus inherent within it. Therefore, its theological method was flawed and led to disastrous results.

As opposed to such a German State Church model, which assimilates theology into its own ideology, or an 'activist' (Constantinian) model, or a 'conversionist' (privatized) model, Hauerwas and Willimon propose a 'Confessing Church' model, a distinction borrowed from John Howard Yoder.<sup>132</sup> A 'Confessing Church' engages in mission not by power, or by compromise, or through salesmanship, but by *being* the church.<sup>133</sup> It is a 'community of the cross', which regards salvation in Christ as a life-long adventure or journey of constant commitment to God and to one another.<sup>134</sup> Contrary to the pragmatics of postmodern culture, such a church lives and acts not in accordance with "what works," but in imitation of "how God acts" (the Sermon on the Mount is a paramount example of this).<sup>135</sup> As such, it is a people living as "strangers in the world" (1Pe 1:1), as a "kingdom and priests" to serve God (Rev 5:10) as His servants and ambassadors (2Co 5:20) to the nations.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., See pp. 44-45. Hauerwas and Willimon borrow Yoder's distinction of activist, conversionist, and confessing church models.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 85-86.

#### 4. The Church as an Alternate Community

Craig Van Gelder asserts that a crucial feature of the church, and its mission, is for a “demonstration of God’s reality . . . lodged in *a living community* of his believers” (emphasis mine).<sup>136</sup> Again, Van Gelder stresses the church’s social nature when he argues that the core biblical images for the church develop a common theme, namely, that it “is primarily a social fellowship of persons.”<sup>137</sup> Thus, the communal nature of the church is not something peripheral to it, but is essential for its being.<sup>138</sup> Yet, according to Guder, the church is not just *any* community. It is particular and unique—one which “happens concretely in the coming together of Christians to worship, to grapple with the Scriptures, to be instructed in the faith, to love each other, and to practice the rule of Christ corporately and individually.”<sup>139</sup> In its life, then, the community of Christ is an *alternate community*, which lives in the world in distinction from it as a colony of heaven. It has a separate identity and worldview, which is based upon the person, work, and Word of Christ, who is its ultimate foundation and authority.

The alternate community exists as a demonstration of the reality of the present-yet-coming kingdom of God in the world. As such, it should act in a manner that accentuates the differences between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Included among the many ways the church must proclaim the kingdom are the following: confronting the principalities and powers of this world when they become oppressive, using an alternate vocabulary that demonstrates a different understanding of the world,

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<sup>136</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 39.

<sup>137</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 107-108.

<sup>138</sup> Van Gelder, ed., *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 263.

<sup>139</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Structures: The Particular Community,” in *Missional Church*, 234.

promoting an alternative view of economic theory and practice oriented toward social justice, and possessing an alternate understanding of power and the use of power. The content of the mission that has been given to the church is best demonstrated in the preaching, teaching, and healing ministry of Jesus. The community's otherness or alternativeness results from following Christ's example.

Thus, the church's distinctiveness is not an end in itself, but is for the sake of the world and, indeed, is an open invitation for all who would join. Inagrace Dietterich describes it as follows:

The church offers the world an invitation to a new communal life, a new social identity, and a new way of receiving and sharing the basic necessities of life...the church proclaims and embodies a new social ethic in which deeds of mercy and acts of charity are a natural and organic part of its life as it manifests the liberating possibilities of God's reign to the world.<sup>140</sup>

Accordingly, Guder maintains that the church "focuses on the community being sent into its mission field as Christ's witness."<sup>141</sup> It is an apostolic community, which is to say that it is "the formation of a people whose life witnesses to the apostolic message."<sup>142</sup> Roxburgh clarifies that being an apostolic church does not mean achieving effectiveness in reaching non-believers, or becoming so secular that the world comes to accept it; rather, it refers to "the call to announce by demonstration the existence of a distinctive and alternative community of Jesus Christ," which "has its beginnings in God's action, not in human choice or decision."<sup>143</sup> Along these lines, Lois Barrett identifies the "key images of God's alternative community" (i.e., the Missional Church)

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<sup>140</sup> Inagrace Dietterich, "Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit," in *Missional Church*, 166.

<sup>141</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 234.

<sup>142</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, "The Church in a Postmodern Context," in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 257-258.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

with the illustrations of ‘salt of the earth’, ‘light to the world’, and a ‘city set on a hill’, all of which disclose something of the church’s otherness.<sup>144</sup>

## 5. The Church as the Local Congregation

In recent times, theology has experienced a renaissance of interest in the local congregation, which Patrick R. Keifert attributes to four factors, including the following: i) a major shift in scholarly research standards; ii) a return to premodern theological themes (i.e., Trinitarian theology and eschatology within an ecumenical and *missional* ecclesiology); iii) a renewed focus upon the particular and local in regards to moral and ethical issues, as opposed to the abstract and universalistic tendencies of modernity; and iv) a growing sense of mission in North America and internationally.<sup>145</sup> The Missional Church Movement is no exception to this trend, frequently pointing to the significance of *the local congregation* as the nucleus of the church’s identity and mission.

Hunsberger, following Newbigin, refers to the local congregation as the *hermeneutic of the gospel*, “the lens through which [the gospel] may become known and by which it can rightly be interpreted.”<sup>146</sup> Elsewhere, John R. Hendrick discusses the *missional* role of local congregations in the postmodern context, contending that a missionary congregation demonstrates the following attributes: it will i) understand that it exists in a cross-cultural situation; ii) enter into dialogue with its context and culture; iii) provide opportunities for its members to reflect on culture from a biblical view; iv) pray for and seek its own transformation; v) accept the marginal position in which it finds

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<sup>144</sup> Lois Barrett, “Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in *Missional Church*, 128.

<sup>145</sup> Patrick R. Keifert, “The Return of the Congregation: Missional Warrants,” *Word and World* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 368.

<sup>146</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 14.

itself; and vi) bear witness in its social and cultural situation.<sup>147</sup> Most of these characteristics, as well as the general emphasis upon local congregations, can readily be perceived in the four *missional* images for the church described previously.

In addition to these notions, Missional Church Movement advocates underscore various other facets of *missional* congregations. For example, Keifert refers to the congregation as the “primal center for the study of theology and productive center of theology and theological education.”<sup>148</sup> He points out that the early church of the first four centuries epitomized this approach to theology. Such a locus for theological education, he argues, ensured that theology served the mission of the church, rather than the aspirations of individuals or universities.<sup>149</sup> Presumably, what Keifert is arguing is that, by locating theological study in the concrete congregation of real people in real community, we can avoid the tendency for academic theology to become abstract and irrelevant (or even hostile) to the empirical church.

As a second example, Dietterich stresses the importance of social or ecclesial practices for missional congregations, for their cultivation as “communities of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>150</sup> These include “baptism, the Lord’s Supper, reconciliation, discernment, hospitality, the reading and interpretation of Scripture, the development and exercise of leadership, the loving care and support of one another, the proclamation of God’s Word,

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<sup>147</sup> John R. Hendrick, “Congregations with Missions vs. Missionary Congregations,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 303-306.

<sup>148</sup> Keifert, “The Return of the Congregation,” 370.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 142-182.

the active evangelization of all peoples, the exploration and learning of the faith, as well as the responsible and responsive stewardship of all God's abundant gifts."<sup>151</sup>

As a final example, Guder envisions the local congregation as a mission/evangelizing community.<sup>152</sup> He writes, "As we move to the end of the twentieth century, there has been a growing consensus in worldwide Christianity that the local congregation is the basic unit of Christian witness."<sup>153</sup> Consistent with Keifert's emphasis upon the 'particular' and 'local', Guder argues that Christian witness must be lived out in particular places, where Christians can meet regularly for worship and work. In belonging to a *local* congregation, members share in the benefits of proximity, frequency of direct contact with others, mutually supportive relationships, the sharing of resources, and experiencing spiritual growth together.<sup>154</sup> Such togetherness is inherent to Christian witness, being based upon the *missio Dei*. Guder explains, "This is what the Holy Spirit does: it forms mission communities so that the gospel may be incarnated in particular places, to be the witness to Jesus Christ."<sup>155</sup> Thus, "Regardless of the actual shape and name adopted, the local congregation is the basic unit of Christian witness if we understand witness incarnationally."<sup>156</sup>

Evangelism is the heart of the mission and ministry of the local congregation as a mission community.<sup>157</sup> Unfortunately, as Guder laments, many churches in North

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>152</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 146.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 150.

America have lost sight of or do not sufficiently appreciate the central *missional* vocation of the church.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, to remain faithful to its calling, the church must submit to continual conversion. Guder explicates his point, “*The continual conversion of the church happens as the congregation hears, responds to, and obeys the gospel of Jesus Christ in ever new and more comprehensive ways.*” Particularly, a congregation that desires to place evangelization at the centre of its life and ministry must demonstrate the following features: i) a fundamental commitment to incarnational witness; ii) congruence between its proclamation of the gospel and its actions; iii) intentionality in confronting its conformities to culture and its tendencies to endorse a reductionist gospel (through rigorous engagement with the Bible, the Christian traditions, and the ecumenical community); and iv) openness to continual conversion, with a willingness to repent of its cultural captivity and gospel reductionism.<sup>159</sup>

To aid local congregations in their understanding of the church’s nature and mission, Guder proposes the following confessional statement, which is intended for corporate reading. Note well the manner in which it integrates the themes of *missio Dei*, mission community, and continual conversion, as well as the primary prominence it devotes to mission.

We believe that we are the church, that is, we are a community of God’s people called and set apart for witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. We are blessed to be a blessing. As the father has sent Christ, so Christ sends us. Jesus Christ has defined us as his witnesses where we are. We believe therefore that the Holy Spirit not only calls us but also enables and gifts us for that mission. Our task is to determine the particular focus and direction of our mission. We are to identify the charisms given us by the Spirit for mission. We have the responsibility and the capacity, through the Holy Spirit, to shape ourselves for faithful witness. Our purpose defines our organizational structures—which means that our mission

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 202.

challenges us to re-form our structures so that we can be faithful in our witness.<sup>160</sup>

#### D. Mission as the Defining Feature of the Church

At this point, I will focus on an aspect particular to Missional Church Movement ecclesiology, namely, its conception of mission as *the* defining feature of the church. This viewpoint, evident in much of the Movement's literature, generally appears in one of three ways. First, Guder and Hunsberger argue that the church is not the goal of the gospel but its instrument and agent, subservient to the mission God has given it. "In particular, we have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness."<sup>161</sup> Similarly, Cheryl Bridges Johns states, "The believers are not allowed to hold a monopoly on the abundance they have received. This means that we have to stop viewing ourselves as the end and humbly acknowledge that we are *only* the means to a greater end" (emphasis mine).<sup>162</sup> Consequently, Guder defines the church as "God's instrument for God's mission."<sup>163</sup> It is "a concrete reality formed in specific cultures *for its mission*" (emphasis mine).<sup>164</sup> Therefore, mission should not be viewed as a sub-topic of the church; rather, it *defines* the church as "God's sent people."<sup>165</sup> Accordingly, our ecclesiology must shift from 'church with a mission' to expounding the meaning of being a 'missional church'.<sup>166</sup> While some attention is given to the internal dynamics of the church, such as fellowship,

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<sup>160</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 236.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>162</sup> Johns, "When all God's People are Prophets," 19.

<sup>163</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 8.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

the fruit of the Spirit, and Christian togetherness (i.e., Dietterichs' chapter in *Missional Church*), nevertheless these are placed in the service of the church's primary focus, its mission. "Through this power of the Holy Spirit a 'people sent' are cultivated through the practices by which they are formed, trained, equipped, and motivated as missional communities."<sup>167</sup>

Second, Missional Church Movement advocates argue that the church is, in essence, mission. For example, Guder asserts that mission is the central biblical theme, which describes the purpose of God's action in human history.<sup>168</sup> This action, which is based upon God's soteriological intentions for the world, occurs in and through the *missional* church. Furthermore, Lois Barrett reflects upon the images of 'salt of the earth', 'light of the world', and 'city set on a hill', and concludes, "These images suggest that mission is not just what the church *does*; it is what the church *is*."<sup>169</sup> As Johannes Blauw wrote many years ago, "It is exactly by going outside itself that the Church is itself and comes to itself."<sup>170</sup> Or, as David Bosch argues, the church is essentially missionary, existing in being sent out and equipping itself for mission.<sup>171</sup> Thus, "ecclesiology does not precede missiology."<sup>172</sup> Hunsberger endorses this position, believing that it follows from a theocentric, as opposed to an ecclesiocentric, exposition

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 128. See also Guder's comment: "The church does not *do* mission, it *is* mission. By its very calling and nature, it exists as God's 'sent' people (*missio* = sending)." From Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church," *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (1998): 5.

<sup>170</sup> Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), 122.

<sup>171</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 372.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

of mission. The nature of the church, accordingly, is based upon that of the Triune, Sending God.<sup>173</sup>

Guder's unique contribution to this line of thought is his contention that the primary definition of the church is given in the mission promise of Ac 1:8: "You shall be my witnesses."<sup>174</sup> Thus, according to Guder, the church should be defined as "a people of witness."<sup>175</sup> Guder sets his view in opposition to conventional traditions of ecclesiology, arguing for "the preeminence of witness as the fundamental definition of the church."<sup>176</sup> Elsewhere, he states this emphatically: "We need to grasp that the witness to which we are called is an all-encompassing definition of Christian existence."<sup>177</sup> For Guder, this concept of 'witness' serves as the principle feature of the church, under which other subordinate functions, including especially proclamation (*kerygma*), community (*koinonia*), and service or ministry (*diakonia*), are categorized and incorporated.<sup>178</sup> This configuration develops consistently and logically from his assumption that "the community of Christ is not an end in itself but a part of God's accomplishment of his saving purposes..."<sup>179</sup> In summary of his view, Guder writes:

Thus, the mission of the church is to be Christ's witness in the world, being, doing, and saying that witness as the continuation of his ministry, incarnating the gospel for the sake of a world for which Christ died. And the internal mission of

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<sup>173</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 82.

<sup>174</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 44.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

the church is to be equipped and to equip itself, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, for this work of witness.<sup>180</sup>

The Missional Church Movement's treatment of Scripture is a third evidence for its understanding of mission as *the* defining feature of the church. For example, Guder implores biblical scholars to employ a *missional* hermeneutic in probing the Bible, which he believes is urgently needed.<sup>181</sup> He argues that the New Testament writings were addressed to communities that understood their *missional* identity and calling, and thus "the purpose of the canonical Scriptures was (and is) to enable them to continue in that mission."<sup>182</sup> Elsewhere, Guder asserts that the purpose of theological labour in the early church was "to equip and support the church in its missionary vocation."<sup>183</sup> He explains:

The theological controversies of the second to sixth centuries were an expression of the church's struggle with the contextualization of the gospel in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds into which the gospel was being translated. But, with the establishment of Constantinian Christianity, the missional sense of the church's calling and nature faded from consciousness.<sup>184</sup>

Thus, Guder calls for a *missional* re-orientation of the church, one which marshals "all of our theological resources" for the formation of the church for its mission in every particular community.<sup>185</sup>

## E. Summary

In summary, the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement fuses mission into the essence of the church. In response to the *missio Dei*, the Missional Church comes into existence as an agent of God's mission. It represents God's reign as a sign, foretaste,

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>181</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 228.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>183</sup> Guder, "Missional Theology," 7.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 9.

and instrument of the kingdom; and it exists as its community, servant, and messenger. As such, the Missional Church operates with the *eschaton* or end in view, living out its life as a group of heavenly citizens, who expectantly await the return of their King, serving provisionally as His ambassadors to the world. It is loyal only to Him, and must repeatedly repent of false allegiances and temptations to compromise His mission. The Missional Church therefore experiences continual conversion. It is called to be different, to leave worldly means, powers, and privileges behind as it offers to the world an alternate way of life. Finally, the Missional Church does not exist for the sake of itself, seeking to advance or expand its territory or strengthen its institutional security and authority. Rather, it is called to exist for others; it is blessed to be a blessing.

## **F. The Need for Ecclesiological Reflection**

### **1. An Acknowledged Need**

The Missional Church Movement acknowledges that its task is not yet complete, both theologically and practically. There is still an earnest need for ecclesiological reflection within a missiological framework. According to Hunsberger, there is a need for “recovering a practical missionary ecclesiology, a self-understanding of and by the churches that envisions our missionary character and guides us in faithful living.”<sup>186</sup> Guder adds, “We urgently need biblical scholarship that will probe the scriptural record, using a missiological hermeneutic,” in order to accomplish such a *missional* reorientation and restructuring.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Hunsberger and Van Gelder, ed., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 14.

<sup>187</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 228.

## 2. The Need for Ecclesiological Balance and Depth

In addition to the necessity for engagement in ecclesiological reflection in order to support a *missional* view of the church (as the authors acknowledge), we have a further theological responsibility to ask critical questions concerning *missional* ecclesiology itself. Briefly stated, we must think through the following enquiries:

First, is it methodologically appropriate to begin with sociological and demographical analysis, and subsequently to construct a theological position based upon a cultural context? Second, is the Missional Church Movement correct when it asserts that mission is *the defining feature* of the church, that ‘missionary’ or ‘witness’ is an “all-encompassing definition of Christian existence,” and that mission is not merely what the church *does* but what the church *is*?<sup>188</sup> Is it possible that the inevitable implication of such a view is that ecclesiology is swallowed up into missiology, that *being* is defined by *doing*, and that our understanding of church is thus functional, task-oriented, and pragmatic? Third, in its efforts to counter the affects of North American culture, does the Missional Church Movement act in a reactionary manner? Is its apprehensiveness for individual salvation, for modernity, and for Christendom imbalanced or overstated? Finally, in emphasizing mission as a controlling concept for the church, the Missional Church Movement gives a foundational place to such New Testament passages as the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and the designation of the disciples as witnesses in Acts 1:8. Is this an appropriate place to begin an ecclesiological exposition? Or, must we investigate the entire Bible, beginning with Creation and Fall (interpreted in light of the Incarnation), in order to properly understand God’s purpose for the church? In other

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<sup>188</sup> Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 233.

words, can an ecclesiology that is founded almost solely upon the New Testament adequately explain the church's reason for being?

### **3. Introduction to Bonhoeffer**

Before investigating these and other questions in the final chapter of this work, I will undertake an exposition of the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a noted ecclesiological theologian. My intention is to bring Bonhoeffer into dialogue with the Missional Church Movement, such that his insights regarding the nature and function of the church might offer an assessment, perhaps even a corrective, to the proposed *missional* ecclesiology.

Engaging Bonhoeffer in this manner is appropriate and pertinent for at least two reasons. First, Bonhoeffer is interested in many of the same concerns as the Missional Church Movement, including the need for the church to incarnate the gospel in its life and ministry, the problem of fragmented faith (i.e., similar to Newbiggin's discussion of the public-private dichotomy), and the dangers of assimilating Christianity into human cultures and ideologies (as part of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer literally experienced a church without privileges, an alternate, exilic community, etc.). Thus, I suggest that Bonhoeffer would be in fundamental agreement with the Movement's aspiration for the church to live for the sake of others, to examine its cultural (and other) allegiances and loyalties, and to proclaim the kingdom of God boldly in the world, both in word and deed.

Second, I suggest that Bonhoeffer would raise a number of questions and objections regarding the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology, similar to those I mentioned in the previous section. In Bonhoeffer's work, we will encounter a different

methodology, as he believes that all teaching about Christ begins in silence before the Word of God. We will also encounter a more comprehensive ecclesiology, both from a theological perspective and a biblical perspective (the entire biblical narrative is important for Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology). Furthermore, we will find that Bonhoeffer is able to hold different aspects of biblical truth in tension, thus resisting totalizing tendencies and giving credence to various voices within Scripture and tradition. For example, according to Bonhoeffer, sin is both a personal and a corporate problem and thus mission must reach individuals and communities. Similarly, community is an end in itself, yet also exists for others. And, Christian existence harmonizes *being* and *doing*.

Thus, while honouring the intentions of the Missional Church Movement, and while agreeing with part of its critique of the Western church, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church nevertheless challenges the Movement in significant ways. In the next two chapters, I shall proceed with an exposition of the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BONHOEFFER'S ECCLESIOLOGY: PART ONE

#### A. General Introduction to Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology

For most of his academic and pastoral life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was captivated with the meaning and significance of the church. For him, the church was a source of joy and strength, a “physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God.”<sup>1</sup> In his thinking and writing about the church, Bonhoeffer combined theological study and cultural analysis with personal faith and pastoral experience. In so doing, he developed ecclesiological insights that possessed a prophetic pertinence to his own era, as well as an enduring timelessness that continues to address the church today.

I will discuss these insights as I engage in an exposition of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, which I have divided thematically into three major sections in two chapters. This chapter includes an exposition of the first two themes, namely the *relational* and the *incarnational / Christological* elements of his ecclesiology. The following chapter includes an exposition of the third theme, the ‘*missional*’ elements of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. In a subsequent section of Chapter Four, I will draw out the parallels and congruencies between Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement. In the exposition, I will encounter the four major themes in Bonhoeffer's overall thought, which

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 20.

Clifford Green identifies as sociality, Christology, anthropology, and soteriology (the first three themes permeate the content of this chapter, while the last theme relates to Chapter Four).<sup>2</sup>

## B. A Relational Ecclesiology

According to Clifford Green, sociality is one of the most pervasive themes in Bonhoeffer's writings. Green goes so far as to suggest that sociality is *the* fundamental feature of his thought.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, Green argues that Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is set within the larger theological framework of sociality.<sup>4</sup> This emphasis upon the sociological or relational nature of the church has aroused interest in Bonhoeffer, not only among his fellow Protestants, but among Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox theologians and laypeople as well.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, it was through his

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<sup>2</sup> Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Contra Green, I believe that Bonhoeffer's most pervasive theme is Christology, which infuses an incarnational and relational quality into every aspect of his theology. Particularly, he is interested in exploring the reality and concreteness of the living and present Christ in the church community (his early writings) and in the world (*Ethics, Letters and Papers from Prison*). In support of this claim, I note that in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer employs sociological categories and analysis in *the service of theology*, and not the other way around. Bonhoeffer writes, "...it should be noted that this study of the sanctorum communio does not properly belong to the sociology of religion, *but to theology*. It will be carried out *on the foundation of Christian theology* and will make fruitful for theology the fundamental insights that derive purely from social philosophy and sociology, as well as the sociology of religion" (emphasis mine). See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, vol. 1, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 32-33. Thus, Bonhoeffer's emphasis upon sociality is grounded theologically, or more particularly, Christologically and incarnationally. See also Russell W. Palmer, "The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Evangelical Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1977): 132; James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 138; Andreas Pangritz, "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134; and Eberhard Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology and his 'Religionless Christianity,'" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23, no. 3 (1967): 61-77. Having made this qualification, I agree that sociality is of crucial importance not only to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology but to the entirety of his theology. Thus, I will proceed with my discussion of the relational aspects of his ecclesiology with the understanding that a Christological foundation is primary.

<sup>4</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> See William Kuhns, "A Catholic Looks at Bonhoeffer," *The Christian Century* 84, no. 26 (June 28, 1967): 832; and Andrew J. Sopko, "Bonhoeffer: An Orthodox Ecclesiology?," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 81-88.

experiences with the Roman Catholic Church in Rome (i.e., its universality) in 1924 that Bonhoeffer first felt he was “beginning to understand the concept of the church.”<sup>6</sup>

Before tracing the relational components of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology through his works, I will begin with some introductory remarks about relevant aspects of Bonhoeffer’s theological background and context. Among the major influences of Bonhoeffer’s early thought were his theological professors, including Adolf Schlatter’s (1852-1938) perspective of ‘the world’ and the Bible as authority; Karl Heim’s (1874-1958) epistemology and apologetics; Adolf von Harnack’s (1851-1930) notions of freedom, historical objectivity, and confidence in the human spirit; Karl Holl’s (1866-1926) understanding of Luther and of sociality; Reinhold Seeberg’s (1859-1935) work on Luther, nineteenth century Protestant theology, and Hegel; and Karl Barth’s (1886-1968) dialectical theology, his understanding of revelation and the otherness of God, and his critique of religion.<sup>7</sup>

As Bonhoeffer began his early work, he attempted to find a middle position between the Idealism of his teachers (i.e., the immanence of God) and the dialectical theology of Karl Barth (i.e., the transcendence of God). “Transcendence is interpreted in terms of (in the *form* of) human sociality, and in such a way that the dualistic risk of the transcendence-immanence coupling is overcome.”<sup>8</sup> Green explains that, “For Bonhoeffer, the other man, as an ethical subject in community, is the *form* of both the *otherness* and

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<sup>6</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed., trans. Eric Mosbacher, et al., ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 59.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Rumscheidt, “The Formation of Bonhoeffer’s Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 52-65.

<sup>8</sup> Clifford Green, “Sociality and Church in Bonhoeffer’s 1933 Christology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21, no. 4 (1968): 423.

the *presence* of God” (how Bonhoeffer constructs this will become clear as we proceed).<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, in regards to sociality, Bonhoeffer wished to avoid Idealism’s tendency toward assimilative collectivism, which suppresses difference and individuality, as well as existentialism’s tendency toward narrow individualism.<sup>10</sup> The following quotations illustrate the contrast between these two positions regarding sociality, as well as Bonhoeffer’s struggle with them.

Hegel compromises difference; the separateness of persons, the contradictions within communities and relationships, all this needs to be taken up in the arms of the dialectic. It is not the nature of the Idea to allow the difference to remain, on the contrary, its nature is just to resolve or sublimate the difference....One of Bonhoeffer’s principal theological tasks involves coming to terms with the meaning of that unity which preserves difference as difference and yet avoids totalization.<sup>11</sup>

For [Bonhoeffer] the existential question is not posed in the form of the anxiety of finitude, as in Tillich, nor by the individual’s insecurity before the uncontrollable future in the process of historical change, as in Bultmann, nor in Heidegger’s being-towards-death. The call to decision and responsibility, the exercise of one’s historicity, the identification of the self—in short, the existential question of the being of the self is posed by the encounter with the other man, and above all with Christ in the form of the other man who asks *the* question: the question of love for the neighbour.<sup>12</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, “To exist as a human person is to exist as an historical nature in society.”<sup>13</sup> He is very much against the theory of atomism, which he encountered in the ‘formal sociology’ of his day.<sup>14</sup> This approach to sociology, he explains, “views persons as fixed objects whose particular social ‘dispositions’ enable

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>11</sup> Charles March, “Human Community and Divine Presence: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theological Critique of Hegel,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45, no. 4 (1992): 434.

<sup>12</sup> Green, “Sociality and Church,” 423.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, trans. R. Gregor Smith (London: Collins, 1963), 17-21.

and create relations with other persons.”<sup>15</sup> Further, “while these forces are capable of transforming the social sphere of the person as described above, nevertheless the personal center remains unaffected.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Bonhoeffer charges that, in assuming that a person is an ‘isolated centre’, the atomistic theory presents an “individualistic theory of society.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Bonhoeffer rejects the view that a person can be understood as an isolated individual (i.e., as a thing-in-itself), apart from community and relationships. Therefore, he also rejects any theory of sociality that builds upon such an assumption.

Accordingly, Bonhoeffer asserts that all theological doctrines must be interpreted socially: “The more this investigation has considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, we can understand the concepts of ‘person’, ‘primal state’, ‘sin’, and ‘revelation’ only in relation to sociality.<sup>19</sup> For Bonhoeffer, this position is not based upon a particular sociological commitment, but upon a biblical and theological interpretation of humanity.<sup>20</sup> (See the next section.)

Although he wants to preserve the sociality of the person, Bonhoeffer equally desires to protect the person from being absorbed or dissolved into sociality and thereby losing individuality and distinctiveness, as in Idealism. He argues that such an Idealist view of personhood must be overcome with a theological-anthropological interpretation

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<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> As hinted in the subtitle of the work (i.e., A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church), Bonhoeffer employs sociological categories in the service of theology, not vice versa. See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 21.

of the concrete individual person as ultimate and willed by God.<sup>21</sup> The problem with Idealism, according to Bonhoeffer, is that all ways of knowing are contained within the sphere of the mind. The thinking subject conceptualizes all other things only in relation to the self, interpreting all otherness through itself. An object always remains an object and can never become a transcendent subject, even when that object is a person or, indeed, God.<sup>22</sup> Thus, both God and other people are drawn into the thinking 'I', and otherness and transcendence are collapsed into immanence. Individuality and finitude are not preserved, as the ultimate goal is to overcome them, as both 'I' and 'Thou' are assimilated into the universal mind or spirit. Bonhoeffer writes, "From the purely transcendental category of the universal we can never reach the real existence of alien subjects."<sup>23</sup> Thus,

As long as my intellect is dominant, exclusively claiming universal validity, as long as all contradictions that can arise when one knows a subject as an object of knowledge are conceived as immanent to my intellect, I am not in the social sphere.<sup>24</sup>

In order to preserve the Christian concept of the person, which is a being-in-relationship, there must be a possibility for transcendence. One's own mind must be confronted with a fundamental *boundary*; this boundary is God.<sup>25</sup> "*For Christian philosophy, the human person originates only in relation to the divine; the divine person transcends the human person, who both resists and is overwhelmed by the divine.*"<sup>26</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins, 1963), 28.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. See also *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998): 45.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 49.

arises from Christianity's absolute distinction between God and humanity.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, God is not the only being who presents a boundary to the individual; other people also present this boundary in the context of the 'I'-'Thou' social-ethical encounter—in the “*social ontic-ethical basic-relations of persons.*”<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer writes:

The other can be experienced by the I only as You, but never directly as I, that is, in the sense of the I that has become I only through the claim of a You. The You-form is fundamentally different from the I-form in the sphere of ethical reality. But since the You, too, stands before me as a person, as a thinking and acting mind, we must understand the You as an I in the general sense, i.e., in the sense of self consciousness, etc.<sup>29</sup>

Bonhoeffer is aware that an objection could be raised at this point, in that the 'I' does not yet reach transcendence or otherness, as the other is still immanent in the mind of the thinking 'I'. His response is that he is not discussing epistemological transcendence, but ethical transcendence, “experienced only by those facing a decision; it can never be demonstrated to someone on the outside.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, persons constitute barriers, limits, or boundaries for one another, confronting one another with ethical claims, which demand responsible decision.<sup>31</sup> In his ethical interpretation of the 'I'-'Thou' encounter, therefore, Bonhoeffer differs from Buber, who instead stresses intimacy between persons in order to overcome the objectified 'I'-'It' world.<sup>32</sup> Yet the problem of transcendence remains, even if it is interpreted as ethical transcendence: “One human being cannot of its own accord make another into an I, an ethical person conscious

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>31</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> Clifford Green, “Human Sociality and Christian Community,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 116. Green attributes the identification of intimacy in Buber to Walter Kaufmann.

of responsibility.”<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer resolves the problem with reference to the activity of God: “*God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God’s active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human You is an image of the divine You.*”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, “*The claim of the other rests in God alone; for this very reason, it remains the claim of the other.*”<sup>35</sup> Since God wills the person “*in concrete vitality, wholeness, and uniqueness as an ultimate unity,*” and yet not as an isolated, atomistic individual, Christian sociality must be understood interpersonally, building upon the individuality and diversity of persons.<sup>36</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, then, the concepts of person, God, and sociality are thoroughly interrelated,<sup>37</sup> from a Christian viewpoint, one cannot be understood apart from the others.<sup>38</sup> This discussion about the nature of Christian sociality foreshadows the relational ecclesiology developed in *Sanctorum Communio* (and his other works), as well as the inferences he makes regarding the church.<sup>39</sup> But, before we can understand the development of his argument, we must investigate the sources upon which his

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<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Although, as I noted earlier, the foundation for Bonhoeffer’s thought is an incarnational theology which provides the foundation for his understanding of the human personhood and sociality.

<sup>38</sup> In addition, humanity’s communion with God and human communion with other humans arise and fall together. God does not create humans to live in an isolated spiritual relationship with Him alone, but God’s relationship with humanity is lived-out in the context of community. “Community with God by definition establishes a social community as well. It is not that community with God subsequently leads to social community; rather, neither exists without the other.” See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>39</sup> One may inquire of Bonhoeffer whether there really is such a thing as a distinctly ‘Christian’ sociality. Indeed, James M. Gustafson criticises Bonhoeffer for making excessive claims regarding the sociological uniqueness of the Christian community. See James M. Gustafson, review of *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theology Today* 21 (January 1965): 527-529. His point is well-taken, and probably justified. However, in fairness, Bonhoeffer’s theological perspective is that the church is a reality and not merely a possibility. Bonhoeffer does not proceed by expounding ‘what is’ from ‘what ought to be’, but rather by expounding ‘what ought to be’ from ‘what is’ (i.e., from reality or revelation). Thus, the church is recognized *by faith*, not by outward appearances.

assumptions (i.e., of God, humanity, etc.) are based. Therefore, we will now turn our attention to Bonhoeffer's exposition of the biblical accounts of Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

### 1. Creation—The Primal State

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer argues that in the primal state (i.e., Ge 1-2), humanity is in immediate or direct communion with God. This perfect communion is not merely that of an 'I-'Thou' encounter, but "This community is a real connection of love between an I and an I."<sup>40</sup> The immediacy of this community means that the will of God and the will of humanity are united in purpose. In other words, humanity is completely obedient to God in serving Him. This service is one of love, which reinforces humanity's identity and affirms its created-ness, its proper place in the Creator-creation relationship. It has nothing to do with slavery or the suppression of human dignity. Furthermore, loving service is the life-principle that God Himself sets by His own example: "by limitless serving God rules limitlessly over men. In that God establishes this law for community, man serves him limitlessly in fulfilling it, and God rules over men."<sup>41</sup>

However, in the human community (i.e., relationships among humans) immediate love must take other forms, since the Creator-creation relationship, in which the former rules absolutely over the latter, does not apply.<sup>42</sup> Thus, "mutual service is *service in*

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<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins, 1963), 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 41. Bonhoeffer writes according to the custom of his own time, and thus uses gender-exclusive language. I have decided to preserve his own original words, but wish to qualify this with the following citation from Charles Ringma: "Bonhoeffer uses sexist language. He constantly speaks of 'man' when he is clearly referring to all persons. For example, the statement 'Christ... is the truth spoken in the concrete moment, the address which puts a man in the truth before God' obviously includes Christ's address and challenge to women. We have decided not to rewrite Bonhoeffer's use of language, and we ask the reader to make the necessary adjustments. In this and in other ways Bonhoeffer was a person of his time, but this should not detract from the value that he holds for our generation." See the preface to Charles Ringma, *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Colorado Springs: Piñon Press, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins, 1963), 41.

*common, together* under the rule of God” (emphasis mine).<sup>43</sup> Green remarks, “Bonhoeffer clearly means here that God’s being and human being in the primal community is always a ‘being-for’ one another.”<sup>44</sup> This common willing and serving, which humanity shares, does not rule out the possibility of conflict—as if there were no conflicts before the Fall. In the common will to serve God conflicts still arise, because humans are created as *unique individuals* in accordance with God’s will: “The will of every individual strives to attain the single goal of serving the divine will, that is, serving the community in its own way.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, in contrast to post-Fall conflict, which originates in the selfish will to assert oneself over-against others, pre-Fall conflicts had to do with deciding how best to serve God and others.

In addition, human community in the primal state, as being-for one another, is based upon purposive acts of will. It is distinctly human, which implies conscious intention or planning and not merely animalistic instincts.<sup>46</sup> Being in community is not simply having something in common with others (although this is a by-product), but arises in the reciprocal will for being-in community and being-for others in common responsibility. Thus, it must be distinguished from other types of social gatherings or groups. For example, community is not to be equated with ‘society’.<sup>47</sup> Since it is God’s

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<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 60.

<sup>44</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 48.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 61.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer draws on Ferdinand Tönnies’ distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*). See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 89. Bonhoeffer adopts Tönnies’ ideas uncritically, without noting the weaknesses of the communitarian typological approach. These weaknesses should be noted. For example, Tönnies’ critics point out that his concepts are neither founded upon nor proven by empirical research. In addition, it is argued that Tönnies’ identification of the subtypes of community have become anachronistic and inadequate (i.e., as Steven Brint puts it: in an age in which “members of communities may or may not interact intensively or in a physically, co-present way,” and which is characterized by “mass transportation and communication, geographic and social mobility, and cross-cutting social worlds.”) Furthermore, Tönnies is criticized

will for humans to live in community, the primal community is not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself.<sup>48</sup> It is part of the social structure of *life* (which is also an end willed by God); it is a “life-community.”<sup>49</sup> In contrast, “society is an association of rational action,” a means to a specified end or goal.<sup>50</sup> Whereas community is about being-for others, “People accept responsibility for the society only in their very own interest.”<sup>51</sup> While personal bonds in the community are expressed in ‘closeness’ or intimacy, in society they are expressed in ‘looseness’ or indifference.<sup>52</sup> While the community is created and preserved by God, the society is joined voluntarily and secured contractually. As a second example, communities should not be confused with the concept of the ‘mass’.<sup>53</sup> In a mass, people are brought together not by common purposive will, but by

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for overstressing or dichotomizing the differences between community and society, and idealizing the former over the latter. Steven Brint writes, “The obvious difficulty with this approach is that these qualities do not necessarily line up together on one side of a conceptual divide. Common ways of life do not necessarily imply common beliefs. Small numbers of people do not necessarily imply common ways of life. Continuous relations do not necessarily imply emotional bonds. And so on. More important, social relations characterized by ‘natural will’ do not necessarily lead to all of the outcomes [Tönnies] associated with *Gemeinschaft*. . . . [Tönnies]’s highly connotative approach invited confusion about the defining coordinates of community, and it encouraged the tendency of subsequent writers either to romanticize or debunk community, rather than to approach the issue of community and community types in a rigorous analytical spirit.” See Steven Brint, “*Gemeinschaft* Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept,” *Sociological Theory* 19, no. 1 (March 2001): 1-23; and James A. Christenson, “*Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*: Testing the Spatial and Communal Hypotheses,” *Social Forces* 63, no. 1 (1984): 160.

However, as the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* points out, Tönnies’ thought is more complex and nuanced than he is often given credit for. Mathieu Deflem writes, “Tönnies conceived of any society as always to some degree both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies’ concepts, therefore, must be understood as directional concepts that represent analytical ideal types that are understood in abstraction to grasp society in its concrete manifestations. . . . Continually haunting the reception of Tönnies’ work until today are an unfounded association of his thought with romantic-idealism and the related misconception that Tönnies would have pessimistically criticized *Gesellschaft* societies.” Furthermore, “Tönnies’ ambition to combine competing schools of thought and the diffusion of his work over many publications in various matters of sociology did not promote an adequate reception of his thought.” See Mathieu Deflem, “Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936),” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer cites Ge 2:18: “It is not good that the human being [Mensch] should be alone.” See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 60, 89.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90. In connection with this, Bonhoeffer notes that, unlike societies, communities can bear young children as members (i.e., a child cannot commit to a contract or contribute to an association).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

some common stimulus “that produces a necessary reaction, while their bonding is accidental” (i.e., a theatre audience, a literary circle, etc.).<sup>54</sup> The mass represents the simplest form and most powerful feeling of unity, but it is not built upon the separateness of persons and cannot last beyond the common experience.<sup>55</sup>

An additional feature that Bonhoeffer includes in his discussion of the primal community is the notion of ‘objective spirit’ (not to be confused with the Holy Spirit!). He explains:

Two wills encountering one another form a structure. A third person joining them sees not just one person connected to the other; rather, the will of the structure, as a third factor, resists the newcomer with a resistance not identical with the wills of the two individuals. Sometimes this is even more forceful than that of either individual—or than the sum of all the individuals, if this is at all conceivable. Precisely this structure is objective spirit. It not only appears as independent and autonomous to the third person, who desires admission into a bond of friendship; the objective spirit also thrusts itself as a third entity right between two who are bound together in even the most primitively formed structure. Thus, the persons themselves experience their community as something real outside themselves, a community that distances itself from them without their willing it, rising above them.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, when two people come together in a relationship there are at least three factors that must be accounted for, including the one-who-relates, the one-being-related-to, and the relation itself. While this relation arises with the relationship and cannot exist without it, it also transcends the relationship as something that can be perceived objectively by observers.<sup>57</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, the objective spirit of a community

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>57</sup> As an example, people often perceive married couples as having a couple-identity, distinct from and transcending the identity of both individuals outside of the context of marriage (i.e., there is a difference between being with the individuals and being with the couple as a unit). In a healthy marriage, this collective couple-identity affirms and strengthens both people in their individuality and their existence as a real, empirical couple. Similarly, Bonhoeffer writes, “God created man and woman directed to one another. God does not desire a history of individual human beings, but the history of the human *community*. However, God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of *human beings*. In God’s eyes, community and [the] individual exist in the same moment

can be ascribed personal character; it can be regarded as a collective person.<sup>58</sup> As a collective person, God addresses the community corporately and the community has an ethical responsibility before God.<sup>59</sup> Thus, to anticipate what will be developed later, sinful humanity after the Fall is addressed corporately ‘in-Adam’, while redeemed humanity is addressed corporately ‘in-Christ’, in being-in-the-church (i.e., the collective person of ‘Christ existing as church-community’). All of this is not meant to erase individuality, as indeed, communities are built upon the differences and uniqueness of individual persons.

In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer discusses the primal community in terms of the *imago Dei* (image of God). Created in the image of God, humanity in the primal state lives in true freedom. “To say that in humankind God creates the image of God on earth means that humankind is like the Creator in that it is free.”<sup>60</sup> This freedom should not be understood as a substance or quality that people possess for themselves, but as something they have for others. Freedom, for Bonhoeffer, is a relation. “Being free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free.”<sup>61</sup> God created humanity, as man and woman, to live together, for-one-another, in free and selfless interdependence.<sup>62</sup> In this manner, humanity lives in the

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and rest in one another. The collective unit and the individual unit have the same structure in God’s eyes. On these basic-relations rest the concepts of the religious community and the church.” See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 80.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 102-106.

<sup>59</sup> As when God addressed the people of Israel as a corporate entity, or when Christ addressed the ‘spirits’ of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 118-121.

<sup>60</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, vol. 3, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 64.

primal community before God, in continuous worship, and *for* God and others, enjoying immediate relationships with both God and neighbour. All of this is in accordance with the will of the Creator, and brings glory to the triune God. “In the free creature the Holy Spirit worships the Creator; uncreated freedom glorifies itself in view of created freedom. The creature loves the Creator, because the Creator loves the creature.”<sup>63</sup>

In his “fresh and far reaching” interpretation of the *imago Dei*, Bonhoeffer avoids the tendency of previous theologians to interpret the *imago Dei* individualistically.<sup>64</sup> As Clifford Green states:

Bonhoeffer’s innovation is apparent in contrast to the view of previous theologians, all of whom have said that the human image of God consisted in some quality or property of the individual. This has been identified variously as free-will, as reason, as a quality of the soul such as immortality or, in Augustine, as a similarity to the trinitarian God seen in the unity of human memory, intellect and will.<sup>65</sup>

In contrast to the aforementioned views, Bonhoeffer interprets the *imago Dei* in terms of an *analogia relationis*, an analogy of relationship.<sup>66</sup> Humanity, created in the image of God, exists in being-in-relationship as man and woman inseparably united (separation from God and others means death).<sup>67</sup> That Eve is created from Adam’s own human flesh means that she is a unique and special gift; she is one with Adam as a being-in-relationship, a partner and co-ruler over creation. That Eve is created from Adam’s flesh does not elicit pride in Adam, but profound humility. Bonhoeffer writes, “Adam knows that he is bound in a wholly new way to this Eve who is derived from him.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> de Gruchy, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 116.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 65. Incidentally, Karl Barth appropriated Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis* in his 1942 Doctrine of Creation. Barth, “The Work of Creation,” vol. 3, no. 1, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*.

<sup>67</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 66.

This bond is best described in the expression: he now belongs to her, because she belongs to him. They are now no longer without each other; they are one and yet two.”<sup>68</sup> The two are one, yet their individuality and uniqueness are never abolished.<sup>69</sup> In language reminiscent of *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer argues that Eve represents a limit or boundary to Adam (as does Adam to Eve), and thus the two live in ethical responsibility to each other.<sup>70</sup> Thus, as a community of love and responsible service, which God has established and which worships God as Creator, this first marriage “is therefore the church in its original form.”<sup>71</sup>

From the *analogia relationis*, Bonhoeffer also expounds humanity’s freedom to rule over creation. While freedom over against other human beings should be understood as freedom *for* one another, freedom over against the created world should be understood as freedom *from* creation (i.e., humanity’s dominion over it).<sup>72</sup> This is not a freedom devoid of responsibility and care for creation—indeed, lordship and service are inseparable:

...this freedom to rule includes being bound to the creatures who are ruled. The ground and the animals over which I am lord constitute the world in which I live, without which I cease to be. It is my world, my earth, over which I rule. I am not free from it in any sense of my essential being, my spirit, having no need of nature, as though nature were something alien to the spirit. On the contrary, my whole being, in my creatureliness, I belong wholly to this world; its bears me, nurtures me, holds me.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Importantly, Green notes that Bonhoeffer is not “expounding some speculative ontology of the Creator” in his reflection upon the *analogia relationis*; rather, his interpretation is based upon Genesis 1-3, read in light of a Christological hermeneutic.<sup>74</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, “Because God in Christ is free for humankind, because God does not keep God’s freedom to God’s self, we can think of freedom only as a ‘being free for....’”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, this *analogia relationis* is not something that humans possess in and of themselves, apart from God. It consists only in the fact that humanity points to or illustrates the divine, and it extends only as far as human beings fulfil this purpose in relationship to God and others. Bonhoeffer asserts that the analogy or likeness “must be understood very strictly in the sense that what is like derives its likeness *only* from the prototype, so that it always points us only to the prototype itself and is ‘like’ it only in pointing to it in this way.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, Green summarizes, “since God’s being is being-for-humanity, so human relationships image this in one person ‘being-free-for-the-other’ in love.”<sup>77</sup>

## 2. Fall

Just as Bonhoeffer interprets creation relationally, so he also interprets the Fall of humanity relationally. The emergence of sin introduces division and isolation into the primal community. In the Fall, unmediated communion with God is lost, which means unmediated social community among humans is also lost.<sup>78</sup> “Between man and God, as

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<sup>74</sup> de Gruchy, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 117.

<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>77</sup> de Gruchy, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 117.

<sup>78</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 61.

between man and man, a divisive power has come, the power of sin.”<sup>79</sup> True community between humans, as well as true morality and religion in the proper sense, disappear from human nature.<sup>80</sup> After the Fall, human community is no longer based upon love, but selfishness and isolation; religion no longer has God as its centre, but the self.<sup>81</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, fallenness is not merely individuality or finitude, as in Docetism and Idealism, but self-indulgent idolatry.<sup>82</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, “Whereas in the primal state the relation among human beings is one of giving, in the sinful state it is purely demanding. Every person exists in complete, voluntary isolation; everyone lives their own life, rather than all living the same life in God.”<sup>83</sup>

Thus, as Green points out, while human existence in the primal state is being-for-others, existence in the sinful state is being-for-self and is characterized by the exercise of self-serving power over others.<sup>84</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, “The original community of love, as mutual harmony of reciprocally directed wills, is essentially destroyed when one will changes from a loving to an egocentric direction.”<sup>85</sup> Such is the divisive nature of sin, which “enters with the will that in principle affirms as valuable only itself, and not the

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<sup>79</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins, 1963), 42.

<sup>80</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 107.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer asserts, “All who countenance that they need only to come to themselves, in order to be in God, are doomed to hideous disillusion in the experience of being-, persisting-, and ending-up-turned-in-upon-themselves utterly—the experience of utmost loneliness in its tormenting desolation and sterility.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt, vol. 2, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>82</sup> In the *Christology* lectures, Bonhoeffer attacks the Docetic heresy and German Idealism, which conceive of Christ as the manifestation of a divine Idea and ignore his humanity. In these false views, God redeems humanity from its individuality and finitude. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 76-82.

<sup>83</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 108.

<sup>84</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 49.

<sup>85</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 117.

other, and that acknowledges the other only on its own terms.”<sup>86</sup> In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer explains this egocentricity in terms of the *cor curvum in se* (the heart turned in upon itself). He argues, “It is clear now that, on its own, the I cannot move beyond itself. It is imprisoned in itself, it sees only itself, even when it sees another, even when it wants to see God.”<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, it is evident that sin is a corporate problem affecting all of humanity. Certainly every individual is culpable for her or his own sin, however it is also true that each individual sinful act is connected to, and thus demonstrates, the universality of sin.<sup>88</sup> After the Fall, all of humanity is united in the collective person ‘Adam’, that is, in sin.<sup>89</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, “Every deed is at once an individual act and one that reawakens the total sin of humanity.”<sup>90</sup> Accordingly, Green notes that Bonhoeffer interprets the doctrine of original sin, and the empirical spread of sin, not biologically or sexually (as did Augustine, in Bonhoeffer’s view<sup>91</sup>) but in terms of sociality.<sup>92</sup> Perhaps it is helpful to suggest that Bonhoeffer explains the spread of sin by means of recapitulation; in sinning and being sinned-against (a vicious cycle), every person participates in the collective person of sinful humanity, which is ‘Adam’. Thus, each sin is a wilful act committed by a culpable individual, which damages and isolates the individual, the local community, and all of humanity simultaneously. This collective person ‘Adam’ “can only be superseded

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 110-111.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>92</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 52.

by the collective person ‘Christ existing as church-community,’” who gathers up humanity into Himself and accomplishes what humanity is unable to do.<sup>93</sup> As Bonhoeffer later argues in *Ethics*, “Jesus is not *a* man. He is *man*. Whatever happens to him happens to man.”<sup>94</sup>

In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer elaborates upon the fallen state of humanity. Humanity has lost the beginning and now finds itself in the middle, knowing neither the beginning nor the end.<sup>95</sup> In the beginning God created humanity to be in relationship with Himself, and humanity lived out its existence with God at the centre of its life. The tree of life at the centre of the Garden of Eden symbolizes that God is at the centre of the world, of all reality, and is the source of all life. God is in the centre, not Adam.<sup>96</sup> As such, God is both the boundary and the centre of human existence. Humanity lives from this centre, with God as its source of life. And, oriented toward the centre, humanity knows itself to be in existence as a being-for-God-and-others. Bonhoeffer writes:

*God is at once the boundary and the center of our existence. Adam knows that. But Adam knows it in such a way that this knowing is only an expression of Adam’s existence from the center—Adam’s being oriented toward the center; it is an expression of Adam’s creatureliness and freedom. Adam’s knowing is embedded in Adam’s freedom for God, in unbroken obedience to God; it is knowledge arising from the freedom of the creature, knowledge in life, knowledge in ignorance.*<sup>97</sup>

In the Fall of humanity, Adam enters into sin and thus transgresses his centre and boundary. In this act, humanity usurps the place of God and positions itself in the centre. “Now humankind stands in the middle, with no limit. Standing in the middle means

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<sup>93</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 121.

<sup>94</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, A Touchstone Book (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 74.

<sup>95</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 28.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

living from its own resources and no longer from the center. Having no limit means being alone.”<sup>98</sup> The creature now considers itself to be the Creator and the source of its own life. Thus, in isolation from God, humanity also becomes isolated from itself, because God (the true source of life that binds the community together) is no longer at the centre of its existence. Adam now rejects both God and neighbour as being his limit or boundary. Whereas he once lived wilfully with this limit, serving God and neighbour out of love and gratitude, “Now he no longer sees the limit that the other person constitutes as grace but as God’s wrath, God’s hatred, God’s begrudging.”<sup>99</sup> God’s original intention, that Adam’s limit constitute his life in ethical responsibility, in being-for-others, has been distorted. Now, Adam is compelled to transgress his limit, to overpower and manipulate it according to his own selfish desires.<sup>100</sup> The other is no longer perceived as confronting the self with an ethical claim, but as a competitive challenge. This discussion parallels what Bonhoeffer later writes in *Ethics*, when he refers to the beginning or centre as humanity’s *origin*. After the Fall, humanity is in disunion with its origin; henceforth, it regards itself as the origin of good and evil. As a result, “Man’s life is now disunion with God, with men, with things, and with himself.”<sup>101</sup>

In addition, the Fall alters the being of humanity from existence in the *imago Dei* to existence in being *sicut Deus* (like God). In contrasting the difference between *imago Dei* and *sicut Deus*, Bonhoeffer states:

Imago dei – humankind in the image of God in being for God and the neighbour, in its original creatureliness and limitedness; sicut deus – humankind similar to

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 24.

God in knowing-out-of-its-own-resources, in its aseity, in its being alone. Imago dei – bound to the word of the Creator and deriving life from the Creator; sicut deus – bound to the depths of its own knowledge of God, of good and evil. Imago dei – the creature living in the unity of obedience; sicut deus – the creator-human-being who lives on the basis of the divide between good and evil. Imago dei, sicut deus, agnus dei – the human being who is God incarnate, who was sacrificed for humankind sicut deus, in true divinity slaying its false divinity and restoring the imago dei.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, in becoming ‘like God’, humanity rejects the reality of God as its centre and, instead, places itself at the centre and lives from its own knowledge of good and evil. It distrusts the Word of God and, instead, relies on its own word (and the word of the serpent, which twists and distorts God’s Word). And, it transgresses the Law of God (grace) and, instead, follows its own laws (works). “Humankind-sicut-deus is dead, for it has cut itself off from the tree of life; it lives out of its own resources, yet it cannot live. It is compelled to live, yet it cannot live. That is what death means.”<sup>103</sup> In choosing to live for itself and by itself, humanity has chosen life permeated with death and decay—physically, spiritually, and relationally.

### **3. Redemption**

For Bonhoeffer, sin is both an individual and a corporate problem. Therefore, in order to redeem humanity, God must address people individually and collectively. Bonhoeffer considers both of these aspects, respectively, in his theology of revelation and in his understanding of the church as the new humanity. I now will examine each of these in turn.

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<sup>102</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 113.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

### 3.1 The Place of Revelation

According to Bonhoeffer, revelation is a social event. It is the personal self-communication of God's love for humanity.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, revelation is simultaneously God's Word and God's deed—it accomplishes something in concrete reality. It lifts sinful people out of themselves and delivers them from the *cor curvum in se*, transforming them from being in untruth to being in truth. “Revelation gives itself without precondition and is alone able to place one into reality. Theological thought goes from God to reality, not from reality to God.”<sup>105</sup> Without God's Word of revelation, humanity would not be able to escape its self-captivity; it would not even realize that it exists in untruth. Bonhoeffer writes:

This is knowledge from revelation, which can never be had apart from, that is, precisely, in Adam. For ‘in Adam’ means to be in untruth, in culpable perversion of the will, that is, of human essence. It means to be turned inward into one's self, *cor curvum in se*. Human beings have torn themselves loose from community with God and, therefore, also from that with other human beings, and now they stand alone, that is, in untruth. Because human beings are alone, the world is ‘their’ world, and other human beings have sunk into the world of things (cf. Heidegger's ‘*Mitsein*’, ‘being-with’). God has become a religious object, and human beings themselves have become their own creator and lord, belonging to themselves.<sup>106</sup>

“Therefore, only those who have been placed into the truth [i. e., by God] can understand themselves in truth.”<sup>107</sup> To be in the truth is to be in Christ, and to be in Christ is to be in the church-community.<sup>108</sup> God's Word of revelation creates the church, which is elected in Christ from eternity.<sup>109</sup> Only this concept of revelation can account for the

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<sup>104</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 61.

<sup>105</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 89.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>108</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 140.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

existence of the Christian church. Bonhoeffer argues, “The concept of the church is conceivable only in the sphere of reality established by God; this means it cannot be deduced. *The reality of the church is a reality of revelation, a reality that essentially must be either believed or denied.*”<sup>110</sup> Not only does God create the church-community; God, in Christ, indwells the community and is truly present in His people. Bonhoeffer notes that Paul “repeatedly identifies Christ and the church community (1 Cor. 12:12, 6:15, 1:13).”<sup>111</sup> The church is the body of Christ, the collective person ‘Christ existing as church-community’, and is “the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence of God.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, along with the Word and the sacraments, the church is a revelatory form of Christ on earth.<sup>113</sup> Yet Christ cannot be equated with the church, nor be totally defined by it: “Christ exists ‘before’ and ‘above’ the individuals” (more on this in section C. 1.).<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, to argue that Christ is revealed in and as the church is not to say that Christ’s presence in it is obvious to the world. On the contrary, as God’s personal *revelation*, this truth is both manifest and hidden, both revealed and concealed, and it is discernable only in faith. As God’s *personal* revelation, it is accepted only by those whom God knows: “Accordingly, my knowledge of God depends in each instance on whether God has known me in Christ (1 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 4:9), on whether God is effecting faith in Christ in me.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 49-59. Bonhoeffer discusses the *form* of Christ as Word, Sacrament, and church.

<sup>114</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 140-141.

<sup>115</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 92.

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer employs his construction ‘Christ existing as church-community’ as the solution to the problem of how revelation can be understood as both contingent (i.e., transcendent, truly other) and yet intelligible to the human mind and with concrete effects in historical reality. He criticises both transcendental and ontological attempts to resolve the problem of act and being. According to Bonhoeffer, transcendental philosophers build upon Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal (our perception of a thing) and the noumenal (a thing in itself).<sup>116</sup> Human knowledge does not constitute a duplication of reality. Rather, knowledge is attained by means of human perception, interpreted through universal categories of reason, which are accessible to all. Transcendental approaches acknowledge that reality is not always as we perceive it to be. However, humans are oriented toward transcendence and can make judgements about reality through transcendental apperception, the process of interpreting empirical data through an a priori synthesis of reality and universal categories of the mind. In other words, by applying a radical critique of reason, one can make reliable judgements about the real world, which remains transcendent yet “in reference” to the thinking ‘I’.<sup>117</sup>

Idealism (i.e., Hegel) further develops the insights of Kant by taking the critique of pure reason one step further. Realizing that one can never truly attain transcendence (unless it is an immanent human potentiality), Idealists argue that reality is not merely “in reference” to the thinking ‘I’ but, in fact, reality “comes about through me.”<sup>118</sup> But if this is true, Bonhoeffer argues, then the self never escapes the *cor curvum in se*; it remains trapped in itself—even worse, it places all of reality (including God and neighbour) under

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 37-44.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 44.

its subjection. Transcendental philosophy ultimately fails to emancipate the self, for it either realizes that transcendence is impossible (thus, God is unknowable and revelation is unintelligible), or it collapses the world into the thinking 'I'. Bonhoeffer concludes:

Transcendentalism succeeds in preserving the purity of the act by regarding Dasein only as 'being in reference to' something transcendent. But since according to Kant this something transcendent cannot prove itself to be genuinely transcendent, Kant's original conception comes to naught. Hence it is that idealism draws the transcendent into itself, uniting being and act within itself, with all the consequences that arise for anthropology.<sup>119</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, the ontological approach, which is epitomized in the work of Martin Heidegger, is concerned "to demonstrate the primacy of being over against consciousness and to uncover this being."<sup>120</sup> Being transcends what is given in existence, as that which is 'always already existing', even before thought. Bonhoeffer explains:

All thought is but a determination of the being of Dasein [being-there]. Thought does not, therefore, produce its world for itself. Rather, it finds itself, as Dasein, in the world; in every instance, it is already in a world just as, in every instance, it is already itself...The decisive point is, however, that it already 'is' in every instance what it understands and determines it to be.<sup>121</sup>

Heidegger interprets being in terms of temporality. Human beings, as Dasein (being there), are thrown into existence in historicity, "in the momentariness of the decisions that they, in every instance have already taken."<sup>122</sup> In addition, human being as Dasein is being-toward-death, the awareness of which draws Dasein out of the "uncanniness [Unheimlichkeit]" of the world into authentic existence.<sup>123</sup> "In the call of conscience Dasein experiences itself as guilty in its fallenness to the world, in its nullity,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 69.

and enters into its most authentic possibility: the decision unto death... Dasein grasps its own wholeness.”<sup>124</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, Heidegger succeeds in “forcing together” act and being with his concept of Dasein. “Dasein is neither a discontinuous succession of individual acts nor continuity of a being that transcends time. Dasein is constant decision-making and, in every instance, already being determined.”<sup>125</sup> However, Bonhoeffer charges Heidegger with promoting a “consciously atheistic philosophy of finitude.”<sup>126</sup> Through existential awareness of existing in time, being thrown into the present and projected toward the future (i.e., death), the human being as Dasein comes to understand itself. Such a view, in Bonhoeffer’s opinion, leaves no room for revelation.<sup>127</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer concludes:

For the inevitable conclusion must be that, in the first place, reason itself determines the limits and that, in the second place, being somehow falls into the power of the thinking I, so that in both instances, the I understands itself from itself within a closed system.<sup>128</sup>

Bonhoeffer resolves the problem of act and being in the concept of the church as the mode of being in revelation. He writes:

... Christian revelation must not be interpreted as ‘having happened’, but that for those human beings living in the church, in each present, this once-and-for-all occurrence is qualified as future. Christian revelation must occur in the present precisely because it is, in the qualified once-and-for-all occurrence of the cross and resurrection of Christ, always something ‘of the future’. It must, in other words, be thought in the church, for the church is the present Christ, ‘Christ existing as community’.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>128</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 76. Whether or not Bonhoeffer fairly criticises Heidegger is not my intention to prove and is beyond the scope of this paper. I have included Bonhoeffer’s discussion because it demonstrates his commitment to the belief that revelation must come from outside oneself if it is to deliver the self from the *cor curvum in se*. Yet it must have a concrete effect in history if it is to be taken seriously and relied upon (for ethical action, etc.).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 111.

In the church, the proclamation of the Word of God and the human community of faith arise together and coexist.<sup>130</sup> In the church, the Living Christ binds Himself to the proclamation of the Word in contingency and freedom. Yet this Word creates a concrete, historical community, in which Christ is present in the form of ‘Christ existing as church-community’. In being-apprehended by God’s revelation, each individual is given a new existence of being-in-Christ, which means being-in-the-church. Thus, “The community of faith is God’s final revelation as ‘Christ existing as community’ [Gemeinde], ordained for the end time of the world until the return of Christ. Here Christ has come in the closest proximity to humanity.”<sup>131</sup> Or, to anticipate the language of the later Bonhoeffer of *Ethics* and the prison letters, the church exists as the penultimate community, which is established and justified by the ultimate Word of God, and is directed toward Christ’s Lordship and future return.

### 3.2 The Church as the New Humanity

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer states, “In Christ humanity really is drawn into community with God, just as in Adam humanity fell.”<sup>132</sup> This *new* humanity, which is the church, is established and accomplished by the vicarious action of Christ. It exists in reality and not merely in potentiality, as Christ is really present in it and not merely represented by it (only what is absent requires representation).<sup>133</sup> As mentioned previously, the church is not an objective reality (i.e., obvious to the world), but is apprehended by faith in God’s revelation. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer writes:

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>132</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 146.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 157.

This is the new creation of the new human being of the future, which here is an event already occurring in faith, and there perfected for view. It is the new creation of those who no longer look back upon themselves, but only away from themselves to God's revelation, to Christ. It is the new creation of those born from out of the world's confines into the wideness of heaven, becoming what they were or never were, a creature of God, a child.<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless, the church is a concrete reality, which the Holy Spirit actualizes in human history. Bonhoeffer asserts, "...in moving the elect who are part of the church-community established in Christ, the Holy Spirit simultaneously leads them into the actualized church community."<sup>135</sup> Thus, the church is created and realized by the will and action of the triune God, and not by human determination and effort.

In the church, the tension between being isolated and being bound to others is overcome. Through God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, God restores humanity's relationship with God and others.<sup>136</sup> Without abolishing individuality, distinctiveness, and finitude, God re-creates a new humanity, which is united in Christ. Not that Bonhoeffer thinks that the kingdom is fully manifest and consummated in the church. Rather, the kingdom is present-yet-coming: "The Realm of God is a strictly eschatological concept, which from God's point of view is present in the church at every moment, but which for us remains an object of hope, while the church is an actually present object of faith."<sup>137</sup>

In this New Humanity, God's greatest commandment for the church is to love God and neighbour. While faith recognizes and receives God's lordship, love makes the kingdom of God actual—and both are given by the Spirit.<sup>138</sup> Thus, the church is called to

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<sup>134</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 161.

<sup>135</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 159.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

demonstrate the reality of God's love for humanity, existing as a concrete community of faith, which is grounded in the love of Christ. Clearly, the type of love that Bonhoeffer has in mind here is not merely a sentimental feeling of fondness, sympathy, desire, like-mindedness, or kinship. Bonhoeffer stresses that we must not confuse *agape* (the love of God as demonstrated in the New Testament) with *eros* (self-love); "Whereas the former shows us the foundation, depth, and meaning of love, so the latter discloses love's crude intensity as directed toward ourselves."<sup>139</sup> For Bonhoeffer, *agape* has the following characteristics: i) it is not a human possibility; ii) it is possible only in Christ and through the Holy Spirit; iii) it is a volitional, purposive act; and iv) it is boundless love for the *real* neighbour, not merely as an object of pleasure but as an 'other' in whom one encounters God's claim.<sup>140</sup>

The church, as the new humanity reconciled in *agape* love, is God's means for restoring His initial purpose for human existence, which is to be in relationship with God and others. As Bonhoeffer argues in *Creation and Fall*, Christ has restored to the new humanity the *imago Dei*, which is epitomized in being-free-for others.<sup>141</sup> Consequently, it is evident that the church must be understood in terms of sociality. Christian spirituality is not merely an individualistic affair; it is also about reconciliation.<sup>142</sup> Christian redemption is not merely a solitary encounter with God (though it includes this); it is also

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 167-172. See also the distinction he makes between 'emotional love' and 'spiritual love' in *Life Together*, 42-44.

<sup>141</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 113.

<sup>142</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (London: Collins, 1965), 225. Thus, Bonhoeffer says, "It is rather the task of Christian preaching to say: here is the church, where Jew and German stand together under the Word of God; here is the proof whether a church is still the church or not." Ibid.

a corporate reality.<sup>143</sup> And Christian sanctification is not merely a matter of personal holiness; it also involves communal growth and edification.<sup>144</sup> Christian life necessarily involves being-with-and-for others in concrete relationships. Primarily, Christ came to form a community of disciples, not a religion of abstract and disembodied systematized truths, doctrines, and moral rules (though these are appropriate and necessary within the communal setting).<sup>145</sup> Christian life is *life together* in Christ. “That is why the Scriptures call us the body of Christ. But if we have been elected and accepted with the whole church in Jesus Christ before we could know it or want it, then we also belong to Christ in eternity with one another.”<sup>146</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the Lord’s Supper is the ultimate expression of Christian life together under the Word of God.<sup>147</sup> At the sacrament, Christians come together as a people reconciled to God and to each other. They partake of a common meal, in celebration of the forgiveness, new life, and salvation they share

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<sup>143</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, A Touchstone Book (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 242. Bonhoeffer writes, “No one can become a new man except by entering the Church, and becoming a member of the Body of Christ. It is impossible to become a new man as a solitary individual. The new man means more than the individual believer after he has been justified and sanctified. It means the Church, the Body of Christ, in fact it means Christ himself.”

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 280. Bonhoeffer writes, “If we regard sanctification as a purely personal matter which has nothing whatever to do with public life and the visible line of demarcation between the Church and the world, we shall land ourselves inevitably into a confusion between the pious wishes of the religious flesh and the sanctification of the Church which is accomplished in the death of Christ through the seal of God. This is the deceitful arrogance and the false spirituality of the old man, who seeks sanctification outside the visible community of the brethren. It is contempt of the Body of Christ as a visible fellowship of justified sinners, a contempt which disguises itself as inward humility, whereas it was the good pleasure of Christ to take upon him our flesh visibly and to bear it up to the cross. It is also contempt of the fellowship, for we are then trying to attain sanctification in isolation from our brethren. And it shows contempt for our fellow-sinners, for we are withdrawing from the Church and pursuing a sanctity of our own choosing because we are disgusted by the Church’s sinful form. By pursuing sanctification outside the Church we are trying to pronounce ourselves holy.”

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>146</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 33.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

together in Christ.<sup>148</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer concludes his book *Life Together* with these words:

The community of the holy Lord's Supper is above all the fulfillment of Christian community. Just as the members of the community of faith are united in body and blood at the table of the Lord, so they will be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and Christ's community is complete. The life together of Christians under the Word has reached its fulfillment in the sacrament.<sup>149</sup>

### ***The Church as both End and Means, both Goal and Instrument***

Since the church *is* the restoration of God's original purpose for humanity, as depicted so well in the sacrament, the church is *an end in itself* and not simply a means or an instrument.<sup>150</sup> Along these lines, Bonhoeffer contends, "The church is the end and the fulfillment of God's revelation in the history of his people... [It is the] "*kaine ktisis* (2Co 5.17; Ga 6.15), the second creation after the old, corrupt creation, is man in the community, the community itself (Eph 2.15)."<sup>151</sup> Thus, the church must demonstrate care and concern for its own inner life (i.e., that its members are maturing, being edified together in Christ, and experiencing and enacting the love and unity of the Spirit). For this reason the church incorporates and embodies a number of ministries to strengthen its inner life, including proclamation and confession, offices and gifts, commandments and discipleship, prayer and intercession, confession and absolution, listening, self-sacrifice, love, and friendship (among other things).<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 173, 176, 190.

<sup>151</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom: Letter, Lectures and Notes 1935-1939*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 44, 47.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 44. See also Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 90, 108-118; and *No Rusty Swords*, 150-151.

However, since God accomplishes His purposes in creating the new humanity *in and through* the church, the church is also *a means to an end*. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer states, “The church is the place where Jesus Christ’s taking form is proclaimed and accomplished.”<sup>153</sup> Again, he writes, “the church of Jesus Christ is the place, in other words the space in the world, at which the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is evidenced and proclaimed.”<sup>154</sup> Therefore, the “first demand” placed upon the church is to “be witnesses to Jesus Christ before the world.”<sup>155</sup> Thus, the church is irreducibly both a means *and* an end.<sup>156</sup> Bonhoeffer warns that it is a dangerous error to overemphasize one of these over the other. The danger become apparent when one remembers that the church concerns the restoration of life as God intends it. If we view life solely as an end in itself, we are left with life without purpose or meaning (i.e., nihilism). If we regard life solely as a means to an end, we perpetuate the mechanization of life.<sup>157</sup> In addition, Bonhoeffer argues that both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism err by overly stressing either the finality or the instrumentality of the church. In emphasizing the church as an end, Roman Catholicism tends to neglect the proclamation of the Word. In focusing on the church as a means for proclamation of the Word, Protestantism tends to have difficulty understanding such things as ecclesial discipline, spiritual exercises, asceticism, meditation, contemplation, etc. Ironically, this narrow focus upon proclamation is

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<sup>153</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 89.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. However, while the church must be regarded as both *end* and as *means*, Bonhoeffer grants a logical priority to end over means (though the former necessarily leads to the latter). The church is always an end before it is a means, because it concerns the restoration of life, personhood, and community as God intends them (and these are not means but ends). In addition, Bonhoeffer similarly argues that rights must logically precede duties, as God always gives before He demands (though duties are implicit in rights). Furthermore, the church is an end in itself because Christ (the Ultimate) himself takes form in it (the penultimate).

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

actually detrimental to the preaching ministry, since the proclamation finds no fertile soil in which to take root.<sup>158</sup>

#### 4. Summary

In this section, I have examined the relational aspects of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. At the beginning of the chapter, I noted that Bonhoeffer wrote with the conscious intention of avoiding the deficiencies of both Idealism (assimilative collectivism, self-mediated knowledge and relationships) and individualism (atomism, existentialism). Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is essentially a theological exposition of the biblical redemption narrative, from Creation and Fall to the restoration of the new humanity in Christ. Throughout this interpretation, he continually employs relational categories. In the primal community humans enjoy immediate relationships with God and others, and freely live in being-for others. In this context, community is a vital expression of life before God, who is the source and centre of its existence. As such, the community exists as an end in itself.

All of this is twisted and distorted in the Fall, as individuals enthrone themselves as the centre of reality and, henceforth, use other individuals and the community at large to accomplish their own goals and satisfy their own desires. They exist in a state of untruth, having hearts turned in upon themselves. However, by His own freedom, initiative, and power, God creates the church to overcome human sin and alienation. Thus, the church is the new humanity, in which each individual's relationship with God and with others is restored in Christ. While the church satisfies God's intention simply by *being* the new humanity, *being* the church-community, it also has a mission to reach out

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 297.

to others with the love and reconciliation of the gospel. In this sense, it must be understood as both an end/goal and a means/instrument. Although, the former takes precedence over the latter, since the ultimate purpose of the church concerns the restoration of life and of relationships in Christ.

### **C. An Incarnational / Christological Ecclesiology**

According to Russell Palmer, Christology is at the heart of Bonhoeffer's theology.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, Adreas Pangritz contends, "the question 'Who is Jesus Christ?' forms the *cantus firmus* of Bonhoeffer's theological development from beginning to end."<sup>160</sup> Christology permeates not only the theological and pastoral work of the early Bonhoeffer; it also provides an essential foundation for the 'radical' reflections of the later Bonhoeffer (such as his nonreligious interpretation in the prison letters).<sup>161</sup>

Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is no exception to this trend—it is thoroughly Christological. In this section, I will explore the Christological aspects of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, categorizing them according to the following themes: 1. the church as 'Christ existing as church-community'; 2. the church and the freedom of God in Christ; 3. the church and the mediation of Christ; and 4. the church and radical discipleship in Christ.

#### **1. The Church as 'Christ Existing as Church-Community'**

Bonhoeffer first employs the phrase 'Christ existing as church-community' (Christus als Gemeinde existierend) in *Sanctorum Communio*. In using the phrase, Bonhoeffer consciously alludes to the work of Hegel, whom he draws on and criticises

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<sup>159</sup> Palmer, "The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 132.

<sup>160</sup> Pangritz, *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 134.

<sup>161</sup> Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 61-77.

(Bonhoeffer borrows and modifies Hegel's construction). Joachim von Soosten

comments:

Still present is Hegel's terminology, which had been so appealing to Bonhoeffer precisely because it conveys a close connection between Christ and the church-community. Within the bounds of this terminology, however, a decisive critique of Hegel is already visible. For with this phrase Bonhoeffer intends to take up Paul's concept of the church as the body of Christ, and, going back to Paul's Adam-Christ typology, he also understands Christ as a 'collective person'. Both of these notions, which are informed by the New Testament, are conceptually linked in the phrase 'Christ existing as church-community'.<sup>162</sup>

Basically, Bonhoeffer modifies Hegel's notion by grounding the reality of God's presence in the church Christologically, in the Incarnation. He wants to preserve Hegel's identification of God with the church, without equating them and thereby divinizing Christian history. Thus, Christ resides in the church and exists as the church, but He also transcends and confronts it as the Living God. While the church is the presence of Christ on earth, Christ is not equivalent to the *religious community*, nor is the Holy Spirit equivalent to the objective spirit of the community. (See section C. 3.2.)

However, Bonhoeffer's Christology in *Sanctorum Communio* is not yet fully developed. Ernst Feil even argues that the phrase 'Christ existing as church-community' does not have an explicitly Christological intention, as the phrase concerns the notion of the collective person of Christ, not the mediation of Christ.<sup>163</sup> Charles Marsh disagrees with Feil on this point. While he admits that Bonhoeffer does not develop the theme of Christ's mediation in *Sanctorum Communio*, he rejects Feil's charge that Bonhoeffer does not have a Christological intention. Marsh argues:

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<sup>162</sup> Joachim von Soosten, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," in Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 295.

<sup>163</sup> Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 62-63. I disagree with Feil here. While Bonhoeffer's Christology is, admittedly, not fully developed at this point, nevertheless the phrase 'Christ existing as church-community' certainly has a Christological intention, as Charles Marsh demonstrates.

But the text of the dissertation contradicts Feil's conjecture. Bonhoeffer writes, "The man whose life is lived in love is Christ in respect of his neighbour." Great pains are taken to show that Luther's notion of "being transformed into one another through love" is a penetrating description of the christological character of community. Bonhoeffer says, "Each man can and will become Christ for his fellow man." What it means for Christ to exist as community is that the I is opened up to be with and for the other.<sup>164</sup>

For Marsh, the problem with *Sanctorum Communio* is that Bonhoeffer is limited by his use of dialogics, taking on the notion of "the between as the source which is always prior to the I and other."<sup>165</sup> Thus, in the concrete moment 'I' and other meet at an in-between space of dialogue, which precedes both conversation partners. Consequently, Bonhoeffer "protects the difference of I and other, but at the expense of failing to appreciate the continuity of their life together."<sup>166</sup> Feil and Marsh are in agreement that Bonhoeffer does not sufficiently account for the intermediation of Christ, which simultaneously protects difference and yet sustains the continuity of the church-community as being bound together in Christ in continuous fellowship. Furthermore, at this point in his writing, Bonhoeffer too closely identifies Christ and the other in the immediate dialogical 'I'-'Thou' encounter. Thus, Marsh states, "Whether Bonhoeffer turns out to be a Hegelian by default is a question that must not be ignored."<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 77-78.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 77. In particular, Marsh has in view the sort of dialogics that is placed in exclusive opposition to transcendental philosophy, and which naively posits an (transcendental?) in-between space. Marsh, following the argument of Michael Theunissen, writes, "...the two options make mutually different claims which are *not* in fact contradictory. The transcendental project of social ontology tells us important things about the inescapable subjectivity of the dialogical partners, which cannot be entirely swept into the between. Similarly, dialogics provides a dramatic description of the teleology, or the futural character, of the relation. Genuine selfhood may then be conceived as a movement from subjective origins to dialogical communion; the former involves means and the latter ends."

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

Bonhoeffer later corrects this Idealistic tendency with his discussion of Christ as the Centre and Mediator of all reality.<sup>168</sup> (See section C. 3.)

## 2. The Church and the Freedom of God in Christ

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer stresses that, in being present in and as the church-community, God remains free and transcendent. In contrast to Idealism, God is not immanently bound to humans by necessity, in a process of Self-becoming or Spirit-actualization. Rather, God enters into communion with humans and binds Himself to them by His own electing decree in freedom. Bonhoeffer states, “God’s freedom has woven itself into this personlike community of faith, and it is precisely this which manifests what God’s freedom is: that God binds God’s self to human beings.”<sup>169</sup> In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer continues to assert God’s freedom. God is never the creation, but always the Creator. God is not the substance of nature—He is not contained in nature; nor can He be objectively identified from nature (as in natural theology).<sup>170</sup>

Only God’s Word unites Him with His work, as God is utterly beyond the world. Thus,

It is not ‘from’ God’s works, then, that we recognize the Creator—as though the substance, the nature, or the essence of the work were after all ultimately somehow identical with God’s essence or as if there were some kind of continuum between them, such as that of cause and effect. On the contrary we believe that God is the Creator only because by this word God acknowledges these works as God’s own, and we *believe* this word about these works.<sup>171</sup>

However, Bonhoeffer is careful not to overemphasize the otherness of God, such that the tension between God’s transcendence and God’s nearness is abolished. In fact, he

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<sup>168</sup> While Bonhoeffer attacks the social implications of Idealism in *Sanctorum Communio* (i.e., its totalizing, assimilative nature), he does not yet deal with the problems that Idealism poses for epistemology and the doctrine of revelation. Bonhoeffer addresses these themes in *Act and Being*, *Creation and Fall*, and the *Christology* lectures.

<sup>169</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 112.

<sup>170</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 40.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

is critical of (the early) Karl Barth for this very reason, charging: “God recedes into the nonobjective, into what is beyond our disposition,” since Barth so emphasizes God’s act (transcendent, *actus directus*) that the redeemed person remains a “heavenly double” and is not united with the empirical total-person.<sup>172</sup> In regards to Bonhoeffer’s critique of Barth, William Fennell comments, “Barth served to liberate the Church from her bondage to religion, but she has not learned from him how to speak of God in worldly fashion, i.e., how to think of him in relation to man’s total life in time.”<sup>173</sup>

Bonhoeffer finds the tension of God’s transcendence-yet-nearness expressed in the two creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis: “The first account is about humankind-for-God, the second about God-for-humankind. The first is about the Creator and Lord, the second about the fatherly God who is near at hand.”<sup>174</sup> In addition, Bonhoeffer discusses God’s freedom not in Libertarian terms, as merely freedom-*from* restrictions, but in relational terms, as freedom-*for* humanity. “God wills not to be free

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<sup>172</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 85, 99. Interestingly, Klaus Bockmuehl directs a similar criticism at Barth in his book, *The Unreal God of Modern Theology: Bultmann, Barth, and the Theology of Atheism: A Call to Recovering the Truth of God’s Reality*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1988). He writes, “Plainly Barth is concerned solely with what lies beyond the reality described as world, time, and man. The new life, the effect of justification, has such little reality that Barth can denote it only by the verbs may, can, ought, and will. As these verbs painfully indicate, the new life is still to come, strictly ‘eschatological’. In *this* life, nothing changes except that we acquire an invisible viewpoint” (p. 82). Similarly, Bockmuehl makes the following comparison between Barth and Bultmann: “If Gollwitzer could say about Bultmann’s program that the subject (God) was in danger of being swallowed up by the predicates, the opposite danger exists for Barth: the predicates can all be swallowed up by the subject. In both cases an impermeable wall exists between this world and the other, and the living relationship between God and man is lost. The difference is that for Bultmann ‘reality’ is only in *this* world, while in Barth it is only in the beyond. In the former we have only man’s work; in the latter, only God’s. Both respect an iron curtain between God and man, and both make one side empty, finally abandoning it to demons” (p. 85).

See also the criticism that Barth endorses a “positivism of revelation” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Enlarged Edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Collier Books: New York: Macmillan, 1972), 280, 328-329.

<sup>173</sup> William O. Fennel, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Man of Faith in a World Come of Age,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 8 (July 1962): 178. Fennell also reflects, “It is interesting to note that Barth now has recognized his limitation in an essay entitled ‘The Humanity of God.’” Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 72.

for God's self but for humankind."<sup>175</sup> (See also my summary of Bonhoeffer's exposition of the *imago Dei* in section B. 1.) All of this is based upon Bonhoeffer's Christological reading of the creation accounts, in light of the Incarnation.

Bonhoeffer expresses the Christological foundation for the freedom of God most clearly in the *Christology* lectures (also published as *Christ the Center*), in which he strives to preserve the mystery of the Incarnation from the totalizing (and potentially oppressive) nature of all systematic thought, including theology.<sup>176</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, all teaching about Christ begins in silence.<sup>177</sup> The fact that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Son of God is the ultimate presupposition for all faith, theology, and indeed all reality. Thus, Christology is *the discipline par excellence*; it stands alone.<sup>178</sup> As such, it is not possible for us to discover this truth by way of reasoning, nor is there any way we can prove it to others.<sup>179</sup> When left to our own *Logos*, which is our own reasoning, we cannot engage in true theology; we can only engage in mythology because our thoughts and language are inadequate and distorted.<sup>180</sup> We attempt to classify Christ according to our own categories of understanding but, due to our fallenness, we cannot think outside of ourselves. So, we assimilate Him into our own desires and agendas. We mistakenly

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>176</sup> See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *True Patriotism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 28. "It is the task of theology solely to preserve God's wonder as wonder, to understand, to defend, to glorify God's mystery as mystery!" Quoted from Jay C. Rochelle, "Mystery and Relationship as Keys to the Church's Response to Secularism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19 (August 1992): 270.

<sup>177</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966), 27.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. NB. Bonhoeffer does not use the term 'mythology', but this captures the essence of what he is saying.

associate Him with our own values and ideals, thereby claiming divine approval for our own *logoi* (words, reason).

Therefore, Bonhoeffer argues, Jesus Christ came as the supreme *Counter-Logos*, declaring all human *logoi* to be judged and dead.<sup>181</sup> While He walked the earth, He refused to be classified by the human *Logos*, whether this meant being integrated into an oppressive religious/political order (i.e., Pharisaic religion), or yielding to militant messianic expectations regarding the emancipation of the Jewish people from Roman rule (i.e., the Zealots), or any other attempts to assimilate Him. Consequently, humanity could neither understand nor accept Him. Since the divine *Counter-Logos* claims supremacy over all human claims, the human *Logos* cannot coexist with the *Counter-Logos*. The human *Logos* is confined to itself and cannot think outside of itself. It is obsessed with what Bonhoeffer calls “how?” questions, which are questions of immanence—those which are subject to human classification (i.e., how does Jesus fit into our worldview?). The human *Logos* cannot ask that question which alone is significant: namely “Who is Christ?” The question “Who?” is a recognition of transcendence and, as such, it cannot be posed.<sup>182</sup> For indeed, how can one recognize or even seek that which is truly and totally other? In the first chapter of his gospel, the apostle John captures this idea of the Incarnate (*Counter-*) *Logos*, who is transcendent yet immanent, divine yet human, and unrecognizable yet familiar: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him” (Jn 1:10-11).

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<sup>181</sup> The term *Counter-Logos* appears in the 1978 edition *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). It is rendered *Anti-Logos* in the 1966 edition *Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966).

<sup>182</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 30-32.

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the encounter of the divine *Counter-Logos* with the human *Logos* is always a confrontation: “The *Logos* cannot endure the *Counter-Logos*. It knows that one of them must die.”<sup>183</sup> Such confrontation took place throughout Jesus’ life and was epitomized at His death, in which the human *Logos* crucified Christ in a desperate and selfish attempt to preserve itself. However, God raised Jesus from the dead and thus affirmed Him as the ultimate and triumphant Word of God, the divine *Counter-Logos* who supercedes and overrules all human *logoi*. Hence, Paul’s declaration to the Philippians: “Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Php 2:9-11).

So, according to Bonhoeffer, we must never use Christ as a means to an end in order to support our own agendas. Unfortunately, however, there have been countless attempts to do this, as when religious or political ideas are approved *a priori* and then, subsequently, attached to the historical Jesus. In such cases, Christ is regarded as the embodiment of particular sets of ideals. Bonhoeffer points out that this was the mistake of Liberal theology:

It understands Jesus as the support for or the embodiment of particular ideas, values and doctrines. As a result, the manhood of Jesus Christ is in the last resort not taken seriously, although it is this very theology which speaks so often of the man...it confuses the real man with an ideal man and makes him a symbol.<sup>184</sup>

Bonhoeffer goes on to show that to manipulate the gospel of Christ in such a manner is to relapse into the ancient Docetic heresy, which downplayed Christ’s

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 83-84. Quoted from Palmer, “The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 137.

humanity by emphasizing an antithesis between idea and appearance and by depicting Christ as the manifestation of God's idea (thus, there is no real mediator between God and humanity!).<sup>185</sup> Practically speaking, the danger in this is that we lose all critical controls for speaking about God: what we worship as 'God' is simply the projection of human ideals. The gospel can then be interpreted in such a way as to justify our own desires, regardless of whether or not they are selfish or oppressive to others. Whatever we value will be projected onto Christ, and whatever we regard as strange, different, or intolerable will be rejected as unchristian. There is no longer any room for the gospel to confront or convict us.

However, as the supreme *Counter-Logos* Jesus is *the way, the truth, the life* (Jn 14:6). He defines the reality in which Christians live. Every human effort to categorize and classify the truth definitively is necessarily incomplete, arbitrary, or even violent, because no one has a God-eye view of the world and thus all such attempts distort the totality of the truth.<sup>186</sup> As the risen Lord, Jesus Christ continually refuses to be classified into self-motivated human agendas. Therefore, Jesus the *Counter-Logos* is the critical control for all speech about God and the divine judge over all human agendas. He alone is the supreme ruler of the church, to whom all allegiance must be directed. Certainly, He is present in and as the church, but He is also above and beyond it and He confronts and disciplines it.

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<sup>185</sup> Palmer, "The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 136-137.

<sup>186</sup> See also Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 33. "[Jesus] speaks with a complete freedom which is not bound by the law of logical alternatives."

### 3. The Church and the Mediation of Christ

Bonhoeffer's emphasis upon the mediation and centrality of Christ developed and deepened over time and throughout the course of his works. In *Sanctorum Communio*, the idea of mediation is missing (as we observed in the criticisms of Marsh and Feil in section C. 1). In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer argues that "thinking is as little able as good works to deliver the *cor curvum in se* from itself."<sup>187</sup> Thus, it is Christ who is the acting subject of proclaiming and believing in the community of faith.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, whereas in *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer primarily identifies the 'Thou' of the neighbour as the limit or boundary, in *Act and Being* he argues that it is only through Christ that the neighbour becomes a true 'other' and presents such a boundary to one's existence.<sup>189</sup> "Only through Christ does my neighbour meet me as one who claims me in an absolute way from a position outside my existence. Only here is reality utterly pure decision. Without Christ, even my neighbour is for me no more than a possibility of self-assertion through 'bearing the claim of the other.'"<sup>190</sup>

In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer asserts that humanity "has lost the beginning; it finds itself in the middle, knowing neither the beginning nor end."<sup>191</sup> Since the Fall, no one knows (by human knowledge) what the true nature of humanity is like, nor can anyone deduce from thought or from nature what humanity 'ought' to be. "No one can

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<sup>187</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 80.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>189</sup> Feil, *Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 64.

<sup>190</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 127.

<sup>191</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 22.

...speak of the beginning but the one who was in the beginning [i.e., Christ].”<sup>192</sup> It is only

through Christ that true knowledge of ourselves is possible. Bonhoeffer writes:

The attempt – with the origin and nature of humankind in mind – to know for ourselves what humankind was like in its original state and to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created is hopeless. It fails to recognize that it is only from Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind...only in the middle, as those who live from Christ, do we know about the beginning.<sup>193</sup>

As mentioned earlier (section B. 2), in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve live in perfect community with God and each other, and God is both the centre and boundary of their existence. The primal community exists in simple trust and obedience to the Word of God, and thus understands its boundary to be the source of life, given by the grace of God.<sup>194</sup> When the serpent comes to tempt Adam and Eve, it invites them to distrust the simple Word of God by cleverly asking them a question, which already contains the wrong answer, “Did God really say....?” Bonhoeffer writes, “The decisive point is that through this question the idea is suggested to the human being of going behind the word of God and now providing it with a human basis—a human understanding of the essential nature of God. Should the word contradict this understanding, then the human being has clearly misheard.”<sup>195</sup> Bonhoeffer identifies the serpent’s question as ‘religious’ speech, which attempts to speak about God “in a way that passes over, and reaches beyond, God”

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>194</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, trans. Kathleen Downham (London SCM, 1955), 15. Bonhoeffer writes, “Innocence means clinging to the Word of God with pure, undivided hearts.” See also Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 86-87.

<sup>195</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 106.

(this foreshadows Bonhoeffer's later critique of religion in the prison writings).<sup>196</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, such 'pious' questioning is the essence of all temptation.<sup>197</sup>

In yielding to the temptation of the serpent, humanity transgresses and usurps the centre, which is God's place alone, and it presumptuously sits in judgement over God's Word.<sup>198</sup> In so doing, humanity regards itself as the centre of existence and the source of life. But since God is the only source of life, humanity's decision to live without God (i.e., from its own resources) is a decision for death. Furthermore, the boundary does not disappear, but now humanity finds itself on the other side of it, unable to access the tree of life (which is God): "The limit is no longer in the center of Adam's life; instead it assails Adam from the outside."<sup>199</sup> Now Adam has a conscience, which tells him that he is in disunion with the centre but cannot help his fate. In fact, Adam's conscience only leads him astray because it encourages him to live according to his own knowledge of good and evil (instead of the simple Word of God) and deceives him into thinking that he can please God by his own will and actions. Bonhoeffer writes, "Conscience is not the voice of God within sinful human beings; instead it is precisely their defence against this voice."<sup>200</sup> Similarly, in *Ethics* he argues, "This means that conscience is concerned not with man's relation to God and to other men but with man's relation to himself. . . .

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>197</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, 16. Bonhoeffer writes, "From the time of Adam's expulsion from paradise every man is born with this question, which Satan has put in Adam's heart. That is the first question of all flesh: 'Has God really said?' By this question all flesh comes to fall."

<sup>198</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 108.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 128.

Conscience pretends to be the voice of God and the standard for the relation to other men.”<sup>201</sup>

Therefore, in the fallen state nothing in humanity’s grasp or potential can reunite it with God and others. Conscience is of no avail. Natural religion is not only hopeless, but even dangerously oppressive.<sup>202</sup> Only the Living Incarnate Christ can explicate humanity from this dismal state. In the *Christology* lectures, Bonhoeffer continues this line of argumentation. First, as the divine *Counter-Logos*, Christ is *against me* (the divine *Logos* must never be identified with the human *Logos*) and puts to death all my human thoughts, efforts, and actions: “Therefore, in him, mankind is crucified, dead and judged.”<sup>203</sup> However, Jesus Christ as the Incarnate God-man is also *for me (pro me)*, which implies the following three things: i) Jesus Christ is the first fruits, the first-born of many who will follow Him; ii) Jesus Christ stands for the new humanity as vicarious representative before God, which means He stands in our place; and, iii) Jesus Christ is in the new humanity and the new humanity is in Him; therefore, God is gracious to the new humanity *in Christ*.<sup>204</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, Jesus Christ as *pro me* “stands there in my place, where I should stand, but cannot. He stands on the boundary of my existence, beyond my existence, yet for me.”<sup>205</sup> In Christ, one is confronted with one’s disunion with God and with oneself,

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<sup>201</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 28.

<sup>202</sup> Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the *Counter-Logos* is pertinent here. In addition, in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer argues against the notion of orders of creation, which was being used by Nazi theologians in his day to endorse the Aryan “blood and soil” propaganda. Instead, Bonhoeffer prefers to speak of orders of preservation, which “uphold and preserve us for Christ” and which “have no value in themselves; instead they find their end and meaning only through Christ.” Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 139-140.

<sup>203</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 48-50.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

one's separation from the boundary and centre by a chasm that cannot be crossed.

However, Christ comes to stand in one's place and, through His vicarious representative action, He bridges the path to God and others simultaneously. "Thus Christ is at one and the same time, my boundary and my rediscovered centre. He is the centre, between 'I' and 'I', and between 'I' and God."<sup>206</sup> Therefore, Christ is the centre of human existence (He fulfills the Law on humanity's behalf), the centre of history in the form of His church (history lives in and from the promise of a Messiah), and the centre between God and nature (in Christ, the God-man, we are authentic creatures before God).<sup>207</sup> As such, Christ is the Mediator of all existence—He mediates between God and humanity, between human and human, and between God and nature.<sup>208</sup> As Charles Marsh points out, Bonhoeffer's discussion of Christ as Centre and Mediator comes very close to Paul's language in Col 1:20 and Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation. He explains:

Specific to Irenaeus is the notion of "recapitulation" or "anacephalaeosis," in which the whole of creation is conceived to be re-constituted, "gathered together, included and comprised" in Christ. When Irenaeus uses the term *recapitulation* he intends to denote that the entire scope of creation is gathered up into the Incarnation of God; consequently, creation as such must be understood as a preparation for reuniting the fellowship of God with humanity.<sup>209</sup>

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer further develops the theme of Christ as Centre and Mediator. "*He is the Mediator*, not only between God and man, but between man and man, between man and reality. Since the whole world was created through him and unto him (John 1.3; I Cor. 8.6; Heb. 1.2), he is the sole Mediator in the world."<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 61-65.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 60-65.

<sup>209</sup> Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 104.

<sup>210</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 95.

This means that Christ has abolished all immediacy in the relationships between individuals and God, other people, and things of this world. All seemingly immediate or direct relationships are built upon an illusion.<sup>211</sup> Christ always stands in the middle, and it is only through His mediation that true relationships are possible (whether people are aware of His mediation or not). Bonhoeffer writes:

Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate relationships of their own, not in their family relationships nor in the ties with their nation nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him. To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves.<sup>212</sup>

Bonhoeffer's emphasis upon the Mediation of Christ has a number of implications for ecclesiology. Through Christ's mediation, His followers become true individuals *and* are brought together into a new fellowship.<sup>213</sup> They are not brought into a human collective, which overrides all individuality and distinctiveness. On the contrary, each person is set free *truly to be oneself*. We must respect the uniqueness in which God has created each person, and resist the temptation to conform others to our own image. Bonhoeffer is adamant in saying, "I can never know in advance how God's image should appear in others. That image always takes on a completely new and unique form whose origin is found solely in God's free and sovereign act of creation."<sup>214</sup> Thus, the church is not simply the gathering of like-minded individuals for a common cause. Rather, the church is the gathering of a people reconciled and redeemed in Christ, existing for-God

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>214</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 95.

and for-one-another. Christ stands in the centre and His followers must see each other through His eyes, love each other with His love, and serve each other through His Spirit.<sup>215</sup> As Bonhoeffer asserts in *Life Together*, “We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”<sup>216</sup>

Christ’s mediation also plays an important role in Christian life and spirituality. Christ’s taking form in the church means that “it is wrong to speak of the Christian life: we should speak rather of Christ living in us,” for “It is only because he became like us that we can become like him.”<sup>217</sup> Furthermore, all Christian prayer is directed through the Mediator, who stands between us and the Father, and constantly intercedes on our behalf.<sup>218</sup> In addition, with Christ as its Centre and Mediator, Christian life is not compartmentalized into dualistic spheres of sacred-secular or spirit-body, but is *wholly* united in Him. Thus,

[God] must be recognized at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>219</sup>

In contrast to the ancient redemption myths, which “arise from human boundary-experiences” that appeal to human weakness and have the tendency to separate spirituality from everyday life, “Christ takes hold of a man at the centre of his life.”<sup>220</sup>

While redemption myths focus on other-worldly experiences and the hope of life after

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<sup>215</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 53. Bonhoeffer writes, “Only he who knows God knows what love is; it is not the other way round; it is not that we first of all by nature know what love is and therefore know also what God is. No one knows God unless God reveals Himself to him. And no one knows what love is except in the self-revelation of God. And the revelation of God is Jesus Christ.”

<sup>216</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

<sup>217</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 303, 304.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>219</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 312.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

death, to the detriment of life in its present, bodily form, the Christian hope of resurrection “sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament.”<sup>221</sup> Christian ecclesiology is about *life together in the world*, with Christ as Centre and Mediator. Because of Christ’s mediation, the church concerns itself with this-worldly life and ministers to those in real need.<sup>222</sup> It feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, befriends the lonely and outcast, clothes the naked, cares for the sick, and visits the prisoner. It does all of this *in, through, and to* Christ the Mediator, who says, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

#### **4. The Church and Radical Discipleship in Christ**

##### **4.1 Personal Discipleship**

Since Bonhoeffer always conceived of the church as being irreducibly diverse *and* united, individual *and* corporate, and including both solitude *and* togetherness, we must address both personal and communal aspects of discipleship. These two aspects of the church-community must be discussed together. For, it is only by being in community that we learn how to be alone, and it is only in being alone that we learn how to live in community. “Each taken by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. Those who want community without solitude [Alleinsein] plunge into the void of words and feelings, and those who seek solitude without community perish in the bottomless pit of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.”<sup>223</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer warns, “*Whoever cannot be alone [allein]*

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 336-337.

<sup>222</sup> Interestingly, Bonhoeffer argues that since the Incarnation demonstrates God’s concern for this-worldly life, with real human relationships, the Old Testament *Song of Songs* should be interpreted as an ordinary love song, as “that is probably the best ‘Christological’ exposition.” See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 315.

<sup>223</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 83.

*should beware of being in community....Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.”*<sup>224</sup>

Bonhoeffer believes that Christians are called to a life of radical discipleship in Christ, which is manifested in at least three ways. First, the disciple is called to a life of devotion to the Word of God. Included in such devotion is making time to be in solitude, silent before the Word. “We are silent before hearing the Word because our thoughts are already focused on the Word, as children are quiet when they enter their father’s room. We are silent after hearing the Word because the Word is still speaking and living and dwelling within us.”<sup>225</sup> Ideally, the disciple should come before the Word in silence at the beginning and end of each day, waiting on God’s Word and coming away from it with a blessing.<sup>226</sup> The disciple is to read, meditate upon, and pray through the Word. While Bonhoeffer values free and spontaneous prayer, he also stresses the importance of disciplined prayer shaped by the Word: “Not the poverty of our heart, but the richness of God’s word, ought to determine our prayer.”<sup>227</sup> Thus, he suggests that the Psalms should be invoked in prayer (Bonhoeffer refers to the Psalms as the ‘prayerbook of the Bible’).<sup>228</sup> Silence before the Word subsequently leads the disciple into a time of intercessory prayer for others, from whom prayer requests have been received or for whom the disciple feels called to pray for whatever reason (including other believers, friends, neighbours, even enemies).

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>227</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. James H. Burtness, vol. 5, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 156.

Second, the disciple is called to a life of radical obedience empowered by the grace of God. For Bonhoeffer, grace and obedience always go together: “*only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.*”<sup>229</sup> Not that Bonhoeffer thinks that obedience is a precondition for grace (we must remember what he wrote about the *cor curvum in se* and the doctrine of revelation!). His point is that we must not cheapen grace by turning it into an abstract idea, divorced from concrete reality. For, he argues, “It is under the influence of this kind of ‘grace’ that the world has been made ‘Christian’, but at the cost of secularizing the Christian religion as never before.”<sup>230</sup> Certainly Christians are saved by grace alone, but such grace is *costly grace*. Costly grace is simultaneously salvation-*from* (i.e., sin, judgement, etc.) and salvation-*for* (obedience, loving God and neighbour, etc.). Conversely, cheap grace focuses on the former, but neglects the latter. Ultimately, grace “is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us...it is *grace* because God did not recon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.”<sup>231</sup> Thus, as Ernst Feil points out, Bonhoeffer’s discussion of cheap versus costly grace is Christologically conceived. Cheap grace is grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate; costly grace is the Incarnation of God.<sup>232</sup> In summary, Bonhoeffer writes:

Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood

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<sup>229</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 63.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>232</sup> Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 78.

of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. And a Christianity of that kind is nothing more or less than the end of discipleship.<sup>233</sup>

Third, the disciple is called to a life that is lived in and for Christ; as such, it is a life of radical *following*. “To live by the life, death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the justification of a life before God. And faith means the finding and holding fast of this foundation.”<sup>234</sup> Faith is resolutely looking toward Christ alone, living by His example and strength, and according to His will. Only in Christ is the disciple’s conscience set free to serve God and neighbour; in fact, Christ Himself becomes the disciple’s conscience.<sup>235</sup> Thus, for Christians, living ethically does not mean living according to a set of timeless truths or universal values, but according to the simple will of God. Since Christ is the *Living God*, the *Counter-Logos* who shatters all of our self-justifying moral systems, there are no hard and fast rules for discerning His will.

Jesus demonstrated this in His own life, as He lived in complete obedience to the Law (but in accomplishing this He had to break the Law (formally), i.e., the Sabbath laws, fasting, etc.). Jesus lived “with a complete freedom which is not bound by the law of logical alternatives.”<sup>236</sup> In other words, He lived not from His own knowledge of good and evil but by the will and the Word of God alone.<sup>237</sup> Nevertheless, finding the will of God is not a mindless task, or merely one of intuition without reflection (such an idea is not incarnational but dualistic, dividing mind from heart, body from spirit, and Word

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<sup>233</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 59.

<sup>234</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 121.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

from Spirit).<sup>238</sup> On the contrary, “The heart, the understanding, observation and experience must all collaborate in this task.”<sup>239</sup> Thus, we must be willing to live in radical obedience to the Living Christ, in constant communion with Him, seeking Him anew in every situation, and never relying upon our own systems, ideas, feelings, or experiences. We must seek Him and His Word alone.

## 4.2 Communal Discipleship

I will discuss Bonhoeffer’s ideas about communal discipleship under three categories, including the ministry of the Word, the ministry of caring and bearing, and the ministry of service.

### *The Ministry of the Word*

For Bonhoeffer, “The church rests upon the word.”<sup>240</sup> The Word of God has absolute authority in the church and demands complete obedience. The church has relative authority, which is derived from and qualified by the Word.<sup>241</sup> The church only speaks authoritatively when it speaks from the Word of God, and believers may validly oppose the authority of the church only out of devotion to the Word (i.e., when the church misrepresents or distorts the Word, not at the whim of individual self-will).<sup>242</sup> Accordingly, Bonhoeffer maintains that the ministry of preaching is crucial in the church. However, he stresses that preaching is only valuable insofar as it faithfully expounds the

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 250.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 252. Such resistance is a delicate matter. Bonhoeffer writes, “It remains for God alone to know when the moment has come when an individual within the church is forced to oppose its authority. This turning against the church’s authority can at any rate only be an act of supreme obedience that is most deeply committed to the church and the word within it, but never a merely capricious act.”

Word (and he was very critical of preachers whose sermons were derived from popular ideas or philosophies, rather than the Word of God).<sup>243</sup> Thus, he states, “Preaching is not meant to be *my* word about God, however serious, however honourable, however faithful, but God’s own Word.”<sup>244</sup>

In addition, such allegiance to the Word of God is not an individualistic affair (though individuals are encouraged to spend time in solitude before the Word), but a communal one. Geoffrey B. Kelly remarks, “Bonhoeffer was convinced that to form a truly Christian community they had to develop a prayerful relationship with God and be led by God’s word.”<sup>245</sup> God intends His Word to be spoken, in the personal address of one believer to another.<sup>246</sup> “God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living Word in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them.”<sup>247</sup> In this manner, the Word of God addresses the believer objectively, outside or exterior to the self, in the form of the concrete word of another believer. Thus, the Word is perceived as both familiar and strange, in affirmation and confrontation.

Included within the ministry of the Word is the worship service. As Jay Rochelle notes, “In accord with Luther’s explanation of the third commandment, Bonhoeffer

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<sup>243</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 230-231.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>245</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Prayer and Action for Justice: Bonhoeffer’s Spirituality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 256.

<sup>246</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 32.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

locates true worship of God in the authentic proclamation of the word...<sup>248</sup> As

Christians meet together under the Word, they engage in praise, thanksgiving, Scripture reading, and prayer.<sup>249</sup> In praise and thanksgiving, believers join together in singing “the new song of the heavenly community”.<sup>250</sup>

It is the song that “the morning stars sang together and all the children of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). It is the victory song of the children of Israel after passing through the Red Sea, the Magnificat of Mary after the Annunciation, the song of Paul and Silas when they praised God in the darkness of prison, the song of the singers on the sea of glass after their deliverance, the “song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (Rev. 15:3).<sup>251</sup>

In Scripture reading, believers hear the Word of God addressed to them and place themselves within the narrative. Such reading not only builds and strengthens the community, but also prepares and empowers it for its ministry to the world. As Paul Ballard remarks, “It is experiencing and being immersed in the mysteries of the Gospel that enables the Christian to live in the world.”<sup>252</sup> In prayer, each individual believer joins his or her voice to that of the praying community, lifting the needs of others before God. In this manner they put aside self-focused thoughts and desires, choosing to focus on and identify with the concerns of others.<sup>253</sup> In all of this, the worship service presupposes that the church comes before God as a people reconciled to Him and to each other. There is no place for animosity here. Hence, Bonhoeffer warns, “If we despise our brother our worship is unreal, and it forfeits every divine promise. When we come before God with

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<sup>248</sup> Jay C. Rochelle, “Gospel in a Secular World: Mystery and Relationship: An Essay in Honor of F. Burton Nelson, Friend and Colleague,” in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago, Illinois: Covenant Publications, 1999), 324.

<sup>249</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 51.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> Paul H. Ballard, “Worship in a Secular World: Bonhoeffer’s Secret Discipline,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (Autumn 1975): 32.

<sup>253</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 57.

hearts full of contempt and unreconciled with our neighbours, we are, both individually and as a congregation, worshipping an idol.”<sup>254</sup>

### ***The Ministry of Caring and Bearing***

In Christian life together, believers are called into a life of caring for one another and bearing one another’s burdens. Just as Christ bears our burdens, so we ought to bear the burdens of others.<sup>255</sup> In this way, one believer acts as Christ for another. We have already seen that believers are instructed to uphold one another in prayer and intercession. Furthermore, in their life together believers are called to share their possessions with those in need (food, drink, clothing, etc.; see section C. 3 regarding Matthew 25). In addition, they are called to minister to one another through confession and absolution. Such confessing and forgiving among believers ensures that individuals do not face temptation alone. Every individual temptation is now a temptation of Jesus Christ, in the form of His body—the church.<sup>256</sup> When one member is tempted the whole church is affected, just as when one member suffers the whole church suffers. Thus, believers need each other to overcome temptation. Moreover, honest, concrete confession to another believer helps one to ensure that one is taking sin seriously and realizing the costliness of grace. Bonhoeffer writes:

Confession is the God-given remedy for self-deception and self-indulgence. When we confess our sins before a brother-Christian, we are mortifying the pride of the flesh and delivering it up to shame and death through Christ. Then through the word of absolution we rise as new men, utterly dependent on the mercy of God.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 128.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>256</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, 22.

<sup>257</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 289.

Thus, confession protects us from deceiving ourselves with cheap grace. In the word of another believer we are confronted with the otherness of God and His Word of forgiveness, through the mediation of Christ.<sup>258</sup>

### *The Ministry of Service*

Believers are called into a life of service to God and others. They serve others in the church-community in ministries of listening, helpfulness, forbearance (enduring in suffering with others), and sharing the Word with one another (to name a few).<sup>259</sup> In addition, believers are called to serve people in the world who are not yet part of the church-community. They encounter the will and commandment of God not only in the church, but also in family, labour, and government.<sup>260</sup> In light of the Incarnation of Christ, this concern for the world is a crucial part of the church's ministry. For, "The church is the presence of God in the world. Really in the world, really the presence of God."<sup>261</sup> As such, the church is called to live as Christ lived: in existence for others.<sup>262</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, "In the incarnation God makes Himself known as Him who wishes to exist not for Himself but 'for us'. Consequently, in view of the incarnation of God, to live as man before God can mean only to exist not for oneself but for God and for other men."<sup>263</sup> I will discuss these 'worldly' aspects of Christian ministry in greater detail in the following chapter, when I expisit the *missional* elements of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology.

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<sup>258</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112-113.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-100, 103.

<sup>260</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 274.

<sup>261</sup> Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 150.

<sup>262</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 382.

<sup>263</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 292.

## 5. Summary

In this section, I investigated the incarnational or Christological elements of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. We discovered that, as Bonhoeffer's thought developed, he increasingly stressed the need for, and reality of, Christ's centrality and mediation. In Christ, God demonstrates His freedom-for humanity and sets it free *for* God and others. As the *Counter-Logos*, Christ stands both for and against humanity, imparting to it new life and community and putting to death its egocentricity and self-reliance. In the new humanity Christ mediates all relationships—He stands between God and humanity, between one person and another, and between God and the natural world. Moreover, Christ the Centre and Mediator defines the life and existence of the church. He calls individuals into radical discipleship under His Word, in obedience to Him, and as followers who shape their lives according to Christ's own life and teaching. And, He calls the church-community into radical discipleship under His Word, in caring for each other and bearing one another's burdens, and in service to God, other believers, and the world. Thus, Christ is both in and beyond the church; He calls it into being, defines its nature, and leads it in accomplishing His loving and reconciliatory purposes in the world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BONHOEFFER'S ECCLESIOLOGY: PART TWO

#### A. A 'Missional' Ecclesiology

While numerous features of Bonhoeffer's theology have drawn the attention of many theologians, pastors, and lay people (i.e., his ecclesiology, Christology, ethics, liberation themes, etc.), the missiological elements of his thought 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> Thus, Bliese even goes so far as to identify Bonhoeffer as a missiologist, if only an unconscious one. Of course, Bliese realizes that Bonhoeffer never developed a theology of mission; however, he makes the following point:

Nevertheless, the burning questions of the day—church and culture, evangelism for individuals or a *Volk* (i.e., 'nations', a people, or groups), how to view other religions, Christianity and secularity, solidarity with the poor, the world as the locus for the church's mission, a Christology focused on 'the other', the 'social

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bliese, "Bonhoeffer and the Great Commission: Does Bonhoeffer Have a Theology of Mission?," Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg, ed., *Reflections on Bonhoeffer*, 253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

gospel, martyrdom and witness, and suffering as central to a cross-centered understanding of the gospel—all are mentioned within Bonhoeffer's texts.<sup>3</sup>

Bliese identifies five distinct aspects of Bonhoeffer's missiological reflection.

First, his missiology offers to the church a “view from inside.”<sup>4</sup> For Bonhoeffer, missiology includes mission within and to the church, as the church is in need of continual openness and reform.<sup>5</sup> As Bonhoeffer engaged in the conflict between Christianity and Nazism, he was forced to consider issues related to Christianity and culture. The German Christians had clearly miscontextualized the gospel in their appropriation of Nazi ideology and in their attempt to create an ‘Aryan church for Aryans’. They were not evaluating and shaping their culture in light of the gospel, but the gospel in light of their culture. Second, Bonhoeffer's missiology offers to the church a “view from below.”<sup>6</sup> As the church considers its mission, it must hear and respond to the voices of the underprivileged, the outcasts, the maltreated, the oppressed, the powerless, and the needy. Third, his missiology offers to the church a “view from outside.”<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer was aware of the ‘westernization’ of Christianity and was open to the possibility of learning more about the Christian faith by dialoguing with people of other religious traditions, especially in the East. In particular, he expressed a desire to travel to India, in order to observe Gandhi's radical employment of the Sermon on the Mount (i.e., regarding non-violent resistance). In a letter to his grandmother, Bonhoeffer writes:

Before I finally commit myself to anything, however, I'm thinking again of going to India. I've given a good deal of thought lately to Indian questions and believe

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 258-259.

that there's quite a lot to be learned there. Sometimes it even seems to me that there's more Christianity in their 'paganism' than in our entire Reich Church. Of course, Christianity did come from the East originally. But it has been so westernized and so permeated by civilized thought that, as we can now see, it is almost lost to us.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, Bonhoeffer's missiology offers to the church a "view from the world."<sup>9</sup>

Since Bonhoeffer's missiological thought was grounded in the Incarnation (i.e., the fact that Christ is fully God and fully human, that He was raised from the dead bodily, etc.), he stressed that mission must address the *whole person*, and not merely a person's intellect, beliefs, or 'spirituality'. Jesus Christ, as the God-man who took humanity into Himself, came to restore and redeem humanity according to God's original intention. His mission was not to overcome human finitude or bodily existence, nor was it merely to save souls. Rather, Jesus Christ came to set humanity free to be truly *human*, truly *creaturely*, and truly *worldly*. Thus, Christ does not save Christians in order to remove them from the world, but to send them back into the world as servants of the gospel. Accordingly, spirituality and mission, prayer and action, are complementary and cannot be separated. Fifth, Bonhoeffer's missiology offers to the church a "view from the Cruciform centre."<sup>10</sup> The theology of the cross plays a key role for Bonhoeffer, in both his missiology and his ecclesiology. As Bliese writes, "Responsible action, for Bonhoeffer, always amounted to a participation of the church 'in the sufferings of God in the secular life'. The cross is the *missio Jesu* into which Jesus' disciples are called."<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 407.

<sup>9</sup> Kelly and Weborg, ed., *Reflections on Bonhoeffer*, 261.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

other words, by participating in the mission of Jesus, Christians are called to share in His suffering with and for the world.

Having provided an introductory sketch of Bonhoeffer's missiological thought, I will now engage in a detailed exposition of the missiological elements of his ecclesiology. I will discuss the missio-ecclesiological themes in Bonhoeffer's works under three broad categories, including the following: 1. the church's mission; 2. the church and religionless Christianity; and 3. the church existing-for-others.

### **1. The Church's Mission**

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>12</sup> This is a fair assessment, since Bonhoeffer frequently stresses the sovereignty of the Word of God and the proclamation of that Word.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argues that the first demand God places

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas W. Ogletree, "The Church's Mission to the World in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Encounter* 25 (Autumn 1964): 468.

<sup>13</sup> In the previous chapter, I observed that the church derives its authority only from the Word of God, as the Word has absolute authority while the church has only relative authority. Thus, Christians must be obedient to the authority of the church, but their obedience to the Word overrides their obedience to the church. If the church defies the Word of God, believers may have to confront or even disobey the church out of their allegiance to the Word. Similarly, Bonhoeffer argues that, generally speaking, Christians should be obedient to the state; however, the state is also subject to the Word of God. There may be times when Christians must disobey the state because of their allegiance to the Word.

Regarding church and state, Bonhoeffer writes, "The state which endangers the Christian proclamation negates itself... All this means that there are three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state: in the first place, as has been said, it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Do good to all men.' In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and demanded when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order, i.e., when it sees the state unrestrainedly bring about too much or too little law and order. In both these cases it must see the existence of the state, and with it its own existence, threatened." See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 221.

upon the church is to be witnesses to Jesus Christ before the world.<sup>14</sup> This proclamation of the gospel should be simple, lucid, and concrete, not complex, ambiguous, and abstract. In reflecting upon the proclaiming ministry of Jesus' disciples, Bonhoeffer writes:

Their proclamation is clear and concise. They simply announce that the kingdom of God has drawn nigh, and summon men to repentance and faith. They come with the full authority of Jesus of Nazareth, they deliver a command and make an offer with the support of the highest credentials. And that is all. The whole message is staggering in its simplicity and clarity, and since the cause brooks no delay there is no need for them to enter any further discussion to clear the ground or to persuade their hearers.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the proclamation of the gospel comes in the form of an announcement. It does not rely on methods of persuasion or techniques of emotional manipulation. "Those who have ears to hear have heard all there is to hear."<sup>16</sup> Too often, the gospel is proclaimed in a manner that promotes cheap grace, which appeals to people's emotional or pragmatic 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>17</sup> Bonhoeffer refuses to do this. As James Woelfel comments, "Bonhoeffer cuts through the church's traditional formulaic descriptions of the necessary

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<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 200.

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 210.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>17</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 280.

ingredients in repentance and conversion.”<sup>18</sup> Not that Bonhoeffer dismisses the seriousness of sin. On the contrary, he would argue 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>19</sup> God’s concern for human sin cannot be restricted to deficiencies in human psychology, spirituality, morality, or ability.

To correct such a narrow approach, 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, however, traditional Lutheran forms of proclamation, which focus on human weakness and misery, simply do not address such ‘good’ people.<sup>20</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 despair, the theologian is at his wit’s end.”<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer faults Lutheranism for narrowly directing the message of the gospel toward the ‘evil man’ without considering how the ‘good man’ might find

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<sup>18</sup> James W. Woelfel, “Bonhoeffer’s Portrait of the Religionless Christian,” *Encounter* 28 (Autumn 1967): 349.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 311.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 341.

Christ.<sup>22</sup> To clarify Bonhoeffer's point, Clifford Green suggests that while Luther was primarily concerned with "Mr. Fearing," a medieval penitent sinner at his wit's end and characterized by guilt, self-doubt, and despair, Bonhoeffer is also interested in "Mr. Success," a powerful and god-like individual characterized by dominance, power, and vanity.<sup>23</sup> In Bonhoeffer's thinking, focusing on the former without the latter results in gospel reductionism, as the gospel becomes "merely the call to conversion and the consolation in sin of drunkards, adulterers and vicious men of every kind, and the gospel [loses] its power over good people."<sup>24</sup> By attending (almost exclusively) to human weakness and by downplaying human goodness, Lutheranism unintentionally justified the lifestyles of those who lived self-indulgently and indifferently to the needs of others.

In addition, in its endeavour to refute works-righteousness in favour of justification by faith alone, Lutheranism tended to lose sight of the positive value of good works and their proper place in Christian life. Bonhoeffer writes, "In seeking to recover the power of the gospel this protest unintentionally transformed the gospel of the sinner into a commendation of sin. And good, in its citizen-like sense, was held up to ridicule."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Bonhoeffer faulted Lutheranism with a narrow view of conversion. From his perspective, it tended to give preference to a particular religious experience (i.e., solace from guilt) while ignoring the richness and diversity of conversion narratives

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<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63-64.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

in the New Testament (i.e., the wise men at Jesus' birth, the centurion in Capernaum, Joseph of Arimathaea, Cornelius, the Apostle Paul, etc.).<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Bonhoeffer suggests that Christian proclamation must also address people in their strength and vigour—again, at the centre of their lives and not merely at the periphery. This means that the church must come to terms with the maturity or adulthood of the world, its coming-of-age. Bonhoeffer writes:

... we should frankly recognize that the world, and people, have come of age, that we shouldn't run man down in his worldliness, but confront him with God at his strongest point, that we should give up all our clerical tricks, and not regard psychotherapy and existentialist philosophy as God's pioneers.<sup>27</sup>

Bonhoeffer rejects the tendency in 'religious' thinking to employ God as a "stop-gap for the incompleteness of [human] knowledge"<sup>28</sup>—in other words, the tendency to appeal to 'God' as a convenient and all-encompassing rationalization to explain the inexplicable. 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 (i.e., the Egyptian sun-god, Greek mythological gods, etc.). Or, in the middle ages, people explained illnesses they did not understand by appealing to demonic activity or the curse of God. The problem with such thinking, according to Bonhoeffer, is that as humanity matures and attains

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<sup>26</sup> Woelfel, "Bonhoeffer's Portrait," 348. Woelfel provides the following summary of examples Bonhoeffer employed, in order to demonstrate the "rich varieties of *metanoia* [conversion] in the Bible": the call to discipleship (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:1-11); Jesus' table fellowship with sinners (Mt 9:10-13; Mk 2:15-17; Lk 5:29-32); the conversion of Zacchaeus the publican (Lk 19:1-10); the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Lk 7:36-50; Jn 12:1-8); Jesus' healing of the sick (Mt 8:16-17; Mk 1:32-34; Lk 4:40-41); the shepherd and the wise men who were present at Jesus' birth (Mt 2:1-12; Lk 2:8-20); the centurion of Capernaum (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10); the rich young ruler (Mt 19:16-20; Mk 10:17-31; Lk 18:18-30); the eunuch whom Philip baptized (Ac 8:26-39); Cornelius and his household (Ac 10); Nathanael (Jn 1:47); Joseph of Arimathaea and the women at the tomb (Mt 27:57-60; 28:5-8; Mk 15:42-46; 16:5-8; Lk 23:50-54; 24:3-8a; Jn 19:38-43).

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 346.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

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>29</sup> Consequently, humanity pushes God further and further to the periphery of its existence and increasingly lives as if God does not exist. Bonhoeffer writes, “If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, this applies not only to issues concerning science, art, and ethics, but is increasingly true of religious questions as well (I will investigate Bonhoeffer’s views on ‘religion’ in more detail in section A. 2.2).<sup>31</sup>

Bonhoeffer explains:

Even though there has been surrender on all secular problems, there still remain the so-called ‘ultimate questions’ – death, guilt – to which only ‘God’ can give an answer, and because of which we need God and the church and the pastor. So we live, in some degree, on these so-called ultimate questions of humanity. But what if one day they no longer exist as such, if they too can be answered ‘without God’? Of course, we now have the secularized offshoots of Christian theology, namely existentialist philosophy and the psychotherapists, who demonstrate to secure, contented, and happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate and simply unwilling to admit that it is in a predicament about which it knows nothing, and from which only they can rescue it.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, Christian proclamation must begin with God in Christ, who addresses humanity at the centre of its existence. Bonhoeffer asserts, “We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know; God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved,” and, “[God] must be recognized at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 325-326.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 326.

in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin.”<sup>33</sup> The gospel of 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. In the Incarnation, Christ took on human flesh and thus incorporated all of human existence into Himself. Therefore, His gospel must address the human condition in the multiplicity of its forms.

While proclaiming the gospel is crucial to the church’s mission, proclamation 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. He writes, “. . .the word speaks of their whole existence in so far as it is grounded anew in the call of Christ, that same existence which was the burden of the beatitudes. The call of Christ makes those who respond to it the salt of the earth in their total existence.”<sup>34</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, such as their preaching. It is the disciples themselves.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Jesus’ analogy of a “city set on a hill” implies, “The followers are a visible community; their discipleship visible in action which lifts them out of the world—otherwise it would not be discipleship.”<sup>36</sup> Christ commissions the church to exist as salt, light, and a city set on a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 311, 312.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

hill, and empowers Christians to bring His presence to others in their words and deeds, through which Christ speaks and acts. “Christians always see other men as brethren to whom Christ comes; they meet them only by going to them with Jesus.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Christian mission implies *being-sent* by the initiative, direction, and efficacy of the Living Christ. 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>38</sup> Since mission means *being-sent* in this manner by Christ, Christians do not choose their own mission field. Rather, in obedience to Christ they must go where He sends them and be His witnesses in whatever context He places them. Bonhoeffer writes, “The choice of field for their labours does not depend on their own impulses or inclinations, but on where they are sent. This makes it quite clear that it is not their own work they are doing, but God’s.”<sup>39</sup> 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>40</sup> Reliance upon our own powers and methods of argumentation, salesmanship, and emotional manipulation is not only futile, but also potentially dangerous. 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. It is futile, because the swine do not recognize the pearls that are cast before them, and dangerous, because it profanes the word of forgiveness, by causing those we fain would serve to sin against that which is holy.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 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.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 186.

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>42</sup> This is not accomplished by carelessly dispensing words of cheap grace. Conversely, sharing the mystery of the Christian faith arises as an overflow of disciplined waiting and praying, which leads to acting.<sup>43</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 upon the practice of *arcane or secret discipline*, which is prayer and righteous action.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting upon his own German church, which (he believed) had profaned and squandered its proclamation, Bonhoeffer urges:

Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, since Christian mission depends upon the initiative and efficacious action of God, its success or failure cannot be deduced according to human standards.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> John W. Mathews, "Responsible Sharing of the Mystery of Christian Faith: *Disciplina Arcani* in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Dialog* 25, no. 1 (1986): 21.

<sup>43</sup> 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 writes, "Bonhoeffer saw a transitional period of comparative silence while the Church discovered what was the 'non-religious' form of faith. And this must be taken seriously: first against panic and desperation to find instant solutions to our problems, or to hail each new (and valuable) experiment as the longed for answer; and secondly against despair, to resignation that all that is left is wilderness." See Paul H. Ballard, "Worship in a Secular World: Bonhoeffer's Secret Discipline," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (Autumn 1975): 35.

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 281, 286, 300.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 193, 195. Bonhoeffer writes, "The Church is marked off from the world not by a special privilege, but by the gracious election and calling of God;" and, "There is nothing left for us to cling to, not even our confession or our obedience. There is only his word: 'I have known thee,' which is his eternal word and call. The end of the Sermon on the Mount echoes the beginning."

Concretely, this means that the success of Christian mission cannot be assessed by the numerical growth of the church. Bonhoeffer warns, “A little band of men, the followers of Christ, are separated from the rest of the world. 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>47</sup> In fact, since Christ provides the ultimate example for Christian mission, the church’s mission is properly founded not upon a theology of success, but upon a theology of the cross. Bonhoeffer argues, “In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things the figure of Him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger and is at best the object of pity.”<sup>48</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 focus only upon the benefits associated with a given goal and often underrate or even minimize the problems, compromises, and damage associated with the means necessary to achieve that goal. To support this view, Bonhoeffer makes the following comment about the ‘successful man’ (this extract reminds one of Hegel’s ‘world historical individual’<sup>49</sup>):

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc.; Toronto: General Publishing Company, Inc., 1956).

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>50</sup>

To affirm the second proposition, “only good is successful,” is to endorse a form of Christianity without the cross. For, “The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success as its standard.”<sup>51</sup> Judged by human standards of success, the life and teachings of Christ seem backward and impractical, even foolish. Consider, for example, the following sayings of Jesus:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Mt 5:38-39). You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven (5:43-45a). Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (6:19-21). You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with [referring to His death]... (Mk 10:39). If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it (Lk 9:23-24).

Furthermore, Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the successful,” but blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted, insulted, and slandered for Jesus’ sake (Mt 5:1-12). In contrast, pragmatic and success-driven mission models avoid the beatitudes and the burden of the cross. Consequently, the inevitable

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<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

outcome of such missionary efforts is the peddling of cheap grace, which contradicts the New Testament's teaching about Christian mission. Bonhoeffer writes:

Our easy trafficking with the word of cheap grace simply bores the world to disgust, so that in the end it turns against those who try to force on it what it does not want. Thus a strict limit is placed upon the activities of the disciples, just as in Mt 10 they are told to shake the dust off their feet where the word of peace is refused a healing. Their restless energy which refuses to recognize any limit to their activity, the zeal which refuses to take note of resistance, springs from a confusion of the gospel with a victorious ideology. An ideology requires fanatics, who neither know nor notice opposition, and it is certainly a potent force. But the Word of God in its weakness takes the risk of meeting the scorn of men and being rejected.<sup>52</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>53</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. Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the transcendent question ‘Who?’ must continually awaken, shock, and redirect our thinking, proclaiming, and enacting of the gospel of Christ. 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. Even those who honestly describe

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<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 186.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

themselves as ‘religious’ do not in the least act up to it and so they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious’.<sup>54</sup>

## 2. The Church and Religionless Christianity

The passage I have just quoted from *Letters and Papers from Prison* begins with the question, “Who is Christ for us today?” and ends with some exploratory thoughts about Christian faith in a ‘religionless’ time. By connecting these two ideas, Bonhoeffer interweaves a Christocentric critique of religion with the 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. Eberhard Bethge notes, “Bonhoeffer became ‘evangelistic’ only by asking this one central question, ‘Who are You for us today?’ and by pointing to an answer with fragmentary probes and with his life.”<sup>55</sup> In the present section, I will investigate the missiological features of Bonhoeffer’s notion of religionless Christianity.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 279.

<sup>55</sup> Eberhard Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology and his ‘Religionless Christianity,’” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23, no. 3 (1967): 64.

<sup>56</sup> In secondary Bonhoeffer literature, there is an ongoing debate about whether Bonhoeffer’s thought progresses continuously from his early theology to his later (especially prison) theology, or whether there is a discontinuous break or departure in his theology. This is particularly relevant as it relates to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of religion, and his ideas concerning religionless Christianity.

This debate came into being after the publication of John A.T. Robinson’s book, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963), in which Robinson appealed to Bonhoeffer’s work (especially the fragmentary prison writings) in support of his agenda of refuting the traditional supranaturalist understanding of God. He writes, “It is this freedom built into the structure of our being which gives us (within the relationship of dependence) the independence, the ‘distance’, as it were, to be ourselves. What traditional deism and theism have done is to ‘objectivize’ this distance into the pictorial image of a God ‘out there.’ But the projection of God *from* the world as a super-Individual is no more necessary an expression of transcendence than is mileage upwards from the earth’s surface. They are both but objectifications in the language of myth—in terms of ‘another’ world—of the transcendental, the unconditional in all our experience. The test of any restatement is not whether this projection is preserved but whether these elements are safeguarded. And that I believe I have tried to do” (p. 131). Robinson thus attempts to debunk the notion of a God ‘out-there’, transcendent and separate from humanity. In so doing, he employs Bonhoeffer’s concepts (i.e., *deus ex machina*, God as a stop-Gap, etc.), but neglects Bonhoeffer’s (orthodox in accordance with Chalcedon, AD 451) Christological / incarnational foundation for these ideas. Robinson himself freely confesses that his intention is not to present a faithful exposition of the breadth (and thus the context) of Bonhoeffer’s thought: “I have made no attempt to give a balanced picture of Bonhoeffer’s theology as a whole, which cannot be done by concentrating, as I have been compelled to do, on this finally flowering of it” (p. 36).

As a result of Robinson and others, in the words of John De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer became the radical theologian of secular Christianity and was even held responsible for the ‘theology of the death of God’ which became

## 2.1 Religion versus True Discipleship or Faith

To understand Bonhoeffer's conception of religionless Christianity, we must first examine what he means by 'religion'. To explain his view, I will elucidate the distinctions he makes between natural religion and true discipleship. In presenting his ideas in this manner I run the risk of erecting a number of false dichotomies (i.e., either/or constructions), which is not Bonhoeffer's intention. He does not intend to construct a system of absolute ideas, but to preserve the mystery of Christian faith (incarnationally understood) and the tension inherent in reality. Therefore, it is important to remember that Bonhoeffer's thought is thoroughly Christological; for him, the

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the rage in some circles at the time." John W. De Gruchy, "The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 93. As T.F. Torrance notes, such abuses of Bonhoeffer's catch phrases like 'religionless Christianity' and 'worldly holiness' were sharply opposed to Bonhoeffer's basic Christian theology and his Christology. See T.F. Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," *Baptist Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 1967): 303. See also the following: Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); T.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966); and R. Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

Throughout my two chapters on Bonhoeffer, I have assumed continuity rather than discontinuity in Bonhoeffer's thought development. Thus, I am in agreement with the majority of contemporary Bonhoeffer scholars on this issue, including John Godsey, Eberhard Bethge, John De Gruchy, Geoffrey B. Kelly, Ernst Feil, Clifford Green, Ralf K. Wüstenberg, Ray Anderson, Rudolf Uhrlich, and John Wilcken. Not that I disagree with the obvious observation that Bonhoeffer's thought *develops* over time, but I reject the charge that Bonhoeffer *departs*, at any time, from his Christological foundation. Wüstenberg is helpful here, suggesting that Bonhoeffer undergoes three distinct developmental stages in his understanding of 'religion': (1) a positive estimation of religion (interpreted against the background of liberal theology, particularly A. von Harnack and A. Ritschl); (2) a critical or negative view of religion (under the influence of Barth and dialectical theology); and (3) an endorsement of religionlessness (with the background of philosophical historicism, particularly W. Dilthey and W. James). See Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 98. Wüstenberg then develops three theses regarding Bonhoeffer's understanding of religion: (1) "Bonhoeffer neither defines religion conceptually nor develops any closed theory of religion" (p. 29); (2) "From the perspective of *influence*, the nonreligious interpretation represents a combination of Karl Barth's theological critique of religion and Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophical historicism" (p. 99); and (3) "The nonreligious interpretation is a life-christological interpretation relating Christian faith and life come of age to one another" (p. 157). Thus, Wüstenberg concludes by saying, "Nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts means asking about the relevance of Jesus Christ for modern life come of age, and it means disclosing the meaning of biblical concepts for this earthly life here and now... The demand for a *nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts* conceals the demand to *live one's faith: To live as to believe means believing* through 'participation in Jesus' being' *as life* in 'being for others'" (p. 160).

For other sources defending the continuity of Bonhoeffer's thought, see the following: Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology and his 'Religionless Christianity,'" 61-77; Rudolf J. Ehrlich, "Some Observations on the 'New Theology' and on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his Ecclesiology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (March 1969): 30-59; Ernst Feil, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Understanding of the World," in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 237-255. John W. De Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer's Legacy: A New Generation," *Christian Century* 114, no. 2 (April 1997): 343-345; Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Revelation in Christ: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Revelation," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 50, no. 1 (May 1974): 39-74; and John Wilcken, "The Ecclesiology of Ethics and the Prison Writings," in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, 195-203.

Incarnation provides the *sole* basis for the unity of all reality. Thus, while Bonhoeffer wishes to avoid dichotomist thinking, he nevertheless makes use of some helpful distinctions for the sake of clarity and concreteness.

### ***Natural Religion versus Revelatory Faith***

One distinction Bonhoeffer makes is that while religion is based upon 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>57</sup> Humans cannot exercise faith by means of their own knowledge and effort because they are trapped within themselves, having a *cor curvum in se*. Thus, Bonhoeffer argues in *Act and Being*, “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>58</sup>

Similarly, in *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer differentiates between human community and community of the Holy Spirit.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, the differences he highlights in this early work correspond closely to his later thoughts concerning the distinction between religion and faith. He argues that human community has the following characteristics: it is based upon human urges and desires characterized by *eros* (self-motivated desire); it is a fellowship of pious souls; there is “humble yet haughty subjection” of others to one’s own needs; it is ruled by those with exceptional abilities and charismatic personalities; its members seek to possess and cultivate power and dominion; it employs psychological

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<sup>57</sup> Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology and his ‘Religionless Christianity,’” 66.

<sup>58</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 58.

<sup>59</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 38-42.

techniques and methods and treats people in a calculated fashion.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, community of the Holy Spirit is exemplified by the following characteristics: it is based upon the reality of the Word of God (and thus upon truth and light); it is a fellowship of those whom Christ calls; its members are motivated by *agape* love (unconditional love, which comes from God) and practice brotherly and sisterly service and voluntary mutual submission; it is ruled by God's Word alone; all power, dominion, and honour are surrendered to the Holy Spirit; the love and fruit of the Spirit governs and nourishes the community. In summary, Bonhoeffer writes:

The Scriptures call pneumatic or 'spiritual' [geistlich] what is created only by the Holy Spirit, who puts Jesus Christ into our hearts as lord and savior. The scriptures call psychic or emotional [seelisch] what comes from the natural urges, strengths, and abilities of the human soul.<sup>61</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, Jesus did not found a new religion but recreated and renewed a part of the world, namely, His church—the new humanity.<sup>62</sup> 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>63</sup> Thus, during his stay in America, Bonhoeffer was critical of sermons that replicated popular ideas or philosophical jargon, rather than exposing the Word of God. In a journal entry dated June 18, 1939, Bonhoeffer writes the following complaint about a sermon he had just heard: "The whole thing was a respectable, self-indulgent, self-satisfied religious

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>62</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 47.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 230.

celebration... Do people not know that one can get on as well, even better, without 'religion'—if only there were not God himself and his Word?"<sup>64</sup>

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer continues his polemic against natural religion.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> All such attempts rely upon human potential and capabilities, not upon 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 knowledge.<sup>67</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>68</sup>

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer employs the Apostle Paul's criticism of "the circumcision group" (Gal 2:11-21)<sup>69</sup> in his attack on religion. He writes, "The Pauline question whether *peritomhv* [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from *peritomhv* is also freedom from religion."<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer refers to Paul's

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 230-231.

<sup>65</sup> See also Chapter Three for my discussions of conscience (section C. 3: The Church and the Mediation of Christ) and religion (section B. 2: Fall; section B. 3.2: The Church as the New Humanity; and section C. 3: The Church and the Mediation of Christ).

<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 22-33.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>69</sup> See also Eph 2:11-18, Php 3:1-11, Col 2:11-12, and Tit 1:10-16.

<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 281.

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. Paul corrects, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:5). Again, he states, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” (6:15). For Paul, true circumcision (i.e., true faith) has nothing to do with outward appearances, but concerns the heart and is accomplished by the Holy Spirit (Ro 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 upon the gracious and unconditional love and action of God alone.

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

A second distinction Bonhoeffer makes is that while religion is always something fragmentary, faith is always something whole. Bonhoeffer maintains a conscious effort to avoid dichotomistic thinking, which he refers to as “thinking in terms of two spheres.”<sup>71</sup> He seeks to expose the danger in Christian thought and practice of separating the divine / holy / supernatural / ‘Christian’ sphere from the worldly / profane / natural / ‘unchristian’ sphere.<sup>72</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

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<sup>71</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 193.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

‘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 practise. This division originated from a misunderstanding and miscontextualization of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, which resulted in the promotion of a ‘cheap grace’ and the separation of faith from action and belief from holiness. Bonhoeffer protests, “Struggling against the legalism of simple obedience, we end by setting up the most dangerous law of all, the law of the world and the law of grace.”<sup>73</sup> In a later section of *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer criticises 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>74</sup> Similarly, in the prison letters Bonhoeffer writes, “The religious act is always something partial; ‘faith’ is something whole, involving the whole of one’s life. Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.”<sup>75</sup> Jay Rochelle summarizes Bonhoeffer’s critique of ‘thinking in terms of two spheres’ as follows:

Bonhoeffer knows the world as the *one* sphere of the Christians’ activity, whereas religion—in his view—allows for two spheres, one which is individual

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<sup>73</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 83.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 362.

and inward and oriented toward private piety, one which is worldly and in which one may live independent of relationship to God.<sup>76</sup>

The problem with dichotomistic thinking, according to Bonhoeffer, is that it assumes there are realities in the world which exist outside of the reality of Christ.<sup>77</sup> But this is contrary to the Incarnation, which demonstrates that Christ is the unifying centre of *all* reality—spiritual and physical, emotional and intellectual, sacred and secular, faith and practice, being and doing, etc. 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*” (emphasis mine).<sup>78</sup> Again, while religion is always something partial or fragmented, faith is always something whole, because faith is founded upon the Incarnate Christ, who is the Centre and Mediator of all reality.<sup>79</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.

Bonhoeffer’s effort to avoid dichotomization infuses his writings with an anti-totalizing quality, which resists not only binary oppositions but systematic thought in general. Not that Bonhoeffer completely avoids the use of systems; indeed, he views himself primarily as a systematic theologian.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, he writes, “Thinking, including theological thinking, will always be ‘systematic’ by nature and can, therefore, never

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<sup>76</sup> Jay C. Rochelle, “Mystery and Relationship as Keys to the Church’s Response to Secularism,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19 (August 1992): 269.

<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 195.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> 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.”

<sup>80</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 36-44.

grasp the living person of Christ into itself. Yet there is obedient and disobedient thinking (2 Cor. 10:5).”<sup>81</sup> However, he qualifies the use of systems by emphasizing the essential place of tension, mystery, transcendence, and the voice of the other. We have already observed Bonhoeffer’s creative designation of Jesus Christ as the *Counter-Logos*, who is *the way, the truth, and the life*, with whom we commune but cannot control or classify—who, therefore, disrupts all totalizing claims, systems, and regimes (see Chapter Three, section C .2: The Church and the Freedom of God in Christ). Furthermore, in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer formulates a number of explicit criticisms of systematic thought (especially systems that claim near or total supremacy; for Bonhoeffer, the true system is an eschatological possibility only<sup>82</sup>). For example, consider the following statements:

A system is made possible, however, only by an immanent idea of God, or, rather, by the exclusion of the idea of God from the context of philosophy altogether, assuming that this were possible in practice, which we would, of course, deny. In the system lies the master of being by the knowing I, hence its claim to divinity, ‘the path to the usurpation of divine beholding.’<sup>83</sup>

One way or another, every system blends reality-truth-I into one; it arrogates to itself the power to understand and have disposition over reality.<sup>84</sup>

That thought tends toward system, unable to disrupt itself, containing itself within itself—this is its designation by virtue of creation and *eschata* [consummation], in which thought no longer needs to disrupt itself because it is in reality, placed by God eternally into the truth, because it sees. But that is why any system of human beings, who *are* not eternally in the truth, is an untrue system and must be shattered so that the true system may become possible.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>82</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 94.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 89.

With his reservations concerning systematic thought, Bonhoeffer exhibits an affinity to postmodern theorists.<sup>86</sup> Consider, for example, Jacques Derrida's notion of deconstruction. Derrida seeks to expose totalizing tendencies (i.e., in texts, arguments, ideologies, etc.) by demonstrating that the logic of a particular text or idea undoes itself in the paradoxes and contradictions inherent within it. While traditional modes of reading and of being attend to that which is present, deconstruction attempts to extract what is absent or latent. Thus, it makes a conscious effort to attend to minority voices. Similarly, Bonhoeffer refers to Christ as the *Counter-Logos*, who confronts the human *logos* and breaks open all human systems (which are, inevitably, totalistic and turned-in-upon-themselves). Thus, Christ "inverts the value systems of society"<sup>87</sup> by proclaiming "the unending worth of the apparently worthless and the unending worthlessness of what is apparently so valuable. The weak shall be made strong through God and the dying shall live...."<sup>88</sup> In other words, in a manner similar to deconstruction, Bonhoeffer's *Counter-Logos* gives a voice to the voiceless by attending to repressed or minority views.<sup>89</sup>

An additional anti-totalizing feature of Bonhoeffer's thought is his understanding of 'ethical reality.' In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argues that 'ethical reality' does not concern timeless and absolute rules, but is about "being drawn in into the form of Jesus Christ."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*. For a discussion of the affinities between Bonhoeffer and postmodern themes, see "Postmodern Perspectives," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 205-281.

<sup>87</sup> Kelly, "Bonhoeffer and Romero," 86.

<sup>88</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity," in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 54, quoted from Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Bonhoeffer and Romero," 86.

<sup>89</sup> For other parallels between Bonhoeffer and deconstruction, see also Walter Lowe, "Bonhoeffer and Deconstruction: Toward a Theology of the Crucified Logos," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 207-221.

<sup>90</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 81-82.

Thus, Bonhoeffer does not intend to expound an abstract ethic, but one that is entirely concrete: “What can and must be said is not what is good once and for all, but the way in which Christ takes form among us here and now.”<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> In practice, being formed by Christ means: “the bold endeavour to speak about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world, in a manner which is neither abstract nor casuistic, neither programmatic nor purely speculative.”<sup>93</sup> Moreover, this formation is not an isolated and individualistic endeavour. Conversely, “The church is the place where Jesus Christ’s taking form is proclaimed and accomplished.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, Christian ethics assists the church community in its ministry of proclamation and action by forming the church, which is the body of Christ, according to the image of Christ. Thus, Christian ethics are not meant to establish and defend universal principles, but to serve the revealing ministry of Christ through His church.

### ***Religious Piety versus Costly Discipleship***

Eberhard Bethge identifies four characteristics in Bonhoeffer’s use of the term ‘religion’.<sup>95</sup> In the present discussion, I will refer to Bethge’s analysis and supplement it

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>92</sup> Bonhoeffer has been criticized for lacking an adequate pneumatology. He certainly refers to the Holy Spirit in his writings, but he does so relatively infrequently (compared with his references to ‘God’ or ‘Jesus’ or ‘Christ’). That being said, I nevertheless believe that this Trinitarian statement faithfully expresses the inner logic of Bonhoeffer’s thought. I will confront the weaknesses in Bonhoeffer’s pneumatology in greater detail in my next chapter (see Chapter Five, Section C: Limitations of Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Clifford Green argues that Bethge’s four categories could be reduced to two (i.e., metaphysics and individualism actually incorporate and explain the other two, which are *Deus ex machina*, and provincialism). See Clifford J. Green, “Bonhoeffer’s Concept of Religion,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 19, no. 1 (November, 1963):

with other relevant observations. First, “Bonhoeffer calls the *metaphysical* dressing of biblical faith ‘religion.’”<sup>96</sup> By metaphysical, Bonhoeffer means all attempts to speak of God in abstraction and detachment, or in a manner that does not address God as a living and personal being. Particularly, he attacks natural religion, apologetics, and the marriage of Christianity to speculative philosophies (i.e., Greek philosophy, nineteenth-century German Idealism, etc.).<sup>97</sup> Second, “Bonhoeffer describes the individualistic handling of the message as ‘religion.’”<sup>98</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.<sup>99</sup> Hence, his famous cry, “Only he who cries out for the Jews can sing the Gregorian chant.”<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Bonhoeffer is critical of those who focus upon the other-worldliness of Christianity and reduce the gospel to a religion of soul-saving. Certainly, he believed that

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11-21. However, for the sake of clarity and to preserve the distinctiveness of Bonhoeffer’s terms, I have chosen to follow Bethge’s classification.

<sup>96</sup> Bethge, “*Bonhoeffer’s Christology and his ‘Religionless Christianity,’*” 66.

<sup>97</sup> For a good treatment of apologetics, which does not fall prey to Bonhoeffer’s critique, see John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Stackhouse presents an apologetic that emphasizes the importance of relationship-building and authenticity. He writes, “I maintain that apologetics is best understood as developing one’s authentic self so as to present one’s faith as helpfully as possible to one’s neighbour. Apologetics is not primarily the acquisition and deployment of techniques. We are to become better versions of ourselves, not to resemble some ideal type of ‘apologist’” (p. xvii). For Stackhouse, apologetics concerns not only issues of truth, but also the virtues of goodness and beauty. Furthermore, apologetics concerns more than the intellect (being human includes more than possessing rationality); indeed, anything that helps to defend and commend Christianity and lead people to take the faith more seriously than before qualifies as being apologetic (see Chapter 7 of his book). In this sense of apologetics, I believe that Bonhoeffer himself engaged in apologetics, as he wrestled with the nature of and (nonreligious) language for our faith in an age in which the world has come of age.

<sup>98</sup> Bethge, “*Bonhoeffer’s Christology and his ‘Religionless Christianity,’*” 67.

<sup>99</sup> Douglas John Hall notes that Bonhoeffer distinguishes serious Christianity from both religious formality and religious enthusiasm. See Douglas John Hall, “Ecclesia Crucis: The Disciple Community and the Future of the Church in North America,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 65.

<sup>100</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 441.

eternal destiny is an important matter; 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 (Col 1:20). 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 (more on the ‘worldliness’ of Christianity in the next section). Thus, 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 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>101</sup>

Third, “For Bonhoeffer the religious concept of the *Deus ex machina* [literally ‘god out of a machine’] stands over against the biblical breakthrough of a suffering Christ.”<sup>102</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,

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<sup>101</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 285-286.

<sup>102</sup> Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology and his ‘Religionless Christianity,’” 67.

that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries. Of necessity, that can go on only till people can by their own strength push these boundaries somewhat further out, so that God becomes superfluous as a *deus ex machina*.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, people appeal to God as the explanation for some unsolvable problem (i.e., an appeal to the mysterious unknown, arguments from silence, etc.). However, when such needs are not felt, they have no place for God in their lives. As 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>104</sup>

Second, Bonhoeffer addresses 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 who must appear at the beckoning call of its master. Such people are prone to be seduced by a ‘health and wealth’ gospel, which promises happiness, riches, power, influence, security, and privilege.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, they are 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, which 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

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<sup>103</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 281-282.

<sup>104</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 266.

<sup>105</sup> For example, see Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Greensburg: Manna Christian Outreach/Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974). Copeland writes, “When you are walking in the Word of God, you will prosper and be in health” (p. 17). As an example, “... an old saint of God, living in poverty, can pray revival down on a church, get everybody in town saved, and be lying in bed sick the whole time—if she does not believe the Word of God for her health” (p. 16). Copeland’s position is that there are laws of prosperity just as there are laws of nature and laws in the spiritual world. They will work when they are put to work in faith, and stop working when the “force of faith” is stopped (p. 19). See also Oral Roberts and G.H. Montgomery, *God’s Formula for Success and Prosperity* (Tulsa: Oral Roberts, 1956). “Success comes to those who believe God for it” (p. 12).

oppressed. They are impressed with God's 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. Bonhoeffer contends:

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help....the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.<sup>106</sup>

Fourth, "Religion has shaped Christianity in such a way that it developed the privileged class of the initiated over the outsiders...."<sup>107</sup> The church in Christendom achieved an honoured status and assumed a position of guardianship and tutelage over society. Christian institutions, as 'religious' entities, became powerful and influential, and thereby "transformed the freeing majesty of the powerless servanthood of Christ into power-structures of sterilizing dependencies."<sup>108</sup> To correct this trend, Bonhoeffer insists that (religionless) Christianity must come to terms with the world's coming-of-age and its ensuing rejection of the patronage of the church. 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."<sup>109</sup> 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

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<sup>106</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 361.

<sup>107</sup> Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology and his 'Religionless Christianity,'" 67.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 360.

without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.”<sup>110</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 (however, as Bonhoeffer discovered in the Afro-American churches he visited in the United States, there is an important place for emotional experience<sup>111</sup>). Rather, God wants Christians to be connected to others in the church in committed and responsible relationships, and to be mutually edified, strengthened, and set free for their existence in the world as Christ’s body, witnesses, and ambassadors. As Bonhoeffer emphatically maintains in *Life Together* (notice how he *combines* spirituality and mission, rather than dichotomizing them!):

This is the proving ground of a genuine time of meditation and genuine Christian community. Has the community served to make individuals free, strong, and mature, or has it made them insecure and dependent? Has it taken them by the hand for a while so that they would learn again to walk by themselves, or has it made them anxious and unsure? This is one of the toughest and most serious questions that can be put to any form of everyday Christian life in community [Lebensgemeinschaft]. Moreover, we will see at this point whether Christians’ time of meditation has led them into an unreal world from which they awaken with a fright when they step out into the workaday world, or whether it has led them into the real world of God from which they enter into the day’s activities strengthened and purified. Has it transported them for a few short moments into a spiritual ecstasy that vanishes when everyday life returns, or has it planted the Word of God so soberly and so deeply in their heart that it holds and strengthens them all day long, leading them to active love, to obedience, to good works?<sup>112</sup>

## 2.2 Living Responsibly in the Midst of the World

Bonhoeffer often speaks of the ‘worldliness’ of Christianity, but in so doing he is not promoting an irresponsible, careless, or hedonistic attitude or lifestyle. He is careful

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Ruth Zerner, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s American Experiences: People, Letters, and Papers from Union Seminary,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 261-282.

<sup>112</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 91-92.

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>113</sup> For Bonhoeffer, worldliness can only be genuine when it is grounded in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>114</sup> Thus, according to Wesson, true worldliness includes the following two characteristics: 1. it is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ; and, 2. it embraces the world as the object of God’s love.<sup>115</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. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer exhorts:

Let the Christian remain in the world, not because of the good gifts of creation, nor because of his responsibility for the course of the world, but for the sake of the Body of the incarnate Christ and for the sake of the Church. Let him remain in the world to engage in frontal assault on it, 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>116</sup>

Because of the reconciling and redeeming work of Christ, the world is granted renewed dignity and value, as it is restored to be what God originally intended. This is experienced, proclaimed, and enacted in the church—the new humanity. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer writes, “That world ‘is for’ human beings in Adam their own, violated, ‘interpreted’ world under the curse of death; and it ‘is for’ human beings in

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<sup>113</sup> Anthony Wesson, “The Impact of Bonhoeffer on the Present Crisis in Theology,” *Church Quarterly* 2 (April 1970): 290.

<sup>114</sup> Bethge, “*Bonhoeffer’s Christology and his ‘Religionless Christianity,’*” 68-69. In regards to ‘a world come of age’, Bethge also notes, “The main notion for Bonhoeffer is responsibility, the irreversible capability and duty of adults to answer the questions of life in their own particular fields and within their own autonomous structure. This includes, to be sure, the joy which follows when human beings grow into their own manhood, but it also includes the integration of historical determinations, guilt, failures, and visions as well. Nobody makes adults children again; they stay responsible even when they turn childish, immature, or tyrannical...*Christology protects man come of age from deifying or demonizing his secularity again, and from falling into hopeless skepticism*” (emphasis mine). Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Wesson, “The Impact of Bonhoeffer,” 291.

<sup>116</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 264-265.

Christ the world set free from the I and, yet, given anew by God into their dominion, in the hope for the new creation (Rom. 8:19ff).”<sup>117</sup> In the Incarnation, divine Spirit united itself with human flesh, and the sacred and secular spheres of the world become one in the person of Christ. 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>118</sup> In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he employs the musical concept of polyphony to illustrate the harmony of Christian spirituality and worldly existence.<sup>119</sup> 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. As John Godsey explains, “As in the fugue, the life of the Christian is grounded in the *cantus firmus* of God’s love, and so long as this is strong and firm, all the rest of life’s earthly melodies, its duties and affections, can find their place as contrapuntal themes.”<sup>120</sup>

Consequently, 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

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<sup>117</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 153.

<sup>118</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 132.

<sup>119</sup> Walter H. Kemp, “The Polyphonous Christian Community of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 6.

<sup>120</sup> John D. Godsey, “Bonhoeffer’s Questions for American Churches,” *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (April 1983): 4.

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>121</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?” This question had specific implications for church and culture in Bonhoeffer’s day, just as it presents a unique significance for our own time. Contemplating his own context, Bonhoeffer writes:

In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the vices of *hubris*, power-worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, discipline, humility, contentment, and modesty. It must not under-estimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul’s teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power.<sup>122</sup>

Similarly, the relevant question for Christian living is not, “How can I be good?” (which concerns our own distorted knowledge of good and evil), but “What is the will of God?” (which concerns a decision of faith for the ultimate reality, origin, and centre of all life).<sup>123</sup> It is only by living in the reality of Christ that human existence becomes truly *humanly* and *creaturely*. As Bonhoeffer writes, “The real man is at liberty to be his Creator’s creature.”<sup>124</sup> In 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.<sup>125</sup> Conversely, to be ‘unnatural’ and ‘unworldly’ is to resist the coming of He who is the

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<sup>121</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, 14, 33-34.

<sup>122</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 383.

<sup>123</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 186.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Origin, Centre, and Mediator of all life. Such defiance can only mean the continuation of live in a state of untruth, decay, and, ultimately, death.<sup>126</sup>

Jay Rochelle argues that genuine worldliness has a number of implications for the practice of Christian faith, which he classifies into three modes. First, “In the *personal* mode, we have the *hidden discipline*.”<sup>127</sup> The hidden or arcane discipline is one of the notions Bonhoeffer employs to maintain a tension between worldliness and spirituality. By engaging in prayer and righteous action, Christians live out their faith in the midst of secular life in a manner that is hidden and protected. This aspect of Christian spirituality remains hidden not because it is an esoteric or exclusive act, but because it is a personal source of strength, nourishment, and direction, which empowers Christians to live authentic and holy lives with and for others. As Rochelle puts it, “A place for piety returns, but it is a piety transformed from disciplines which extract the Christian from the world into a private sphere of religion. Now our discipline prepares us *for* life in the world.”<sup>128</sup> In practicing the arcane discipline, the church is continually formed by the Word and Spirit of God. Thus, it is prepared and empowered for its mission to exist as the revealed-yet-hidden presence of Christ in the world. Bonhoeffer writes, “By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>127</sup> Rochelle, “Mystery and Relationship,” 275.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 370.

Second, “In the *interpersonal* mode, we exercise the ministries of mutual support, edification, and exhortation outlined in *Life Together*.”<sup>130</sup> They include silence (or holding one’s tongue), meekness, listening, helpfulness, bearing burdens, and proclaiming God’s will by the authority of the Word.<sup>131</sup> (See also the discussion of the ministries of the Word, of caring and bearing, and of service in Chapter Three, section C. 4.2.) As I noted previously, mutual ministry in the church is not meant to foster weakness and dependency, but to make people free, strong, mature, and prepared to face the world.<sup>132</sup> It should also assist believers in integrating their faith with various other aspects of their lives, such that community, friendships, family, leisure, and work all become interconnected and complimentary. In relation to this, Bonhoeffer discusses the unity of prayer and work, which results from the Christian’s life and ministry being centered in Christ.<sup>133</sup> He writes:

The prayer of the Christian reaches, therefore, beyond the time allocated to it and extends into the midst of the work. It surrounds the whole day, and in so doing, it does not hinder the work; it promotes work, affirms work, gives work great significance and joyfulness. Thus every word, every deed, every piece of work of the Christian becomes a prayer, not in the unreal sense of being constantly distracted from the task that must be done, but in a real breakthrough from the hard It to the gracious You [Du]. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17).<sup>134</sup>

Third, “In the *societal* mode, the church engages economic and social orders to clear the pathway for the proclamation of the gospel.”<sup>135</sup> Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the penultimate and the ultimate is important for this aspect of the church’s existence. The

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<sup>130</sup> Rochelle, “Mystery and Relationship,” 275.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-276.

<sup>132</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 91-92.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Rochelle, “Mystery and Relationship,” 276.

ultimate is the free justifying Word of God; it is *ultimate* or final because it comes from God alone (i.e., by means of His self-revelation) and is not preceded logically by anything. Bonhoeffer writes, “This word implies the complete breaking off of everything that precedes it, of everything that is before the last; it is therefore never the natural or necessary end of the way which has been pursued so far, but is rather the total condemnation and invalidation of this way.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, there is no method or technique for arriving at God’s ultimate justifying Word—it is His *free* Word.<sup>137</sup> However, paradoxically, this Word of God is also *ultimate* in the sense of time, and “is always preceded by something penultimate, some action, suffering, movement, volition, defeat, uprising, entreaty or hope, that is to say, in a quite genuine sense by a span of time, at the end of which it stands.”<sup>138</sup> For Bonhoeffer, God’s Word is always something final, transcendent, and free. It breaks through hard human hearts (i.e., the *cor curvum in se*), systems of thought, ideologies, and ‘religion’. Yet, “the way from the penultimate to the ultimate can never be dispensed with.”<sup>139</sup> God makes use of the penultimate, the things before the last, for the sake of the ultimate. He preserves the present age and the things of this world in order to speak His ultimate justifying Word in His own ordained time. Perhaps the Apostle Peter was contemplating similar ideas when he wrote, “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2Pe 3:9). Regarding the necessary place for both the ultimate and the penultimate, Bonhoeffer explains:

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<sup>136</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 123.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

A way had to be trodden; the whole length of the way of the things before the last had to be traversed; each one had to sink to his knees under the burden of these things, and yet the last word was then not the crowning but the complete breaking off of the penultimate... A way must be traversed, even though, in fact, there is no way that leads to this goal; this way must be pursued to the end, that is to say, to the point at which God sets an end to it. The penultimate, therefore, remains, even though the ultimate entirely annuls and invalidates it.<sup>140</sup>

It may be helpful to suggest that Bonhoeffer's distinction is an eschatological one, which holds in tension the *already* and the *not-yet* (i.e., a realized yet imminent eschatology). God's Word appeared ultimately and decisively in the person of Jesus Christ. It came to us solely by the grace of God and always goes before our own intentions and efforts. In this sense, it is the *already*, the penultimate. However, this *already* is not the end of the story but the beginning. God's Word both directs and responds to our own actions, leading us closer to God as we are sanctified and strengthened and as we mature in our faith. In this sense, it is the *not-yet*, the ultimate. Thus, the Word of God is not just the beginning, but also the final culmination. The Apostle Paul also speaks of this tension when he writes:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears... Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1Co 13:9-10, 12).

For Bonhoeffer, both the ultimate and the penultimate are crucial to God's plan and cannot be dispensed with. Thus, Christians must avoid both eschatological radicalism, which radicalizes the ultimate and "arises from hatred of creation" (i.e., other-worldliness), and secular compromise, which radicalizes the penultimate and "springs from hatred of the ultimate... from hatred of the justification of the sinner by grace

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 123.

alone” (i.e., a purely social gospel).<sup>141</sup> For the sake of the ultimate, the church must value and attend to penultimate realities as it pursues its mission to the world. In other words, the church must participate in “preparing the way” for the ultimate and justifying word of God by loving and serving others in the world. “The preparation of the way requires that the penultimate shall be respected and validated for the sake of the approaching ultimate.”<sup>142</sup> Therefore, ministries of loving service, such as providing food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, justice for the dispossessed, fellowship for the lonely, order for the undisciplined, and freedom for the slave, are not extraneous to the gospel but intrinsic to it.<sup>143</sup> The church cannot know in advance whether or not such ministries will lead people to faith in Christ, for such faith is contingent upon the personal coming and revealing of Christ Himself. However, such knowledge is irrelevant because the church’s mission is to be an authentic witness to the *whole* gospel<sup>144</sup> (not merely fragments of it), which includes both the ultimate Word of proclamation *and* the penultimate acts of preparing the way. Bonhoeffer warns, “If the proclaimer of the word

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>144</sup> See John Stott, ed., *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996). See especially the exposition of the Lausanne Covenant, a document written with the conscientious effort of encapsulating the main concerns of the 1974 Lausanne conference, namely: (a) a commitment to the authority of Scripture; (b) the lostness of human beings apart from Christ; (c) salvation in Jesus Christ alone; (d) Christian witness “by both word and deed” (neither denying Christian social responsibility, nor making it an all-encompassing mission); and (e) the necessity of evangelism for the salvation of souls. (See John Stott’s “An Historical Introduction,” p. xiv.) Regarding point (d), the document specifies, “World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world” (p. 28). The document also endorses the view that salvation involves transformation in the totality of personal and social responsibilities. Christian social responsibility is based upon our understanding of God as the Creator and Judge of all people. Since humanity is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity which is to be respected and served, not exploited. The documents express penitence on behalf of the church, both for neglecting its social responsibilities and for sometimes having viewed evangelism and social concern as being mutually exclusive (p. 24).

does not at the same time take every measure to ensure that the word may be heard, then he is not satisfying the claim of the word to pass freely and unhindered.”<sup>145</sup>

### 3. The Church Existing-For-Others

The discussion of Bonhoeffer’s emphasis upon the necessary tension between the penultimate and the ultimate leads us naturally into his third major missiological theme, which is the church existing-for-others. The notion of existence for others occurs early in Bonhoeffer’s thought and work. For example, consider his emphases upon the intrinsic sociality of the human person and the harmony of the primal community in *Sanctorum Communio*, the freedom of God *for* others in binding and committing Himself to the church community in *Act and Being*, and the creation of humanity in the image of God, interpreted as being-free-*for* God and others in *Creation and Fall* (see Chapter Three).

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer further develops his notion of being-for others, by incorporating his maturing theology of the cross. Thus, he insists upon the Christian’s obligation to participate in the sufferings of Christ in and for the world. He asserts, “Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion.”<sup>146</sup> Genuine discipleship is not existence in a detached spiritual bliss (though it may include intense spiritual experiences); it is following Christ in the way of the cross. Just as Christ bears our burdens, so we are called to bear the burdens of others. “Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise godfearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he

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<sup>145</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 136.

<sup>146</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 87.

bids him come and die.”<sup>147</sup> Such suffering is not an end in itself, as in extreme forms of asceticism, but is a means for bringing God’s love, reconciliation, and regeneration to a needy and hostile world. As Bonhoeffer writes, “The cross is the only power in the world which proves that suffering love can avenge and vanquish evil.”<sup>148</sup> Thus, the church does not possess a privileged position, but one of grace, compassion, responsibility, and service.<sup>149</sup> Christians are sent to be the presence of Christ in the lives of others: “Thus they are to meet those to whom they are sent as if they were Christ himself. When they are welcomed into a house, Christ enters with them.”<sup>150</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s theology of the cross is evident in a number of his subsequent works as well. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer 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. “The proud throne of the judge no longer lures them; instead they want to be down among the wretched and lowly, because God found them down there themselves.”<sup>151</sup> Moreover, his discussion of the ministry of bearing the burdens of others in *Life Together* is grounded in the theology of the cross.<sup>152</sup> In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer reflects upon Mt 5:10<sup>153</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

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 144-145.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 187, 193, 202.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>151</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 96.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 101. Bonhoeffer writes, “In suffering and enduring human beings, God maintained community with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the cross. Christians share in this law. They are obliged to bear with and suffer one another; but what is more important, now by virtue of the law of Christ having been fulfilled, they are also able to bear one another.”

<sup>153</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

identifies Christians with Christ.<sup>154</sup> Of course, identification with Christ in suffering should never be construed as a meritorious work, a matter of pride, or a self-righteous or self-justifying action, which excuses Christians from acknowledging their own guilt (i.e., an us-versus-them, Christian-versus-heathen, or victim-versus-perpetrator mentality). In *Temptation*, Bonhoeffer seeks to preserve Christian suffering from such notions, arguing that “A suffering for Christ’s sake which acknowledges no element of judgement in it is fanaticism.”<sup>155</sup> By way of correction, Bonhoeffer contends, “It is the guilt of all flesh, which the Christian, too, bears until his life’s end; but, beyond that, it is at the same time the guilt of the world in Jesus, which falls upon him and which allows him to suffer.”<sup>156</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s reflections concerning the church’s existence-for-others are most developed (yet not complete) in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. He argues that genuine Christian resistance and submission originate from complete obedience to Jesus and demonstrate a willingness to suffer for others. Such being-for-others and suffering in solidarity with others is the supreme expression of freedom in Christ. Woelfel writes, “Christ-like suffering, like Christ-like submission generally, is the act of free persons who out of their existence-for-others willingly undergo frustration, impotence, weakness, pain, and even death.”<sup>157</sup> 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 contemplated the full divinity and humanity of Christ, he realized that Jesus’ weakness and suffering in finite, bodily, human existence was the supreme

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<sup>154</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 62.

<sup>155</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, 39.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>157</sup> Woelfel, “Bonhoeffer’s Portrait,” 365.

expression of the victory and supremacy of the Son of God. In His Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus shows us that the true nature of both God and humanity (i.e., 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>158</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”<sup>159</sup> implies that “The church is the church only when it exists for others.”<sup>160</sup> “Its mission is to tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.”<sup>161</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, including creation, fall, atonement, repentance, faith, the new life, the last things, etc.<sup>162</sup> Interestingly, this socio-theological

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<sup>158</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 381-382.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

assertion reiterates one of Bonhoeffer's earliest statements from *Sanctorum Communio*,

although in a richer, more inclusive, and further developed form:

The more this investigation has considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts. 'Person', 'primal state', 'sin', and 'revelation' can be fully comprehended only in reference to sociality [Sozialität].<sup>163</sup>

#### 4. Summary

In summary, I have discussed the *missional* elements of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology in three major categories. First, the church engages in mission by proclaiming and enacting the gospel. The church must proclaim the grace and reconciliation it experiences in its own life, and it must practice what it preaches in concrete loving action. In such proclaiming and acting, it relies not on its own efforts, methods, and techniques, but on the gracious initiative, direction, and efficacy of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Second, the church accomplishes its mission by faith, not by religion. It understands true faith as being established and empowered by the Holy Spirit and encompassing the wholeness of life (i.e., both being and doing). It believes that God's Word and work always go before its own work, shaping and directing the church's words and efforts according to God's will. Thus, the church relies upon the Word of God, wrestles with it, is formed by it, receives new eyes to see the world as God does through it, and allows the Word to speak for itself and accomplish God's purposes in those who do not know Him. Moreover, living by faith means that faith permeates the church's existence and integrates the various aspects of its life, with Christ as its Centre and Mediator.

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<sup>163</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 21.

Third, the church pursues its mission by existing-for-others in a life of costly discipleship and responsible action in the midst of the world. It lives out its faith concretely before God in the reality of His personal presence and will. It breaks out of traditional modes of packaging the gospel, particularly those offering a quick emotional fix or a dosage of cheap grace. In contrast, the church lives in service to others, personally sharing their joys and pains and imparting to them the love and presence of Christ. Accordingly, its prayer always leads to costly and active identification and involvement with others. Christian prayer is not a passive invocation of a *Deus ex machina*, who appears magically to solve the church's problems and remove its responsibility to bear the burdens of others and to share its resources. Furthermore, existing-for-others means that the church will not expect to occupy a position of privilege and prestige in society. Rather, by identifying with and participating in the sufferings of Christ, the church will draw upon *His* resurrection power (i.e., that of the Holy Spirit), exercising it in the midst of its own weakness and humility.

#### **B. Congruencies in the Ecclesiologies of Bonhoeffer and the MCM<sup>164</sup>**

There are a number of similarities in the *missional* ecclesiologies of Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement. Generally speaking, both ecclesiologies wrestle with the identity and mission of the church in Western (post-)modern culture, recognizing that the older (i.e., Christendom) questions, structures, and methods are no longer apposite in the present era. Both ecclesiologies recognize the value of ecumenical dialogue, in order to draw upon the richness and diversity of the various Christian traditions and to broaden and expand our understanding of the gospel, the church, and our

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<sup>164</sup> Missional Church Movement.

mission to the world. And both ecclesiologies seek to reintegrate church and mission (though in different ways and with different emphases), such that the church acknowledges the seriousness and significance of its calling and objective.

In the present section, I will identify some particular congruencies between the ecclesiologies of Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement. Many of these congruencies are probably already apparent to the reader, and thus my intention here is to clarify and elucidate them. The purpose for doing this is twofold. First, I wish to demonstrate that both Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement raise similar questions in regards to the church's relation to culture and its witness of the gospel. Second, in the following chapter, I will suggest that certain aspects of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology need to be critiqued and reworked in light of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological insight and depth.

### **1. The Church and the Embodiment of the Gospel**

Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement emphasize the need for the church to embody the gospel, both in its own communal life and in its engagement with the world. Mission cannot be reduced merely to proclamation. People living in contemporary post-Christendom culture are continually being barraged with words, whether in commercial advertisements, political ideologies, new religious ideas or philosophies, self-help literature or popular psychology, music, fashion, television, motion pictures, and other forms of media. In such a context it is difficult for people to determine which ideas to accept and which to reject, especially since current popular philosophy assures them that all choices are equally valid. In addition, many are disenchanted with the institutional church and believe that it is increasingly old-

fashioned, irrelevant, and disconnected from the issues that concern contemporary people. Moreover, many people simply do not trust the church, on account of the hypocrisy, self-righteousness, corruption, and greed they have witnessed or even experienced in it over the past century (i.e., such current issues as sexual misconduct, abuses of power and control, salesmanship and manipulation, disputes over money, moral failure of television evangelists and other ministers, etc.). In many ways, the church has lost the trust and appreciation of contemporary people and also, accordingly, the warrant to address them.

Therefore, the Missional Church Movement stresses that the gospel cannot merely be spoken; it must also become incarnate or embodied in the life of the church as a visible and tangible demonstration to the world. For example, Lesslie Newbigin argues that Christians must embody and indwell the biblical story, such that the Word of God becomes a part of them and shapes them according to its own worldview and power.<sup>165</sup> As Christians are shaped and formed by the Word of God, they interpret and demonstrate its message in concrete life and action. Thus, they become the living hermeneutic of the gospel in and for the world.<sup>166</sup> George Hunsberger draws upon Newbigin's concept of the church as the hermeneutic of the gospel and adds that the church's mission is to represent the kingdom or reign of God in the world as a sign, foretaste, messenger, and servant of that kingdom.<sup>167</sup> In addition, Craig Van Gelder stresses the incarnational nature of the gospel, suggesting that the church's mission implies a demonstration of the reality of God

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<sup>165</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>167</sup> George R. Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in *Missional Church*, 77-109.

in a living community of believers.<sup>168</sup> This demonstration of the reality of God means that the church will not seek to be conformed to its surrounding culture, but will exist as an alternate community of ‘resident aliens’.

Bonhoeffer also advocates the embodiment of the gospel, insisting that both proclamation and action are necessary for Christian life and mission and must be held in tension. Bonhoeffer emphasizes embodiment of the gospel in at least three ways.<sup>169</sup> First, his depiction of the church as the New Humanity implies that something visible and tangible has taken place. The church is not merely an ideal or something evident only in the ‘spiritual’ realm, but a living reality occurring in human history. It cannot be otherwise, since the church is God’s means of reconciling people with Himself and with others. In view of the Incarnation, the gospel must be embodied. It cannot result merely in a mental assent to certain doctrines or to participation in esoteric religious exercises; it necessarily binds believers to others in the New Humanity, thus overcoming the isolation and self-imprisonment (i.e., *cor curvum in se*) created by the Fall. In other words, the gospel is not just about words, beliefs, and doctrines, but also involves concrete actions, commitments, and relationships. Consequently, mission includes both preaching the gospel message and performing tangible acts of love to demonstrate that message.

Second, Bonhoeffer’s portrayal of the Christological nature of the church implies the embodiment of the gospel in Christian mission.<sup>170</sup> He frequently reminds us of the

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<sup>168</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “Defining the Center—Finding the Boundaries: The Challenge of Re-Visioning the Church in North America for the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> For more detail on these points, see the relevant sections of Chapters Three and Four of this work.

<sup>170</sup> Here, we recall Bonhoeffer’s theme in *Act and Being* that Christ, who is the revelation of God, is present concretely in the church community. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer speaks of the church as a part of the real world in which Christ has taken form. Thus, act and being, belief and action are united as the *reality* of God takes concrete shape in the world. Luca D’Isanto writes, “The true response of the church consists in rendering the *hidden* God *visible* and *interpretable* in the ecclesial *praxis* of contemporary individuals. In this sense, one can say that hermeneutics and ethics

church's mandate to be the presence of Christ in the world. The church is the body of Christ; it is Christ existing as church-community.<sup>171</sup> It is the presence of Christ, just as Christ is the presence of God.<sup>172</sup> It is a revelatory form of Christ on earth.<sup>173</sup> It is a part of the real world in which Christ has taken form.<sup>174</sup> Since Christ is present in and through the church, He directs and forms the church's ministry of proclamation and action according to His own. Thus, the church exercises its faith and accomplishes its mission by living a life of radical discipleship in Christ (see Chapter Three, section C. 4: The Church and Radical Discipleship in Christ). In this manner, Christians act 'as Christ' to others both individually and corporately.

Third, for Bonhoeffer, the church embodies the gospel in its mission of existing-for-others. Just as Christ demonstrated the reality of the gospel in His own ministry (i.e., in His preaching, teaching, healing, deliverance, confronting the powers, identifying with the oppressed, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor and sick, and in His suffering for the sake of others, etc.), so the church's mission to the world involves existing-for-others in similar ways. Just as Christ is the "man for others," so Christians are called to be the "church for others." Such existence-for-others in and through Christ reveals to the world God's original intention for humanity, which is to live in the *imago Dei* in being-free-for-others.

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are intertwined in Bonhoeffer's model of mediation, because no interpretation of God's being can be authentically validated without moving into action." Luca D'Isanto, "Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutical Model of Community," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 146.

<sup>171</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 121.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>173</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 49-59.

<sup>174</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 84.

## 2. The Church Reconfigured in a Post-Christendom Era

Both Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement attempt to envision the nature, form, and function of the church at a time when it no longer occupies a place of prominence and privilege in society. Generally, the Missional Church Movement is wrestling with the questions and problems that postmodernity poses for the church. For example, many people in contemporary postmodern culture no longer believe in absolute truth, particularly religious truth, and thus they are sceptical when presented with religious doctrines that claim supremacy over other beliefs and systems (for example, the claim that Christianity is the only true religion). In contrast, postmodern people tend to appeal to relativism when faced with religious and moral decisions. Furthermore, many people have developed distrust for institutions and hierarchical organizations, including the church. Missional Church advocates point out that the church does not possess the status and influence it once had in society, and that North America is no longer a Christian culture (i.e., as defined by a Christendom mentality). Christendom, they argue, is over. Therefore, the Missional Church Movement challenges Christians to re-think the nature and mission of the church in Western postmodern culture. Christians in North America must learn to view their own society as a mission field and envisage fresh and innovative ways of being and doing church in this setting (see Chapter Two for details).

In Bonhoeffer's reflections on a post-Christendom church, he does not write specifically or directly about postmodernity *per se*, nor does he use the term 'post-Christendom'. However, due to his particular context and circumstances, he tackles a

number of issues and themes which possess a distinctly ‘postmodern’ flavour.<sup>175</sup> For example, in his polemic against German Idealism in *Sanctorum Communio, Act and Being*, and *Creation and Fall*, he draws our attention to the tendency of systematic thought (after the Fall) to become domineering and oppressive, preventing us from attending to, or even recognizing, minority views and otherness. However, Bonhoeffer also cautions us against radical forms of individualistic and existentialist ‘spirituality’. In his own time, Bonhoeffer observed these two extremes (Idealism and individualistic ‘spirituality’) in the German state church, both of which perpetuated the church’s capitulation to Nazi ideology. In *Christ the Center*, Bonhoeffer continues his attack on the totalizing and subjugating power of human ideas and ideologies, arguing that only

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<sup>175</sup> It is, of course, anachronistic to apply the word ‘postmodernity’ to Bonhoeffer’s thinking in a strict sense. In addition, the word *post-modernity* itself poses problems because it suggests that modern thought and practice have ceased, which simply is not the case. (See William Edgar, “No News is Good News: Modernity, the Postmodern, and Apologetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 376.) Nevertheless, a number of Bonhoeffer’s ideas bear an affinity to postmodern thought. Consider, for example, the following: Bonhoeffer’s attack on thinking in terms of two spheres is similar to the deconstructionist’s attack on dichotomist presentations of truth; Bonhoeffer’s notion of the *Counter-Logos* is similar to the postmodern critique of metanarrative; Bonhoeffer’s understanding of ethics repudiates (or at least qualifies) the idea of Natural Law and absolute moral truth (outside of Christ); Bonhoeffer has a concern for genuinely encountering the voice of the other, the minority, the oppressed; Bonhoeffer espouses a critique of the church of power and prestige, in favour of a church for-others, etc. See the following articles: Barry Harvey, “A Post-Critical Approach to ‘Religionless Christianity,’” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 39-58; Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Bonhoeffer and Romero: Prophets of Justice for the Oppressed,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46 no. 1-4 (1992): 85-105; Walter Lowe, “Bonhoeffer and Deconstruction,” 207-221; see also “Postmodern Perspectives,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 205-281.

However, Wolfgang Huber reminds us that it is important to retain an emphasis upon the ‘modern’ elements of Bonhoeffer’s thought. This is imperative, first, because in much of his work Bonhoeffer develops a critical theology of modernity (particularly a critique of the modern Liberal theological project). Second, it is important because ‘modern’ presuppositions, beliefs, and worldviews are very much alive and well in our apparently ‘postmodern’ culture. Ignoring its continued existence (as some postmodern writers tend to do) is neither practically fruitful nor intellectually satisfying. Huber writes, “Postmodern theology is nothing else than a new variant of modern theology; it accepts the criterion of plurality as a central criterion for Christ’s presence in the world. Besides that, the thesis that we have left the epoch of modernity and entered the epoch of post-modernity is simply harmless. For the majority of people life is still determined by the processes of modernization, rationalization and economization. For the majority of people the project of modernity—freedom from need and oppression—is not at all fulfilled simply because a class analysis rightly applies to a theoretical construct that is true for many variants of ‘postmodernism.’ Postmodernism is a meaningful ideology for those who profit from the affluence of affluent societies. For all the others a critical theology of modernity is still needed.” Wolfgang Huber, “Bonhoeffer and Modernity,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 11. While I believe Huber both overstates his case and oversimplifies the intentions and complexities of postmodern thinkers, his critique provides a helpful qualification to my argument.

Christ the *Counter-Logos* can break through our corrupt systems, institutions, and power structures.

Hitler's rise to power and the increasing popularity of Nazism led to the formulation of the Pastor's Emergency League in 1933 and the Confessing Church in 1934 (with the adoption of the Barmen Declaration in May of that year), which occupied much of Bonhoeffer's thought, time, and activities. Throughout this period, Bonhoeffer considered with increasing insight what it would mean to be a church without privileges, power, security, and influence.<sup>176</sup> As World War II progressed and as Nazi atrocities escalated (all with the support and endorsement of the German state church), Bonhoeffer and his associates in the Confessing Church experienced estrangement and humiliation as a result of their commitment to the costly call and discipleship of (true) Christian faith. Specifically, they were persecuted for their refusal to accept Nazi control of the church and for their protest against Nazi discrimination and violence toward non-Aryans.

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

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<sup>176</sup> In this respect, the following comments illustrate the similarities between the ideas of Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement: "If the church is to stand in the middle of the (post)modern global village and not at its religious boundaries, it must first look to its primary vocation: to be the church, i.e., to be the corporate structure of God's eschatological rule embodied in and bodied forth by Jesus as messiah. This vocation only sounds self-serving when we neglect the fact that the church exists for the sake of God's kingdom and that its calling is the same as its servant-king: to open the world to its destiny in this kingdom." In addition, "Religionless Christianity in a (post)modern world means, first of all, that the messianic community must refuse its confinement as a religious association, and rediscover, as Bonhoeffer states in *The Cost of Discipleship*, that it possesses a distinctively 'political character.'" See Harvey, "A Post-Critical Approach," 50.

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 (see section A. 2 of this chapter: The Church and Religionless Christianity). 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.

### **3. The Church and Power: Uses and Abuses**

A third thematic congruency between Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement is a concern for the use of power in the church (though they approach the matter differently). Lesslie Newbigin promotes a balanced approach to the use of power. While rejecting certain attitudes toward power that were operative in Christendom (i.e., the professionalization of ministry, unity of church and state, etc.), he nevertheless wants to avoid eschewing the use of power completely. For Newbigin, such an attitude would amount to a naïve form of “anarchistic romanticism” or “pre-Constantinian innocence.”<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, it would ignore the biblical teaching that God created the principalities and powers (i.e., He gave power to Caesar and Pilate) and now wants them redeemed and transformed, not eliminated or neglected.<sup>178</sup> Such a view would also deprive the church of the proper and constructive use of power. Newbigin writes, “The Christendom project was not wrong, even though it became corrupt. It would have been

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<sup>177</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 100-102.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-129.

wrong had the Christians retreated into their own world of private belief when the classical pagan world was collapsing, and in need of the gospel.”<sup>179</sup> To use power appropriately the church must envision itself not as a triumphant and secure viceroy, but as a servant church under the lordship of Christ.<sup>180</sup>

Subsequent thinkers in the Missional Church Movement argue for a more radical approach to issues of power, endorsing a non-institutional, non-hierarchical, decentralized, and de-clericalized church (see Chapter Two). In addition, they demonstrate a clear rejection of the Christendom model as well as many aspects of modernity (i.e., denominations, top-down leadership, the chaplaincy role of the church in society, etc.). Moreover, they encourage a non-controlling, more tolerant attitude toward doctrinal issues and perspectives. For example, Guder argues that reduction of the gospel (which occurs naturally and inevitably in any particular contextualization of it) leads to reductionism when it is paired with ecclesial control.<sup>181</sup> Furthermore, Mary Lou Codman-Wilson states that the church must release its “dogmatic hold on propositional truth” as its basis for witness.<sup>182</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of power is closely related to his Christology. As his thought develops, he places less emphasis upon Christ’s power and endorses a dialectical tension between the power and weakness of Christ. Clifford Green writes, “In the *Discipleship* period (1932-1937) the Christology vacillates between the power and weakness of Christ, the former being predominant. In the prison theology the paradoxical

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>180</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 226.

<sup>181</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 100.

<sup>182</sup> Mary Lou Codman-Wilson, “Witness in the Midst of Religious Plurality: The Model of E. Stanley Jones,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 212.

understanding of the strength of Christ in his weakness and suffering is clear and uncompromised.”<sup>183</sup> As Green notes, the later Bonhoeffer recognized the need to transcend the power-weakness dichotomy, in accordance with his realization that God’s strength and victory is epitomized in His weakness and suffering. Along with the Apostle Paul, Bonhoeffer believes that “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him (1Co 1:27-29).

Bonhoeffer recognized that there are appropriate *and* inappropriate applications of power, as well as legitimate *and* illegitimate forms of weakness. The employment of power is appropriate when it is used to serve others, when it is used to edify and enrich community, when it is used for the sake of justice and provision for the poor, and when it subjugates itself to the lordship and mediation of Christ. However, the employment of power is inappropriate when it is used to exert the desires of the self (whether individually or corporately) over and against those of others, when it is used to repress minority views and needs, and when it is used to subjugate and enslave others to one’s own ideals and goals (as in the Nazi church).<sup>184</sup> Similarly, weakness is only legitimate when it serves the will of God and enriches relationships with others. As I already noted, God often chooses the weak to shame the strong. Moreover, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus illustrates that only love can overcome hatred, only forgiveness can overcome

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<sup>183</sup> Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 139.

<sup>184</sup> Douglas John Hall writes, “‘The humiliation of Christendom,’ as Albert van den Heuvel later called the de-Constantinianization of the church, is for Bonhoeffer not an end in itself or a program to be undertaken, but a consequence of authentic discipleship, as contrasted with religion and the quest for power and *securitas*.” See Hall, “Ecclesia Crucis,” 71.

bitterness, and only peacefulness can overcome violence (not in terms of pragmatic techniques and methods, but in terms of God's purpose and ultimate plan).<sup>185</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, "The cross is the only power in the world which proves that suffering love can avenge and vanquish evil."<sup>186</sup> However, weakness is not an end in itself; God does not want the poor to remain poor, the oppressed to remain in their suffering, or the starving to remain hungry. Rather, God wants Christians to identify with weakness so that they may enter the pain of others, enduring and overcoming it with them communally as the body of Christ.

#### **4. The Church and the Problem of Fragmented Faith**

Both Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement address the problem of fragmented faith. Newbigin's discussion of Western culture's division of the public realm of 'facts' from the private realm of 'values' parallels Bonhoeffer's critique of thinking in terms of two spheres and his identification of Christ as the unifying and mediating Centre of all reality. Also, Newbigin's emphasis upon recovering a sense of teleology or purpose is similar to Bonhoeffer's insistence upon transcendent 'who?' questions over against immanent 'how?' questions. Moreover, both Newbigin and Bonhoeffer strongly advocate the place of costly discipleship in the Christian church. Notice the affinities with Bonhoeffer's thought in the following passage written by Newbigin (particularly the tensions between faith/practice and security/commitment, and also his reference to "cheap grace"):

The conversion for which Jesus calls, and which the Spirit now effects in those who turn to him, is a radically new way of understanding: it involves at the same

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<sup>185</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 140-145.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-145.

time a demand for total self-surrender and the gift of utter security. It involves both calling and promise, demand and gift, at the same time. And it concerns the whole of life—the public life of the world, the nation, the factory, the society, and the personal life of each believer. There can be no muffling of the call to conversion, but equally there can be no limiting of its range, no offer of a “cheap grace” which promises security without commitment to that mission for which Jesus went to the cross.<sup>187</sup>

In addition, both Bonhoeffer and the Missional Church Movement call for a broader understanding of conversion and salvation. Missional Church advocates seek to direct the church beyond the evangelistic techniques, methods, and campaigns of the past century. They want to attain an understanding of conversion that avoids the individualism and consumerism of twentieth-century North America. They want Christians to understand that Christian life is not merely about their own spirituality and need for fellowship and security, but it also means being active witnesses, servants, agents, and messengers of the kingdom of God. Bonhoeffer similarly argues in favour of a richer understanding of conversion. He contends that since a person is both spirit [Geist] and body [Natur], conversion concerns their whole being and not merely their souls. Since Christ is the Centre and Mediator of all life, Christians must allow their entire lives to become reintegrated and reoriented in Him. And since Christian life is participation in the life of Christ, Christian faith cannot be divorced from radical obedience to Him, costly discipleship in Him, and participation in His suffering and service in and for the world.

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<sup>187</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 239.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A CRITIQUE OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENT'S ECCLESIOLOGY

#### A. Introduction

In this chapter I will offer a critique of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology in light of the ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As I noted in Chapter Two, the movement has not yet published a systematic *missional* ecclesiology. Furthermore, the ecclesiological views of the various contributors to the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* are not uniform, but diverse. The authors write from different doctrinal perspectives, come from divergent church traditions, and demonstrate a great variance in biblical and theological training (i.e., some possess doctorates in theology; others have no formal theological training).<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, a particular contributor even contradicts what another has suggested. For example, while the movement generally underscores the importance of the local congregation, Inagrace Dietterich refers to the “romanticization of the congregation” as one of three major barriers to developing a faithful and effective ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the critique will focus upon prominent themes and trends in the movement's literature (see Chapter Two), identifying and confronting aspects of its

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<sup>1</sup> One critic refers to this variance in theological training and background as a weakness of the book *Confident Witness—Changing World*, arguing, “The fact that the work is an ecumenical product and that not all the contributors are theologically trained raises further concerns.” Andreas J. Köstenberger, review of *Confident Witness—Changing World*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (January 2000): 116.

<sup>2</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich, “A Particular People: Toward a Faithful and Effective Ecclesiology,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 356-360.

methodology and thought that I find problematic. Moreover, I acknowledge that the Missional Church Movement itself desires to enhance and augment its ecclesiology. Thus, I appeal to Bonhoeffer both as a corrective *and* as an opportunity to enrich and deepen the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement.

## **B. Critique of Missional Church Movement Ecclesiology**

### **1. Methodology**

My first critique in light of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology concerns the methodology employed by the Missional Church Movement, particularly in the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. As I noted in my second chapter, the approach taken in this book is to begin with an analysis of the contemporary postmodern cultural context, subsequently to outline a *missional* view of the church which is compatible with that context, and finally to discuss the implications of this view for current church programs, structures, and emphases. However, Bonhoeffer and others would argue that such an approach is methodologically backward and theologically tenuous.

For Bonhoeffer, theology must begin not with context but with the Word of God. He writes, "The way of Jesus Christ, and therefore the way of all Christian thinking, leads not from the world to God but from God to the world."<sup>3</sup> All teaching about Christ begins in silence before the Word.<sup>4</sup> For, without the free and gracious Word of the transcendent *Counter-Logos*, thinking and theologizing remain trapped within corrupt human systems and ideologies. Bonhoeffer personally experienced this during the German church

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 351.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 27.

struggle, as he witnessed (and later suffered) the atrocities committed by the Nazis, which received approval and theological rationalization from the German state church. To justify their support for Nazism, German theologians appealed to a natural theology of the orders of creation (which Bonhoeffer felt could be used to justify anything<sup>5</sup>) and a divinely orchestrated evolution of history (i.e., following Hegel). Together, these doctrines were employed to demonstrate the supremacy of the German race.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, German sympathy for Nazism was fuelled by experiences of frustration, humiliation, and oppression resulting from the treaty of Versailles,<sup>7</sup> which Hitler and his supporters exploited to their own ends. In all of this, the German state church did not attend faithfully to the Word of God, but assimilated its cultural context uncritically. In response, Bonhoeffer stressed his concern at an ecumenical conference he attended in 1932 (when support for the Nazis was growing), charging, “We are more fond of our own thoughts than of the thoughts of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously, we no longer read it against ourselves, but for ourselves.”<sup>8</sup>

If we heed Bonhoeffer’s warning, we should be critical of the Missional Church Movement’s decision to ground its ecclesiological reflection in cultural analysis and to reconfigure the church according to postmodern trends. “The intention should be not to justify Christianity in this present age, but *to justify the present age before the Christian*

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<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer observed the doctrine of the orders of creation employed to justify “the division of man into nations [Völker], national struggles, war, class struggle, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, and cut-throat competition of economics.” See Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, “Editors’ Afterword to the German Edition,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 148-149.

<sup>6</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 214.

<sup>7</sup> In his biography of Bonhoeffer, Edwin Robertson discusses the condition of Germany after World War I, thus giving his reader a deeper appreciation for the infirmity of Germany’s state at that time (i.e., crushed by having to pay war-reparations, even the rich in Germany were going hungry). See Edwin Robertson, *The Shame and the Sacrifice: The Life and Teaching of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 181.

*message.*”<sup>9</sup> Since the Missional Church Movement devotes far more space in its literature to cultural and social analyses than to biblical reflection, we must approach its ecclesiology cautiously and dubiously. As Bonhoeffer admonishes, “We can all too easily neglect questions of truth for questions of daily routine. But how can we have clear guidance for a community or a church without a clear theology?”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, in its attempt to offer the church a new way to thrive in postmodern culture, the Missional Church Movement ironically remains essentially a modern project, having fallen prey to one of the central tendencies of its own North American culture—namely, pragmatism. By prioritizing the question, “how do we function effectively as a postmodern church?” (see Chapter Two, Section A), the Missional Church Movement relapses into modern attempts to solve problems by method and technique, without first attending to deeper philosophical, ethical, or theological questions of purpose. In other words, since its argument is built upon a sociological foundation (i.e., data obtained through cultural analysis), rather than a theological one (i.e., data obtained through biblical exposition and theological reflection) the Missional Church Movement inevitably prioritizes the *function* of the church over the *identity* or *being* of the church.

Bonhoeffer himself identified this tendency in American theology during one of his trips to the United States, complaining, “American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of ‘criticism’ by the Word of God and all that signifies.”<sup>11</sup> He was referring, of course, to the inclination to approach theological issues pragmatically, appealing first to context (i.e., current trends in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 171.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 113.

philosophy, politics, popular psychology, etc.) rather than the Word of God. I suggest that this critique applies also to the Missional Church Movement. To use Bonhoeffer's language, the Missional Church Movement prioritizes the question 'how?' over the question 'who?' Not that the question 'how?' is insignificant, but it must flow out of and be an implication of the question 'who', and not vice versa.

Bonhoeffer is not alone in pointing out the dangers of beginning with context. For example, in his ecclesial work *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Miroslav Volf writes:

Only a poor ecclesiology would simply chase after the developmental tendencies of modern societies. Although history does indeed teach that with regard to the development of its own order the church is to a large extent dependent on developments within society itself, the social form of the church must find its basis in its own faith rather than in its social environment. Only thus can churches function effectively as prophetic signs in their environment.<sup>12</sup>

Karl Barth, who was one of Bonhoeffer's theological mentors and is also cited frequently in the literature of the Missional Church Movement, is emphatic about beginning with the Word of God. According to Barth, the principal task of theology is to

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<sup>12</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 15. In this work Volf develops a free-church ecclesiology, which is based upon the Trinitarian nature of God. He points out that the free-church tradition is based upon Mt 18:20: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Thus, a heavier emphasis is placed upon *the gathered people* of God as being constitutive of the church than is commonly the case in the Reformed tradition, which stresses Word and sacrament as the constitutive elements. Volf defines the church as follows: "Every congregation that assembles around Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord in order to profess faith in him publicly in pluriform fashion, including through baptism and the Lord's Supper, and which is open to all churches of God and to all human beings, is a church in the full sense of the word, since Christ promised to be present in it through his Spirit as the first fruits of the gathering of the whole people of God in the eschatological reign of God" (p. 158). Volf's definition contains elements that are similar to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church, as for example the following: (1) Bonhoeffer also emphasizes the presence of Christ in His people (in his lecture series on Bonhoeffer, Ray Anderson cites Mt 18:20 to explain Bonhoeffer's incarnational view of the church as the presence of Christ. See Ray Anderson, *ST572: Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought* (Fuller Seminary: Academic Technology Center, audio cassette series, Summer 1999), tape #2); (2) Volf's criterion of openness to other churches and to all human beings is similar to Bonhoeffer's ecumenical concern and his assertion that the true church must be a church for-others, willing to suffer for the sake of the oppressed (particularly the Jews in his context); (3) in the prison period, Bonhoeffer wrestled with the notion of the existence of the church *in the world*, outside of the established institutional structure. This bears some resemblance to free-church thinking. However, Bonhoeffer's view also qualifies this definition, since he argues that the church is not created *by our coming together* (not that Volf argues this, but the definition above taken without qualification could be interpreted this way). Rather, since God has created the church His people will gather together...and wherever they are gathered together He is present in their midst.

hear and respond to the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> This Word of God is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who creates, arouses, and challenges all human theological words.<sup>14</sup> Theology is dependent upon Christ for its very existence and continuance. Thus, it is not essentially a creative act (i.e., our creation), but a “response and praise to the Creator.”<sup>15</sup> It is not merely a formulation of our thoughts about God, but our response to His revelation of Himself to us. God accomplished this revelation objectively in human history in Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of the history of Israel.<sup>16</sup>

The primary witnesses of God’s Self-revelation in history are the writers of the Old and New Testaments. As such, the biblical writers claim ultimate authority over all human speech concerning God and are sought after to measure the authenticity of all subsequent God-talk or theologizing. Thus, theological discourse can never be elevated above the biblical witnesses.<sup>17</sup> The church, as the community of God, is the secondary witness of God’s revelation. Its commission is to reflect theologically on the Word of God, engaging in exegesis, church history, dogmatics, and ethics (aided by its theologians), and to proclaim God’s Word in the contemporary setting. For Barth, as for Bonhoeffer, theology serves the Word of God at a fundamental level. It has its beginning with God’s Word and is continually renewed and reformed by it. Thus, I suggest that both Barth and Bonhoeffer would be anxious about the methodology employed by the Missional Church Movement.

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

At this point, Missional Church Movement advocates could raise the objection that every theology begins with context; all attempts to deny or escape one's contextual grounding are at best naïve and at worst dishonest. We always approach the Bible from the viewpoint of our own questions, preunderstandings, and prejudices. Of course, this is a valid point. However, one must distinguish between a legitimate dialogical encounter with the Scriptures on the one hand, and an artificial one-way conversation with them on the other hand. In the first instance, we bring our own questions, concerns, and contexts (i.e., our 'horizon') to the Bible, entering into a sort of 'conversation' with the Scriptures and waiting expectantly for something to be said to us. Furthermore, we allow the Bible to surprise and transform us, to reform and restate our original questions, and to open our eyes and hearts to the character and will of God. In the hermeneutical language of Hans-Georg Gadamer, we approach the horizon of the (biblical) text from the vantage point of our own (cultural) horizon, in a dialogical encounter which leads to the fusion of the two horizons.<sup>18</sup> As Charles Ringma explains, this dialogical endeavour is transformative; it does not seek to assimilate one perspective into another and it "never involves the loss of the one horizon or the other."<sup>19</sup> Rather, through a process of question and answer, the reader discovers new insights and viewpoints in the "intermediate area between familiarity and strangeness."<sup>20</sup>

In the second instance, we give precedence to our own context or horizon, and thus allow the questions we ask to determine the answers we find. We seek not

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Richard Ringma, *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic: The Hermeneutics of Bultmann, of the New Testament Sociologists, and of the Social Theologians in Dialogue with Gadamer's Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 30.

transformation, but confirmation of our own ideas and lifestyles. In other words, we find what we expect to find when we read the Scriptures. Unfortunately, the methodology of the Missional Church Movement tends toward this second approach. Not only do their questions regarding postmodern culture influence the solutions they propose, but they also restrict the textual (i.e., biblical) sources consulted for support (for more detail, see the following section). Of course, the movement has good intentions, arguing that our reading of the Bible has been predetermined by North American cultural assumptions. However, effective history and the shaping of culture are complex issues.<sup>21</sup> While it is true that our culture shapes our reading of the Bible, it is also true that the Bible has

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Gadamer's notion of 'effective history', see Ringma, *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic*, 33-40. He writes, "The prejudices that constitute our tradition cause us to explore the past with particular concerns in view. Gadamer argues that effective-history 'determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation' (1975:267-268)...But Gadamer's point is not simply that we approach the past from the particular horizon of our tradition. *He believes that the past is already operative in the present...* The implications of this notion are, that not only can interpreters not extract themselves from a particular horizon in order to confront the historical phenomenon neutrally and objectively, but the phenomenon no longer exists 'out there' in its pure original and objective state" (p. 34). The methodology employed by the Missional Church Movement seems to assume that the historical shaping of North America, as well as the enculturation of the gospel in North American culture, are problems 'out there' that we can investigate objectively and even solve through sociological analysis and reflection. In light of Gadamer's conclusion, this would seem a dubious endeavour.

Furthermore, we might inquire: is it, in fact, helpful to intensify the dichotomy between gospel and culture, as the Missional Church Movement's methodology seems to do? In his critique of American Christianity (in light of Bonhoeffer), John Godsey writes, "The difficulty posed by thinking in two spheres is that we then divide Christ and culture, church and world, even God and world, in a static way that leads to the ethical quietism of parochial withdrawal or the moral superiority of the Christian crusade or simply the confusion of not knowing where one stands. As Christians and as churches, we try to shun the world or forcibly change it according to our own standards or become secular or develop schizophrenic lives. In any case, we foster 'us-versus-them' mentalities which are not only unhealthy but decidedly un-Christian. The issue is not whether the Christians can dare to be different (or even indifferent), but whether the presuppositions of their basic outlook is Christian." John D. Godsey, "Bonhoeffer's Questions for American Churches," *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (April 1983): 3.

While it is certainly true that the gospel should confront and transform culture (i.e., Bonhoeffer's *Counter-Logos*), it is equally true that the gospel (in accordance with the Incarnation) is always expressed in particular and concrete cultural forms. Thus, perhaps it is better to follow Bonhoeffer's notion of Christ as the Centre and Mediator, who stands between gospel/church and culture and makes true dialogue possible. From this perspective, we would seek not to judge and condemn North American culture (whether modern or postmodern), but to reinterpret or redefine contemporary Christian life and practice in the midst of a world-come-of-age, in accordance with the Word of God. Rather than asking how we can separate the gospel *from* North American culture, perhaps we should be focusing instead on faithfully expressing and living out the gospel *within* our culture (but always immersing ourselves in the biblical narrative and worldview). As we will argue later, engaging in dialogue with Christians in other cultures (especially those which are very different from our own) can help us to express the gospel faithfully within our own culture. (See section B. 5.)

shaped North American culture. It is very difficult to determine, in a balanced and non-dichotomist manner, where the gospel ends and culture begins.

In addition, the movement's approach begs the question: what cultural assumptions provide the foundation for *its own missional methodology*? Is a group of Western scholars and pastors any more likely to deliver the church from its cultural captivity, its own *cor curvum in se*, by employing the techniques of cultural and social analysis? What about the role of the Holy Spirit in renewing and transforming our minds? What about the voice of the Living Christ, addressing the church through His Word (i.e., Bonhoeffer's *Counter-Logos*)? What about our need to seek the will of the Father, who in all things "works for the good of those who love Him..."? (Ro 8:28a). What about the assertions the Bible itself makes concerning the purpose and mission of the people of God (in both testaments)? These questions warrant further biblical reflection and study.

## 2. The Selection of Controlling Texts in Scripture

In his review of *Confident Witness—Changing World*, Andrea Köstenberger states, "Reading this volume, one is immediately struck with the almost total absence of Scripture from the discussion..."<sup>22</sup> This critique could be directed at the other volumes of the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* as well. Even when the authors appeal to Scripture they tend to employ brief generalizations, rather than detailed and coherent exegetical or theological exposition. Scripture is treated pragmatically to support the authors' claims. This limits the writers to a narrow selection of controlling passages, upon which they develop their *missional* ecclesiology. A telling example of this pragmatic approach to Scripture is Guder's assertion that the purpose of the canonical Scriptures was to enable

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<sup>22</sup> Köstenberger, review of *Confident Witness—Changing World*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 114.

the New Testament communities to continue in their mission (see Chapter Two, section D: Mission as the Defining Feature of the Church). There is no mention of the other important functions of Scripture, such as those outlined in 2Ti 3:16: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Nor is there a serious discussion of the spiritually formative and relational aspects of Scripture, as depicted in the Psalms, such as meditation (Ps 1:2; 119:97), worship (56:4, 10-11; 119:172), spiritual refreshment, revival, and healing (19:7; 107:20; 119:25-28, 76-77), protection (18:30; 37:31; 94:12-13), knowing God and seeking His will (40:8; 78:5-8, 119:164-168; 119:105; 130:5), discerning between God’s will and evil paths (119:1-16, 133), and transcending self-captivity and deception by others (119:18, 29-32, 34-40).

In addition, in developing a *missional* view of the church, contributors to the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* appeal to certain biblical passages for support while ignoring other passages (especially those which offer different perspectives of the church). In particular, the movement bases its ecclesiology upon a selective arrangement of New Testament texts, usually those associated with sending or mission. For example, its writers emphasize the great commission (Matthew 28), the sending of the church to be Christ’s witnesses (Ac 1:8), and Jesus’ illustrations of the church as ‘salt’, ‘light’, and a ‘city set on a hill’ (Mt 5:13-16). This narrow focus is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, *missional* ecclesiology should be criticized for elevating the missiological aspects of the church above all other aspects (see also section B. 4). While much is written in the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* about addressing North American culture

and proclaiming and anticipating the kingdom of God, relatively little is said about worship and spirituality, Christian fellowship, teaching and edification of the body, the place of the *charismata* (spiritual gifts), accountability and discipline, social justice, peace-making, and caring for the poor and needy. Even when such issues are mentioned, they are usually subordinated to the church's mission rather than considered as valid in themselves (i.e., in accordance with the heart of God). Exceptionally odd is Guder's endorsement of "the preeminence of witness as the fundamental definition of the church," his assertion that 'witness' is "an all-encompassing definition of Christian existence," and his subordination of other functions of the church to witness (including proclamation, community, service/ministry).<sup>23</sup> Aside from the arbitrariness of prioritizing the term 'witness' (i.e., why *this* feature above all the others? What about the term Jesus frequently used, namely 'disciple'?), it is difficult to envision how it accounts for the breadth of the church's nature and purpose, as well as the many functions just mentioned.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the *missional* aspects of the church need to be balanced with the other portraits presented in the New Testament. For example, consider the following images of the church that are prominent in the New Testament: the church as the people of God (1Pe 2:9-10; also includes notions of the church as a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a righteous remnant, etc.), the church as the body of Christ (1Co 12:27), the church as the community of the Holy Spirit (2Co 13:13), the church as the family of God, agricultural

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<sup>23</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 109, 233, 49.

<sup>24</sup> As a more accurate all-encompassing term to define the church, I suggest the ministry of 'reconciliation' rather than 'witness'. Thus, through the mediation of Christ, the church is a reconciled and a reconciling community (it is reconciled to God, its members are reconciled to one another, and its mission is to be an agent of reconciliation, helping others with their relationships with God and one another). Of course, it is probably wise not to choose a single term to define the church, as the New Testament provides many images and forms for the church.

images of the church (1Co 3:9; vine and vineyard, sheep and sheepfold, etc.), and architectural images of the church (1Co 3:9; a building, a temple, etc.).<sup>25</sup>

Third, *missional* ecclesiology needs to be balanced with Old Testament images of the people of God and placed within the overall biblical salvation narrative. Without a sufficient grounding in the Old Testament, assertions about the church's mission inevitably beg the questions: Why does the church exist? How does it address the human condition? What is mission all about? Why should the church reach out and expand? By avoiding such fundamental questions, *missional* logic runs the danger of being circular and self-perpetuating (i.e., promoting growth for the sake of more growth, or witnessing to make more witnesses—but witnesses of what?).<sup>26</sup> Thus, as established in Chapters Three and Four, Bonhoeffer demonstrates that ecclesiology must coincide with Creation, Fall, and Redemption. As a *reconciled* community, the church exists as the new humanity with Christ as its Centre. Its people enjoy the fruits of reconciliation in their relationships with God and with one another. Their redemption influences the totality of their being, and thus affects several aspects of their life—relationally, epistemologically, morally, practically, socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. In addition, as a *reconciling* community, the people of God are a church which exists-for-others. Just as Christ served others and suffered with and for the world, so the church is called to continue the ministry of Christ (through His mediation) as His ambassadors, sharing the love of Christ

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<sup>25</sup>Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 73-78, 91, 103, 114-116, 121, 124. Similarly, Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology does not reduce the church to a single metaphor but incorporates many images from both the New and Old Testaments. For example, consider Bonhoeffer's Christological exposition of the Creation-Fall narrative as well as his incorporation of Pauline 'body of Christ' imagery in the development of his ecclesiology.

<sup>26</sup> Though, this is not the intention of the Missional Church Movement. In fact, the movement wishes to avoid attitudes of self-preservation.

in its proclamation and in concrete acts of service. Thus, by the mediation of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church exists as the presence of Christ in the world. It calls others to join what it already experiences and practices in its life with and before God.

### **3. Dichotomist and Reactionary Tendencies**

My third criticism of the Missional Church Movement is that its writers have a tendency of framing their arguments and ideas in terms of false dichotomies or, as Bonhoeffer would say, of thinking in terms of two spheres. In their attempts to correct the weaknesses and mistakes of traditional churches in North America they overcompensate in a reactionary manner. For example, Hunsberger argues that the problem with the North American church is that it has been shaped by a functional Christendom, which is no longer dominant in postmodern culture.<sup>27</sup> While I agree with Hunsberger's assessment that we must not construct our ecclesiology according to the presuppositions of Christendom, we must ask: is it any more appropriate to build an ecclesiology upon the presuppositions of postmodernity? Are we not simply replacing one cultural paradigm with another? If this is the case, the Missional Church Movement does not succeed in freeing the gospel and the church from North American culture, but merely from Christendom—only to replace it with postmodernity. In both cases, ecclesiology does not begin with Scripture but with culture. Furthermore, in emphasizing the superiority of postmodernity over modernity, the Missional Church Movement ignores (even downplays) the positive aspects of modernity and the Enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> Along these lines,

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<sup>27</sup> See his chapter on Missional Vocation in George R. Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in *Missional Church*, 77-109.

<sup>28</sup> Some postmodern thinkers underestimate the complexity of modernity (as well as the transition from

Gottfried Oosterwal directs the following criticism at Newbigin (it could also be applied to the Missional Church Movement, which follows and intensifies Newbigin's position):

At this point one wonders what happened to the powerful insights brought by Troeltsch and Weber, Gogarten and Bonhoeffer, Cox and Van Peursen. Though one may not accept the rather positive evaluation of our culture given by a number of "theologians of secularization," the post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment development of our Western culture is far from only negative. And besides, what about the biblical view of Christ as the Lord of all history? Though Newbigin has given us a masterful analysis of the essential features of Western culture, and pointed the way for an effective missionary encounter, I wish he would have been more open to the very positive aspects of Western culture and the many positive functions even of the dualism that developed after the Enlightenment.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the reactionary impulse of the movement's advocates leads them to romanticize certain images of the church. Specifically, we must question whether their endorsement of the 'church in exile' or the 'confessing church' reveals such a tendency toward romanticism or idealism? Primarily, I have two reasons for such questioning. First, it is an exaggeration to say that the contemporary North American church exists in a condition similar to that of the early persecuted church or the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. Many would argue (and I think rightly) that the Judeo-Christian tradition (or at least particular strands of that tradition) is still the dominant moral and political force in North America.<sup>30</sup> While it is true that Christianity does not possess the influence it once had under Christendom, it nevertheless has at least as much support among the

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modernity to postmodernity), and their attacks on it tend to be one-sided. To be sure modernity has its weaknesses but, on the other hand, the benefits it has provided cannot be ignored. For example, technology, medical discoveries, democracy, and other modern phenomena have had many positive effects. Furthermore, as Edgar argues, postmodern thinkers who rejoice at the 'end of modernity' surely deceive themselves and celebrate prematurely: "The roots of modernity are deep, and the likelihood of it disappearing any time soon is remote. Such social phenomena as capitalism, technology, rapid communications, urbanization, and so forth, though hardly neutral, are not likely to be reversed by the present self-doubts and criticisms, despite the claims of various postmodernists. We are indeed still living in modernity, at the structural level, and that is not likely to change in the near future." See William Edgar, "No News is Good News: Modernity, the Postmodern, and Apologetics," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 376.

<sup>29</sup> Gottfried Oosterwal, review of *Foolishness to the Greeks* by Lesslie Newbigin, *Missiology* 15, no. 2 (April 1987): 99.

<sup>30</sup> Allan Janssen, review of *Missional Church* by Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Perspectives* 14 (April 1999): 20.

general population as other religious traditions and minority groups. Certainly, today's North American church enjoys much more security than the early church did under Roman persecution, or the Confessing Church under Nazi rule, or the Hebrews in captivity to the Egyptians. Second, not only is it unrealistic to idealize negative circumstances, such as exile or martyrdom—it is also unhealthy. True, the New Testament church did not evade estrangement, persecution, and oppression at the hand of others for the sake of the gospel (at times, these are necessary), but it certainly did not encourage or pursue such opposition. Douglas John Hall rightly warns, “As Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us, this suffering is certainly not an end in itself. The cross is not to be sought out! The end is discipleship, not rejection and suffering.”<sup>31</sup>

The reactionary overcompensation on the part of the Missional Church Movement has resulted in the creation (or fostering) of a number of dichotomies. I will now briefly examine some of the dichotomies evident in the arguments proposed by the contributors to the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* in their development of a *missional* understanding of the church (refer to Chapter Two). First, Guder argues that the early church's transition from a movement to a religious sect amounted to a reduction of the gospel.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, he criticises the early church's evolution into an institution. However, one may posit the question: are there not times when it may actually be appropriate for the church to exist as a 'religious sect' (as defined by the mainstream church)? We must remember that Reformation churches, the Anabaptists, and the Confessing Church in Germany were all labelled 'sects' by their contemporary mainline traditions. Furthermore, Guder seems to

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<sup>31</sup> Douglas John Hall, “Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 104-105.

ignore the fact that the early church community incorporated both revolutionary *and* institutional facets, as evidenced by the pastoral epistles (i.e., the discussions of churchly matters and offices). As Charles Ringma reminds us, the New Testament church expressed itself in many different forms. While acknowledging the dangers of becoming over-institutionalized (as is often the case in North America), Ringma is careful to avoid the movement-institution dichotomy. He states:

The new community consists of culturally diverse groups who have found unity in Christ....One model of the church is the more institutionalised idea of church as pictured in the pastoral epistles (1 Timothy 3); another is the house churches of the Pauline mission (Romans 16, verses 3 to 5); a third is the Jerusalem community (Acts 2 to 4).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, I charge that the Missional Church Movement's contempt for institutional formulations of the church creates an institution-movement dichotomy, which potentially weakens the effectiveness of the church by limiting the diversity and richness of its gifts and potential forms (i.e., by arguing that the church should avoid this particular form).

Second, in the area of soteriology, the Missional Church Movement perpetuates dichotomies between personal-corporate and mission-benefits aspects of salvation.<sup>34</sup> On one level, Guder's disdain for Evangelicalism's narrow focus upon the individual's personal salvation is an appropriate criticism which deserves attention, as is Bonhoeffer's remark, "It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored."<sup>35</sup> However, Guder goes too

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Ringma, *Catch the Wind: The Shape of the Church to Come—And Our Place in It* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1994), 105.

<sup>34</sup> Newbigin has also been criticized for devoting inadequate attention to issues relating to personal salvation, the atonement, and ultimate questions of eternal destiny. See Peter Forster, review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Themelios* 17, no. 1 (October/November 1991): 34-35, and Jim Miller, review of *Foolishness to the Greeks and The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 9, no. 2 (1990): 42-45.

<sup>35</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 285-286.

far when he asserts, “The biblical record places no emphasis on the special significance of conversion stories,” or, “the experience of the benefits [of salvation] is always subordinated to the call and its purpose,” or, “The ‘classical’ emphasis upon salvation benefits as the reason for God’s calling people to be his witnesses is contrary to Scripture and must be rejected.”<sup>36</sup> He does not account for the fact that Jesus Himself addressed *both* groups of people (i.e., crowds, etc.) *and* individuals (i.e., the calling of the disciples, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, the rich young ruler, etc.), though not individualistically as if they were isolated from community, relationships, and responsibilities.

While it is true that biblical soteriology is concerned with corporate and communal salvation, it is also concerned with the question: “What must I do to be saved?” and the corresponding answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Ac 16:30b-31). According to Bonhoeffer, soteriology simultaneously concerns individuals and communities. It concerns individuals because each person is a culpable sinner, isolated and alienated from God and others; and it concerns communities because an individual’s sin has social implications, fostering selfishness, jealousy, vengeance, shattered relationships, egocentric perspectives and behaviour—in short, the perpetuation of deeper sin, individually and communally. While the Missional Church Movement succeeds in reminding us of the corporate aspects of salvation, it devotes little attention to the problem of the individual’s sin and need for forgiveness. Perhaps the following remark by one of the movement’s critics is apt:

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<sup>36</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 129.

When everything is missional, eternal and spiritual priorities can be compromised; and this is my problem with *Missional Church*....In the New Testament participation in [the kingdom of God] cannot be divorced from grasping the forgiveness of sins which he has made possible (Col 1:13-14). This central focus has been sidelined in the present volume.<sup>37</sup>

Third, the Missional Church Movement perpetuates dichotomies between the inward- and the outward-focused aspects of Christian spirituality. Consistent with their apprehensiveness regarding the individual or personal aspects of salvation, its writers are concerned that traditional Evangelical churches operate as “institutes of salvation” and are preoccupied with inner church life, but are negligent about outward mission.<sup>38</sup> I suggest that there are at least two problems with such an allegation. First, in light of recent trends in Evangelicalism such as the church growth movement, charismatic renewal and evangelism, and the mega-church phenomenon (to name a few), it is simply untrue to say that North American churches are negligent or apathetic about mission (though, of course, one may legitimately pose questions about the methods and theology of such movements). On the contrary, most Evangelical churches are passionate about evangelism, even though they may struggle with carrying it out ‘effectively’.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it is more helpful to suggest that such churches are confused or insecure, not knowing how to engage in mission in contemporary culture, rather than saying they are negligent about mission. Second, to dichotomize inward and outward aspects and to promote the latter over the former actually undermines mission. For, in order to be an effective and

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Raiter, review of *Missional Church* by Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Reformed Theological Review* 58 (April 1999): 51.

<sup>38</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 135.

<sup>39</sup> The Missional Church Movement’s critique seems to be directed primarily at the ‘established’ or ‘mainline’ denominations, since its membership consists mostly of those from Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, along with a lesser number of Episcopalians, Lutherans, Mennonites, and non-denominational Christians. Thus, its generalizations concerning the North American church at large are probably unwarranted. See David Mills, “The Devil is a Good Sociologist,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 1.

authentic witness, it is crucial for the church to have a healthy spiritual life. Without inner transformation and vibrancy, it has nothing of depth to testify about. As the authors of a recent book on church leadership point out, spiritual and relational vitality are essential for facilitating and sustaining change in the church—and openness to change is vital for mission. Thus, they argue that churches must engage more fully in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, Scripture reading, worship, fellowship, etc.<sup>40</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, the necessity for outward action is always held in tension with the necessity for inward growth and wellbeing. This balance is evident in many places in Bonhoeffer's work. The irresistible and transcendent nature of revelatory and justifying grace in *Act and Being* is balanced with the assertion that faith must become manifest in concrete acts of obedience in *The Cost of Discipleship* (i.e., “*only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes*”<sup>41</sup>). The radical (at times, approaching ascetic) aspects of following Jesus in *The Cost of Discipleship* are held in tension with the need for communality, mutual edification, and daily fellowship in *Life Together*. The Christian's ability to embody the gospel in the midst of the world coincides with the practice of *arcane discipline*, which is prayer and righteous action for justice. The secularity and worldliness of authentic non-religious Christianity is grounded solidly in Bonhoeffer's radical Christology, which regards Christ as the Centre and Mediator of all reality. And finally, Bonhoeffer's notion of the church existing-for-others in *Letters and Papers from Prison* is balanced with (and founded upon) everything he wrote formerly

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<sup>40</sup> Jim Herrington, M. Bonem, and J. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000). See Chapter Two.

<sup>41</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 63.

about devotion to the Word, following Jesus, and life together in Christ as His body, the new humanity, the church.

Fourth, the Missional Church Movement makes dichotomist distinctions regarding correct and incorrect ways of preaching the gospel. For example, one author argues that churches must be bodies of people sent on a mission, rather than the storefronts for vendors of religious goods and services.<sup>42</sup> While I acknowledge and appreciate the exhortation for North American churches to evaluate and reform their tendencies toward consumerism and professionalism, one must caution against dichotomizing ‘mission’ and ‘religious goods and services’. Almost everything the church does could be labelled ‘religious goods and services’ (i.e., ministry or *diakonia*, feeding the poor, preaching and teaching, etc.). This is not necessarily unhealthy unless such services are determined by egocentric and popular demands, rather than according to an appropriate application of Scripture.<sup>43</sup>

As a second example, another contributor writes, “The Western church, in particular, must relinquish its dogmatic hold on propositional truth as the basis for witnessing to those of other religions. It must learn to emphasize the ‘who’ rather than the ‘what’ of Christianity.”<sup>44</sup> Christians do not have the burden of proving the truths of Christianity to the world, but simply pointing to and living out the reality of God’s reign in their midst. But surely ‘who’ Jesus is cannot be separated from ‘what’ He said and

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<sup>42</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 108.

<sup>43</sup> David Lowes Watson’s suggestion that the dominant metaphor for evangelism be changed from ‘salesmanship’ to ‘journalism’ also needs to be qualified. See David Lowes Watson, “Christ in All: The Recovery of the Gospel for Evangelism in the United States,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 192. While ‘salesmanship’ is admittedly an inappropriate metaphor for evangelism, the detached, unemotional, and conservative image of ‘journalism’ is hardly better (not to mention the fact that journalists are also selling something!).

<sup>44</sup> Mary Lou Codman-Wilson, “Witness in the Midst of Religious Plurality: The Model of E. Stanley Jones,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 212.

did!<sup>45</sup> In order to understand the relevance of Jesus for today (His good news for us, His judgement of our fallen ways, beliefs, and ideologies, etc.), we must attend critically and analytically to the Scriptures and commit to disciplined prayer and meditation.

Furthermore, to some degree, *all* attempts to contextualize the gospel include efforts to ‘prove’ its validity for a particular people in a particular environment (though not all efforts accept *the burden of convincing or converting!*) For Bonhoeffer, the question, “who is Jesus Christ for us today?” is not meant to be an evasion of propositional truth, analytical reasoning, critical theology, or cultural analysis. Rather, what Bonhoeffer stresses is that we must prioritize Christ as the transcendent *Counter-Logos* so that our thoughts, systems, and methods are open to change. Admittedly, Bonhoeffer also attacked apologetics, but his critique primarily concerned apologetic arguments which were based upon the presuppositions of natural religion, or which appealed to the weaknesses of humanity and pointed to the superiority of the church.<sup>46</sup>

#### **4. Mission as the Controlling Definition of the Church**

My fourth criticism of the Missional Church Movement is that it collapses ecclesiology into missiology, which leads to a functional or task-oriented understanding of human relationships, God, the church, and the Scriptures. As we discovered in Chapter Two, the movement regards ‘mission’ as the controlling definition of the church, stating:

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<sup>45</sup> On a similar note, Miroslav Volf writes, “This necessary recourse to the entire history of Jesus Christ makes ecclesiality dependent on certain doctrinal specifications. Although these may well vary (just as confessions of faith vary within the New Testament) and even be quite brief (as, e.g., ‘Jesus is Lord’), the church cannot exist without them... The content of faith is necessary in order to distinguish Jesus Christ from ‘another Jesus’ and to distinguish his Spirit from ‘another Spirit’ (see 2 Cor. 11:4). The church is the church only if it is built on the Jesus Christ attested by the apostolic writings, which is why Luke reports that the Jerusalem church ‘held fast to the apostles’ teaching’ (Acts 2:42). To be sure, doctrine is not an end in itself, but rather merely a means of preserving and fostering the relation between the assembled congregation and Jesus Christ. It serves to identify unequivocally the person in whose name the congregation gathers. In this limited sense, however, it is true that ‘there is no church without correct doctrine.’” See Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 146.

<sup>46</sup> See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 311-312, 326-327.

1. the church is not the goal of the gospel, but its instrument and agent; 2. mission is part of the essence of the church; and 3. the purpose of the Scriptures is to equip the church for its mission. In the present section, I will evaluate each of these claims.

#### 4.1 The Church as Instrument and Agent of the Gospel

George Hunsberger refers to the church as the ‘agent and instrument’ of God’s reign.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the Missional Church Movement generally emphasizes the action and initiative of the church for the successful completion of God’s mission. “It is as though Christians make the church as *they* gather, as *they* grapple, as *they* practice.”<sup>48</sup> The church analyses its cultural setting and devises its mission accordingly. And, the church reforms itself in a process of continual conversion. In response to such thinking, Allan Janssen raises the criticism that the movement “confuses the subject that creates the church” and works with the (unspoken, perhaps unconscious) assumption that the church is constituted by human practice.<sup>49</sup> While Janssen’s criticism is perhaps an unfair generalization, it is nonetheless true that the Missional Church Movement has departed from Newbigin’s position that the *agent* of God’s mission is always the Holy Spirit, while the *locus* for that mission is the church (see Chapter One).<sup>50</sup> This may appear strange, since in Chapter One we learned that the Missional Church Movement bases its *missional* ecclesiology upon the doctrine of the *Missio Dei*, which stresses God’s action and initiative. However, two comments are in order. First, since the contributors to the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* represent divergent traditions and have varying levels of

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<sup>47</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Janssen, review of *Missional Church*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 130 and *The Household of God*, 99, 104. See also Lesslie Newbigin, “Context and Conversion,” *International Review of Mission* 68 (July 1979): 304, 306.

theological training, some of them are more familiar (and more consistent) with *Missio Dei* theology than others. Second, none of the authors systematically unpack the doctrine of the *Missio Dei*. Rather, they tend to discuss it briefly and then progress promptly to other matters, particularly those concerning human action and initiative. Thus, there is inconsistency between the theoretical and practical employment of the *Missio Dei* in *missional* ecclesiology.

To correct the Missional Church Movement's focus upon human effort, Janssen asserts, "God gathers the church, the Word grapples with us, and our practice happens through the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>51</sup> Not that a proper understanding of the church eliminates the need for human action and initiative. As Janssen remarks, "The church is both gift and task, to be sure. But the order must be kept straight, and the internal connection must be honoured."<sup>52</sup> For Bonhoeffer, a healthy tension between divine initiative/action and human response/cooperation must be maintained. The church is not a human ideal, but a reality created by God, grounded in the mediation and vicarious action of the Living Christ, and sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Word of God always creates a church-community for itself, though it will not convert everybody (nor does it claim that all will embrace the gospel).<sup>53</sup> Thus, as Eberhard Bethge notes, Bonhoeffer "never tried to popularize the message through artifice."<sup>54</sup> Too often, such tactics lead to the promotion of cheap grace rather than costly discipleship.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Janssen, review of *Missional Church*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 543.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 50-51, 52.

Nevertheless, as we discovered particularly in *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*, human faith, responsibility, commitment, and obedience are crucial components of the Christian life. Furthermore, as Bonhoeffer demonstrates in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the church must reflect creatively and courageously about how to live as an authentic and relevant witness in its contemporary setting. Such contemplation must lead the church beyond traditional structures, forms, and programs toward new ways of existing-for-God and for-others in the world. However, such action always arises as a response to God, flowing out of disciplined (even radical) devotion to Christ and attentiveness to His Word.

One of the implications of Bonhoeffer's view is that *missional* thinking and acting are born out of disciplined praying and waiting. We must resist the temptation to become impatient with God, and thus rely upon our own methods and strategies of evangelism. As Jesus and the Apostle Paul demonstrate, we must learn to discern the voice of the Spirit and heed His direction.<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer asks, "Do we want to send ourselves because we are unwilling to pray and wait for God to send us? In the ministry, everything depends upon our being sent, on our commission, and so we should take it upon ourselves only when we receive it quite certainly from God's hand..."<sup>57</sup> Bonhoeffer had little patience with those who neglected prayer and meditation on the Word, focusing instead on 'practical' concerns and pragmatic methods. He writes:

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<sup>56</sup> The Spirit led Jesus into the desert (Lk 4:1); the Spirit anointed Jesus to preach good news to the poor and sent Him to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (4:18-19); Jesus prays in and through the power of the Holy Spirit (10:21); Jesus says to His disciples, "...do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say" (12:11-12). Likewise, the Spirit empowers Paul in his mission and leads him where to go (Ac 16:6); Paul stresses life in the Spirit (Ro 8:1-17); he emphasizes the need to pray in the Spirit (8:26-27); he writes that his ministry to the Gentiles is founded upon and led by the Spirit (15:18-19); and, he argues that the Spirit is the agent of evangelism and conversion (1Co 2:10-14; 12:3).

<sup>57</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 188.

Recently a leading member of the Confessing Church told me: “We haven’t the time for meditation now; the ordinands must learn to preach and to catechize.” This either shows a total lack of understanding of young theologians today, or else a blasphemous ignorance of how preaching and teaching come about. The kind of questions that young theologians seriously put to us today are: How can I learn to pray? How can I learn to read the Bible? Either we can help them do this, or we can’t help them at all. None of this can be taken for granted.<sup>58</sup>

However, his emphasis on prayer and meditation had nothing to do with idealism, escapism, self-righteous holiness, or rugged asceticism. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer believed that spiritual vitality and growth sets Christians free to be truly worldly and oriented toward others (in light of the Incarnation and mediation of Christ). Such a focus on seeking God is consistent with Bonhoeffer’s understanding of revelation, conversion, and the priority of the Word of God. Only God can set people free from their sin, their alienation from God and others, and their captivity to self. Yet God intends to accomplish His mission through His church. Thus, Christians must wait expectantly for God’s direction, devoting themselves to prayer and meditation upon His Word. Being transformed and empowered by the Word and Spirit of God, Christians are prepared to share something new, transcendent, and life-giving with the world. Bonhoeffer writes, “Jesus does not call his disciples to act in their own power but to pray that God will send preachers. This is because we do not know what is good for the community; God alone in his providence should act with the community.”<sup>59</sup>

Since such prayer and meditation are practiced within the context of community<sup>60</sup> (not merely individualistically), another implication of Bonhoeffer’s view is that mission is a communal affair. This is a challenge to the model proposed by the Missional Church

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted from Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 465.

<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 186-187.

<sup>60</sup> For Bonhoeffer’s discussion of communal spirituality, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 48-80. See also Chapter Three of this work, section C. 4.2: Communal Discipleship.

Movement, which is basically a top-down, expert-driven approach. Although some contributors to the *Gospel and Our Culture Series* wish to distance themselves from traditional hierarchical church structures (i.e., institutionalism, denominationalism, professionalism, etc.), the Missional Church Movement itself is essentially envisioned and advocated by specialists (academics, sociologists, pastors, etc.) who are attempting to teach the church how to thrive in a postmodern setting. Ultimately, *missional* ecclesiology ends up being yet another set of ideals, which pastors must now promote to their congregations. Thus, many pastors and church leaders, who are already having difficulty motivating their people for evangelism and outreach, may find the Missional Church Movement literature frustrating and difficult to implement.

For Bonhoeffer, mission is not primarily the project of the clergy or church leadership; it must be discerned and carried out by the whole people of God, in accordance with the initiative and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Bonhoeffer's approach encourages all Christians within the church community to mature in their faith, so that they become responsible and active participants in missionary work in their own spheres of influence. They are not to remain immature and passive bystanders, dependent upon the church (i.e., the clergy) to accomplish mission work for them or even to provide them with 'how-to?' instructions for effective witnessing. Perhaps the reason why so many North American churches struggle to be effective in outreach and evangelism is that they do not have a dynamic inner life? Their members are not maturing in their faith, becoming increasingly radical followers of Jesus, and experiencing the life-giving empowerment of the Spirit in fresh new ways. John Godsey, in his critique of American Christianity in light of Bonhoeffer, similarly wonders whether North American churches

are helping people come of age or merely fostering dependence.<sup>61</sup> His question deserves serious attention and consideration.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer would say that we are stagnant, relying on outdated ‘religious’ language of the past because we lack the authenticity, depth, and experience of costly discipleship in the present.<sup>62</sup> People who encounter the Living Christ cannot help but tell others about their experience of Him—the New Testament provides numerous examples of this.<sup>63</sup> However, without the fresh experience of the transformative and captivating power of the Word and Spirit of God in our lives, our own words are impotent and inevitably take a defensive posture. “Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease....”<sup>64</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer exhorts us to be radically devoted to Christ, to wait patiently for His guidance and empowerment, inviting Him to lead His church in new and unexpected ways. He writes:

It is not for us to prophesy the day (though the day will come) when men will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming – as was Jesus’ language; it will shock people and yet overcome them by its power; it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God’s peace with men and the coming of his kingdom. ‘They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for

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<sup>61</sup> Godsey, “Bonhoeffer’s Questions,” 6-7.

<sup>62</sup> For example: outdated methods and tools for evangelism, such as tracts, the ‘four spiritual laws’, ‘born-again’ terminology, etc. Such methods are not inappropriate in and of themselves, but they must be used with discernment at a proper time and place (some would argue that their time and place has past). Certainly, they must not provide the foundation for evangelism, thus taking the place of authentic relationships with others and personal testimony of one’s experience of God.

<sup>63</sup> To cite a few examples, consider the woman at the well (Jn 4:29), the conversion of Saul/Paul and his testimony about it (Ac 9:1-19; 22:1-21), the two blind men whom Jesus healed (Mt 9:27-31), Mary Magdalene after having seen the resurrected Christ (Jn 20:18), etc.

<sup>64</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 300.

it' (Jer. 33.9). Till then the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who pray and do right and wait for God's own time.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4.2 Mission as the Essence of the Church

Missional Church Movement contributors argue that mission is part of the essence of the church. Mission is not just what the church *does*; it is what the church *is*.<sup>66</sup> "The church does not *do* mission, it *is* mission. By its very calling and nature, it exists as God's 'sent' people (*missio* = sending)."<sup>67</sup> In response to this viewpoint, Michael Raiter comments:

The church is now defined as a community brought together by a common calling to be a sent people. The question that must be asked is, does the New Testament conceive of the church in this way? I am in full agreement with the authors that 'sending' is a defining element of mission. I am less comfortable, however, with their view that it's of the essence of church....If the church is missional then so is every member, and everything the church does is mission.<sup>68</sup>

Raiter makes a valid criticism, but his statements require qualification. If the Missional Church Movement defines the church's *missional* nature in purely functional or task-oriented terms, then Raiter's comment is apt and deserves careful consideration. While it is true that Jesus sends the church on a mission to the world, it is also true that before He sends the church He must create, reconcile, renew, edify, and empower it. His people can be authentic witnesses in the world only if they know Him intimately and experience His transformative presence. As Newbigin reminds us, mission results from an explosion of joy in the church community, which overflows into the world.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 128.

<sup>67</sup> Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church," *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (1998): 5.

<sup>68</sup> Raiter, review of *Missional Church*, 51.

<sup>69</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 116.

However, if the Missional Church Movement defines the *missional* nature of the church in relational terms (but not to the exclusion of functions), then it is correct in placing mission within the essence of the church. Thus, I suggest that Allan Janssen goes too far in his critique of the Missional Church Movement when he writes, “The Spirit shapes that communion for mission, yes, but not only to be sent out. The church is a place where they can live as a people that give glory to God. *It need have no end beyond itself*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>70</sup> According to Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, which follows the logic of the Creation-Fall-Redemption narrative, the church must exist *simultaneously* for the sake of its own community *and* for the sake of others. It exists as an end in itself *and* as a means to a greater end in the eschatological reality of already (ultimate) and not-yet (penultimate). 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>71</sup> (for Bonhoeffer, ‘life’ and ‘community’ are never merely means to an end<sup>72</sup>). The church also exists-for-others because its Lord, Jesus Christ the “man for others,” is conforming it to His own image (i.e., the *imago Dei*), which means being-free-for others (see Chapter Four). In this relational sense, everything the church does is indeed mission. It exists to experience and share the reconciliation and intimate communion with God and others made possible by the gospel of Christ. Everything it does bears witness to this.

Thus, my problem is not that the Missional Church Movement understands mission as being part of the essence of the church (though I do not agree that mission

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<sup>70</sup> Janssen, review of *Missional Church*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> See Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 273; *Way to Freedom*, 44, 151-152, 178; and *Ethics*, 110.

<sup>72</sup> See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 149, 295-296.

defines the essence of the church exhaustively), but that it tends to prioritize doing over being, corporate and objective aspects of salvation over personal and subjective ones, and existing-for-others over existing-in-community. In other words, the Missional Church Movement tends to emphasize the functional aspects of the *missional* nature of the church, rather than the relational ones. This emphasis leads to a functional or task-oriented understanding not only of the church and human relationships, but also of God and the Scriptures.

### 4.3 The *Missional* View of God and the Scriptures

According to the Missional Church Movement, God is a missionary God. Therefore, the church is to be understood as a *missional* church, which is sent to be “God’s instrument for God’s mission.”<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, the purpose of the Scriptures is to equip God’s people for mission.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, Allan Janssen rightly charges the movement with progressing from “an assumption that the scripture is at the disposal of the church.”<sup>75</sup> He writes, “...it is the church that appears to possess the Word and then use it to perform a particular function. It is no longer the Word itself that calls together the church, that grasps it, that molds it. Instead, the church uses the Word.”<sup>76</sup> Proceeding from the assumptions of a *missional* methodology, the Missional Church Movement imposes its functional understanding of the church onto its view of the purpose and application of Scripture. Thus, it emphasizes the pragmatic role of Scripture, but neglects its formative and edifying aspects (spiritually, relationally) for individuals and

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<sup>73</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Guder, “Missional Theology,” 7.

<sup>75</sup> Janssen, review of *Missional Church*, 21.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

communities. I have already addressed the problems associated with this approach in a previous section (see section B.1: Methodology).

In addition, without qualification or balancing counter-statements, the assertions made by the Missional Church Movement come dangerously close to imposing an aloof, task-oriented, pragmatic character onto God's nature, especially when combined with the contention that biblical conversion narratives do not concern personal salvation or the well-being of one's relationship with God.<sup>77</sup> It seems that God simply uses the church to accomplish His business on earth. However, I ask: of all God's attributes, why choose 'sending' as the primary attribute upon which to expound a *missional* view of the church? Surely God means much more to the church than being simply its origin and Sender! And surely God does not send the church merely for the sake of sending—His sending serves a greater, more ultimate purpose. I suggest that God's missionary nature stems from His love for creation; God sends because God loves—indeed, “God is love” (1Jn 4:8).<sup>78</sup> Thus, perhaps it would be more appropriate to construct a *missional* ecclesiology upon God's loving nature and His desire to share communion with humanity. Such a starting point would eliminate false dichotomies associated with being-for-others versus being-in-community. Furthermore, it would balance the Great Commission, “Therefore, go and make disciples...” (Mt 28:18-20), with the Great Commandments, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Bonhoeffer's relationally

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<sup>77</sup> Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 129.

<sup>78</sup> Augustine's Trinitarian analogy of God as Lover, Beloved, and Love itself has interesting implications for a *missional* ecclesiology.

*missional* ecclesiology accommodates these tensions, grounding the totality of the church's existence in the love and reality of God.

##### **5. Lack of Multicultural and Multiethnic Dialogue**

My fifth critique of the Missional Church Movement's ecclesiology is that it lacks a serious multicultural or multiethnic dimension. In this regard, the movement has failed to capitalize on one of Newbigin's most promising insights regarding the captivity of the gospel to Western culture. Newbigin argues that Christians in the West need to listen to the voices of Christians in other cultures and traditions, in order to gain perspective regarding the westernization of the gospel and to develop a greater appreciation for the richness and diversity of the Christian faith.<sup>79</sup> Bonhoeffer also stressed the importance of dialoguing with other Christian traditions, which is one of the reasons he supported the ecumenical movement. He asserts, "We need the theological help of other churches in order to be able to bear the burden of responsibilities which God has laid upon us, and we wish to give you a witness of the Christian insights, which God has given us anew during the last years."<sup>80</sup> Yet the Missional Church Movement has remained essentially a North American project, albeit an ecumenical one. In the *Gospel and Our Culture Series*, relatively little space is devoted to issues relating to multiculturalism in North America, and there is little evidence that dialogue with Christians of other ethnic backgrounds has taken place. By focusing almost exclusively upon mission within North America (one might even say middle-class America), the movement has deprived itself of the benefits of foreign missionary work—specifically those which come about in an authentic two-

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<sup>79</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 146.

<sup>80</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, 207.

way missionary encounter, as Newbigin called it (see Chapter One, section 1.2:

Newbigin's Understanding of Mission: *The Agent and Locus of Mission*).<sup>81</sup>

A particular weakness is that the Missional Church Movement generally does not engage with ecclesiological views held by minority groups or those living in the two-thirds world.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps this is due, at least partially, to the fact that many of the thriving churches in places such as South America, Africa, and Asia belong either to the Free Church tradition (especially Pentecostalism) or the Roman Catholic tradition, while the Missional Church Movement consists largely of mainline Protestants. Whatever the reasons, I suggest that it would be fruitful for the Missional Church Movement to initiate such dialogical relationships.

Bonhoeffer's life is an excellent example of the potential for cross-cultural and cross-ethnic exposure to broaden one's horizons, making one aware of one's own cultural and ethnic presuppositions and commitments, and providing one with greater understanding and empathy for the views of others. I have already mentioned that Bonhoeffer's ecumenical involvement provided him with important opportunities to discuss and experience other customs and ideas.<sup>83</sup> In addition, his early experiences of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome (1924), his placement as an assistant pastor in Barcelona (1928), and his period of postdoctoral study at Union Theological Seminary in

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<sup>81</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 35.

<sup>82</sup> There are a few exceptions to this, such as Paul Russ Satari's chapter, "'Translatibility' in the Missional Approach of Lamin Sanneh," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 270-284; or Mary Lou Codman-Wilson's chapter, "Witness in the Midst of Religious Plurality," in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 203-218.

<sup>83</sup> However, Bonhoeffer was disappointed that such dialogue did not move the ecumenical movement to action. Due to its lack of interest in theology, it did not confront the German State for its capitulation to Nazism and its endorsement of heretical ideas. Bonhoeffer writes, "Because there is no theology of the ecumenical movement, ecumenical thought has become powerless and meaningless, especially among German youth, because of the political upsurge of nationalism." Quoted from Keith Clements, "Ecumenical Witness for Peace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 160.

New York (1930-1931) all enhanced Bonhoeffer's keen ecclesiological insights, giving him international exposure and encounters with divergent Christian traditions.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, during his time in England Bonhoeffer visited a number of monasteries and free-church communities, including the Society of the Sacred Mission in Kelham, the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, the Methodist College in Richmond, and Woodbrooke College (a Quaker centre) in Birmingham.<sup>85</sup> These experiences helped shape his vision for the illegal Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde, which he would later oversee. At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer and his students experimented with new and innovative ways (at least to them) of living in Christian community and putting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount into devoted practice. Bonhoeffer recorded these insights and events in his books *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Supplementing the breadth and richness of Bonhoeffer's ecclesial life and thought was his keen interest in minority groups, particularly those which suffered discrimination and oppression. Through his relationships with Christians who were under oppression, he became acutely aware of the church's participation in tolerating or even fostering intolerance, racism, even violence. Regarding Bonhoeffer's observations of racism in America, Ruther Zerner writes, "Segregation in the southern states and the manner in which white southerners spoke of blacks revolted Bonhoeffer, who noted that 'in this matter pastors are no better than others.'"<sup>86</sup> Perhaps even more striking for Bonhoeffer, however, was the way the Afro-American churches responded to their condition. Even in

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<sup>84</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*.

<sup>85</sup> Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 120. See also Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 411-413.

<sup>86</sup> Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's American Experiences: People, Letters, and Papers from Union Seminary," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 267.

the midst of oppression they demonstrated a rare authenticity and vibrancy in their communal life together and spirituality which Bonhoeffer had rarely (if ever) witnessed before. Paul Lehmann reflects, “I think that he found in the black religious experience a kind of genuine Christianity which intrigued him.”<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer’s own remarks confirm this. In a report to his church superiors in Berlin, Bonhoeffer states that his encounter with Afro-American Christians was “one of the most decisive and most delightful occurrences of my American stay” and “for me one of the most important experiences in America.”<sup>88</sup> In addition, Zerner notes, “The novels and writings of black authors stirred him more deeply than any other fiction he read in the United States.”<sup>89</sup> Lehmann further speculates, “One of the things he might have done, had he lived, was to have provided a theological bridge; he might have been an interpreter of black theology.”<sup>90</sup> In summary of Bonhoeffer’s experiences of Afro-American churches in America, Zerner reflects:

It seems more than incidental that the black spirituals highlight two of Bonhoeffer’s central Christian concerns: the person of Jesus Christ and communal experience within concrete historical realities. Along with the gospel-centered preaching of sin and grace in black churches, Bonhoeffer must have been aware of the black spirituals’ affirmation of Jesus, both his divinity and his humanity, as well as concern for ‘the solidarity of sufferers’. Bonhoeffer’s own life likewise merged and harmonized the needs of the individual whose center is Christ with the concrete context of the community of faith.<sup>91</sup>

Geffrey B. Kelly links Bonhoeffer’s awareness of Afro-American oppression to his later sensitivity and foresight concerning the threat of Nazism to the true church in Germany. He writes, “Having absorbed from Fisher [one of Bonhoeffer’s Afro-American

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 269. (Interview with Paul and Marion Lehmann, in New York City on January 2, 1976, recorded by Ruth Zerner.)

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 272.

friends] a sensitivity to the economic misery of America's blacks, and having tracked their woes not only to racism but also to ecclesiastical apathy, Bonhoeffer was doubly alert to the menace of Hitler's racist ideology."<sup>92</sup> Such experiences led Bonhoeffer to wonder whether Western Christians were capable of confronting injustice and oppression in the world, being blinded by Western cultural assumptions and concerned primarily for their own security.<sup>93</sup> Thus, in order to equip the Confessing Church in Germany to resist Nazi ideology, Bonhoeffer wanted to seek advice from the East rather than the West. He reasons, "Of course, Christianity did come from the East originally. But it has been so westernized and so permeated by civilized thought that, as we can now see, it is almost lost to us."<sup>94</sup> Thus, Bonhoeffer longed to travel to India to learn from Gandhi and observe his radical application of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>95</sup>

### **C. Limitations of Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology**

In this work, it has been my intention to endorse Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology as an enhancement and corrective of the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement. However, I also acknowledge that Bonhoeffer's theology contains weaknesses which the Missional Church Movement should avoid. Perhaps his greatest weakness lies in the area of pneumatology. Bonhoeffer never develops a systematic doctrine of the Holy Spirit, nor does he sufficiently integrate the nature and function of the Spirit into his doctrine of the church. Critics have noted that this lack of pneumatology is not surprising, given the historical context of Bonhoeffer's Liberal theological training and his desire to avoid

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<sup>92</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Bonhoeffer and Romero: Prophets of Justice for the Oppressed," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 87.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

<sup>94</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 407.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 406-409.

Hegelianism (i.e., Hegel's view of the dominance and assimilative nature of Spirit, the necessity of Spirit's actions in the church and in world history, and the unequivocal identification of Spirit with the church-community and the world).<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, his avoidance of pneumatology is problematic.

L. Gregory Jones argues that this inadequacy in Bonhoeffer's thought creates at least three problems in his theology. First, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is crucial to Christianity's understanding of divine guidance, comfort, and justice (i.e., the conviction of sin and experience of forgiveness).<sup>97</sup> Thus, without reference to the Holy Spirit, some of Bonhoeffer's concepts remain rather vague. In particular, a developed pneumatology would provide a more secure foundation for his explication of 'responsible action', 'acts of repentance', and the shaping of Christian community.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Jones points out that an adequate pneumatology would help to clarify whether Bonhoeffer regards forgiveness and redemption primarily as being restorative (i.e., a return to the primal state) or re-creative (i.e., an eschatological act of recreation), a distinction he finds ambiguous in Bonhoeffer's thought.<sup>99</sup> Possibly, a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit would provide a stronger connection between Bonhoeffer's view of redemption and his discussion of the penultimate and the ultimate. In other words, reference to the Holy Spirit would help Bonhoeffer explain the in-breaking of the eschaton in the present context of the church.

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<sup>96</sup> See Charles Marsh, "Human Community and Divine Presence: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Critique of Hegel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45, no. 4 (1992): 427-448; and, L. Gregory Jones, "The Cost of Forgiveness: Grace, Christian Community and the Politics of Worldly Discipleship," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1-4 (1992): 149-169.

<sup>97</sup> Jones, "The Cost of Forgiveness," 164.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

Second, Jones argues that Bonhoeffer's theology is not fully Trinitarian. He suggests that a more adequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit would connect Bonhoeffer's Christological, ecclesiological, and ethical/political themes to the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer did not live to see the renaissance in Trinitarian thought which has taken place in recent decades. However, given his early support of dialectical theology (which was Christocentric and Word-oriented), his emphasis on the place of tension and his corresponding critique of overly rationalist or closed systems of thought, and his openness to reforming his own views, one may speculate that Bonhoeffer would embrace Trinitarian influences and correct and supplement his theology accordingly. But regardless of what Bonhoeffer might have done, I can only comment with certainty on what he actually wrote. In this regard, I suggest that Newbigin's Trinitarian approach and emphasis upon the Holy Spirit provides a necessary corrective to Bonhoeffer's heavily Christological ecclesiology. Thus, I agree with Newbigin's comment, "The life of the church is a real participation in the life of the Triune God..."<sup>101</sup> (See Chapter One for Newbigin's pneumatological and Trinitarian views.)

Third, a more developed pneumatology would help secure the transcendence of God in statements like 'Christ existing as church-community' and 'the church attaining the form of Jesus Christ in the midst of the world'. Jones believes that such statements, without reference to the working of the Holy Spirit, come dangerously close to

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 129.

compromising Christ's transcendence over-against both the world and the church.<sup>102</sup> I disagree with Jones on this point, because Bonhoeffer qualifies these statements with his notion of Christ as *Counter-Logos*, Centre, and Mediator, and with his doctrine of revelation. Christ the *Counter-Logos* remains truly other; it is the Spirit that binds Christ to the church and enables us to experience Christ as a present reality.<sup>103</sup> Thus, pneumatology is crucial for explaining *how* Christ's work (for example, atonement and mediation) becomes effective and concrete for the believer in the present, historical world, and not merely in some heavenly realm (i.e., Bonhoeffer rejects Barth's 'heavenly double' concept<sup>104</sup>). So, if anything, a more developed pneumatology would allow Bonhoeffer to be more precise in describing Christ's immanence, not His transcendence.

Therefore, I suggest that Bonhoeffer's weakness here is not so much a problem of transcendence-versus-immanence, but rather of confusing the person and work of Christ with the person and work of the Holy Spirit. As a result, Bonhoeffer has difficulty explaining the interplay of unity and individuality/otherness in the church community. In a related comment, Miroslav Volf criticizes the attempt to ground the sociality of salvation in a notion of a collective person of the whole church, a tactic which Bonhoeffer employs in his early theology but seems to abandon in his later works.<sup>105</sup>

Volf writes:

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<sup>102</sup> Jones, "The Cost of Forgiveness," 164.

<sup>103</sup> James Torrance's definition of worship is helpful here: worship is "... the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father." James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>104</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 99. See also Chapter Three of this work, section C.2: The Church and the Freedom of God in Christ.

<sup>105</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 77, 87, 102, 109, 112, 114, 118, 120, 137, 139, 145, 148, 192, 214, 216, 225, 260, 284, 288, 295. See also Chapter Three of this work.

To conceive the sociality of salvation with the aid of the notion of the *whole Christ* as a collective subject is to make an anthropological and soteriological mistake. According to Paul, the resurrected Christ lives in Christians through the Spirit (see Rom. 8:8-11), just as Christians live in Christ and in communion with one another through the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:12-13). Neither can it be otherwise, since it is precisely the Spirit who is the first fruits of the eschatological communion between human beings and God and of communion with one another in God's new world (see Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22). This is why one must conceive the sociality of the present experience of salvation *pneumatologically*.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to Jones' criticisms, I add that Bonhoeffer's lack of emphasis on the Holy Spirit is symptomatic of Western Christology in general. In his book, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Clark Pinnock argues that, historically, the Western doctrine of Christology has been dominated by the notion of Logos.<sup>107</sup> Pinnock suggests that although Logos-Christology should not be abandoned, a narrow focus on it leads to unfortunate consequences. In Western theology, the Holy Spirit is often given a subordinate or even trivial function in the work of God. Much attention is given to the Word of God, who was incarnated in human flesh, who proclaims the gospel, who lived, who died, who rose again, and who presently calls people to Himself. But what is the Spirit's role in all of this? How is the Spirit involved? Our tendency has been to downplay or ignore the Spirit. Part of the problem, perhaps, is Western dependence upon human rationality and fear of the unknown (or unexpected). While the Holy Spirit is difficult to understand, to categorize, to explain or predict, Logos is easier to conceptualize and comprehend. While the Holy Spirit must be encountered and experienced, the concept of Logos and the salvation narrative can be understood at an intellectual and detached level. While the Spirit operates in an unknown realm (i.e., the

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<sup>106</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 188. See also Volf's criticism of Ratzinger's understanding of the church as subject in his treatment of the universality and particularity of the church (i.e., the one and the many), pp. 29-72.

<sup>107</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Spirit must make Itself known), the Logos appeals to reason (thus John used the term apologetically to appeal to Greek thinking).

However, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is essentially related to Christology, and hence to soteriology as well. According to Paul, it is the Spirit who gives us life and who lives in us (Ro 8:11). It is the Spirit who reveals to us that Jesus Christ is Lord (1Co 12:3). At salvation, we are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, a guarantee of what is to come (Eph 1:13; 2Co 1:21-22). In the Spirit, we are washed and renewed (Tit 3:4). Again, Paul says that we are “saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2The 2:13). And John tells us that the Spirit awakens us to new birth (Jn 3:5-8). Thus, the Spirit is active in all aspects of salvation: justification, sanctification, regeneration, glorification, etc. His being and working should permeate our entire lives.

In addition, it is important to remember that the Holy Spirit was active on earth before, during, and after the Incarnation. God’s Spirit hovered over the earth at Creation. The Holy Spirit inspired the prophets. The Holy Spirit resided in King David (Ps 51:11), who as prophet, priest (he wore priestly garments), and king, prefigured Christ. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit effected the conception of Jesus, came upon Jesus and filled Him at His baptism, empowered and directed Jesus’ charismatic ministry on earth, and raised Jesus from the dead! Thus, the ministry of reconciling fallen humanity to God is the Spirit’s ministry.

Therefore, Pinnock argues that traditional Logos-Christology needs to be balanced with Spirit-Christology.<sup>108</sup> This criticism aptly applies to Bonhoeffer's Logos-centered theology. The community gathering in the name of Christ must be created and sustained by the Spirit. Discipleship in Christ must be empowered by the Spirit. Christian ethics, radically centered in Christ, must be permeated with the fruit and life-giving presence of the Spirit. Existence-for-others must be existence-in-the-Spirit. And the liberating or emancipative work of Christ, as the transcendent *Counter-Logos* who breaks open all human systems and ideologies, must be complemented with the mind-transforming power of the Holy Spirit. For, when considered in isolation, Christ's work is not enough to redeem and reorient humanity. Without the Spirit, humanity can neither understand nor be affected by Christ's work. As Paul argues:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1Co 2:10b-14).

I conclude that Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church is in need of amendment; in particular, the pneumatological character of the church requires development. Thus, in some respects, the theology of the Missional Church Movement provides a healthy corrective to Bonhoeffer's thought. This is especially true of

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<sup>108</sup> For example, instead of asking how the Spirit serves Christ's ministry we might reverse the question, inquiring as to how Christ serves the life-giving ministry of the Spirit. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), especially the second section of the book.

Newbigin's Trinitarian foundation for the church.<sup>109</sup> For Newbigin, creating the church is an action of the Triune God, in which the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in carrying out the Father's will of drawing people to the Son. Consequently, being part of the church means participating in the life and action of the Present, Living, and Triune God in reconciling people to God and to one another. Thus, as the Missional Church Movement argues, God accomplishes God's mission (*missio Dei*) by sending the church into the world to participate in His work. Just as God sent the Son and the Spirit, so He now sends the church into a lost and broken world in accordance with the love, authority, and power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>110</sup>

#### **D. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have sought to evaluate the ecclesiology of the Missional Church Movement by comparing and contrasting it with the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In the process, I discovered that Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology affirms some of the insights and suggestions posited by the Missional Church Movement, but questions others. In particular, I have argued that Bonhoeffer affirms the exhortation for the church to place a greater emphasis on embodying the gospel; he supports the challenge for the church to adopt fresh and innovative forms in its mission of existing-for-others in a post-Christendom era; he agrees that the church must be cautious in its use of power and demonstrate a delicate tension of moving in the power of the Spirit yet participating in the weakness and suffering of Christ for the world; and he shares the Missional Church Movement's concern for the problem of fragmented faith. However, Bonhoeffer's

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<sup>109</sup> See Chapter One of this work, section A.1.2: Newbigin's Understanding of Mission: *The Agent and Locus of Mission*.

<sup>110</sup> See Chapter One of this work, section B.1.2: Foundational Themes.

ecclesiology challenges the methodology employed by the Missional Church Movement, its selective use of Scripture, its dichotomist tendencies, its view that mission is the controlling definition of the church, and its under-representation of multicultural, multiethnic, and minority views. Thus, Bonhoeffer's theology of the church serves both as a supplement and a corrective to the intentions and views of the Missional Church Movement.

In conclusion, I wish to impress upon the reader Bonhoeffer's sense of hope and optimism regarding the church. Despite the problems we often observe, Bonhoeffer encourages us to be grateful for what God has given and to love the church as Christ loves it. Thus, I close with the following quotation, which is both exhortative and provocative:

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty; if, on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry...then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, quoted in Charles Ringma, *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Colorado Springs: Piñon Press, 2000), July 12<sup>th</sup> reading.

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## VITA

Patrick Franklin received his Bachelor of Arts from Wilfrid Laurier University (June 1998), where he studied Psychology and Business Administration. He then received the Master of Divinity degree from Tyndale Seminary in May 2001, and will receive the Master of Theology degree from Regent College in April 2004. Currently, Patrick serves as a pastor at Chartwell Baptist Church (at King's Collegiate) in Oakville, Ontario. He is very happily married to Elena Mae Taliotis Franklin, who is his partner in life, study (Elena and Patrick studied at Tyndale together), and ministry. In their spare time, Elena and Patrick enjoy hiking and camping, playing Ultimate Frisbee and Volley-Ball, watching movies, and reading books.