

WHOLLY HUMAN AND WHOLLY DIVINE, HUMILIATED AND EXALTED: SOME REFORMED EXPLORATIONS IN BONHOEFFER'S CHRISTOLOGY LECTURES

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I. INTRODUCTION: ON GETTING THE QUESTION RIGHT

At the University of Berlin in the summer of 1933, the very year in which Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a series of lectures on Christology. Bonhoeffer's dense treatment is worth our time and attention, precisely because of the way in which Bonhoeffer frames the christological question. Instead of asking the question 'How?', i.e. the question of how Jesus can be said to be both divine and human, Bonhoeffer asks the question 'Who?'.¹ The question 'Who are you?' promotes a salutary line of theological questioning precisely because the question 'Who?' is a question which is raised by the revelatory self-presence of Another. 'It [the question 'Who?'] is the question about the other person and his claim, about the other being, about the other authority.'² It is a question which is raised by the one who transcends us and, in so doing, establishes the terms of the account, pointing us away from ourselves to his self-disclosure.³ Maintaining and defining human existence, Jesus Christ stands at its centre. Therefore, christological inquiry, for Bonhoeffer

¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. E. H. Robertson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), p. 31. The question 'How?' is the question raised by those who seek 'to examine Christ at arms' length'. M. Jenson, 'Real presence: contemporaneity in Bonhoeffer's Christology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (Spring 2005), p. 144. See also W. Krötke, 'Der begegnende Gott und der Glaube. Zum theologischen Schwerpunkt der Christologievorlesung D. Bonhoeffers', in *Bonhoeffer-Studien. Beiträge zur Theologie und Wirkungsgeschichte Dietrich Bonhoeffers*, ed. A. Schönherr & W. Krötke (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1985), pp. 25-35.

² Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 31.

³ Commenting on Bonhoeffer's lectures, J. Webster writes, 'thinking about Jesus Christ cannot be classificatory, a matter of assigning him a place in an existing order of objects, whether material or spiritual. Rather, he is that in terms of which all other reality is to be mapped.' See 'Incarnation', in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics I* (Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 116.

fer, includes a humbling on the part of the inquirer, insofar as he or she is the one who is questioned and gripped, 'mastered [as it were] by the subject-matter'.⁴

As the living Lord, the living subject-matter, Jesus Christ attests and imparts himself in the present, speaking his own Word, a Word which dethrones the human *logos* and the question which invariably accompanies it, 'How?' Christological inquiry, for Bonhoeffer, is thus grounded in the Christ who questions us, the Christ who is presently operative in the power of the Spirit. Such an inquiry is not a matter of reflecting on an ideal which Christ is said to represent and which can be known in advance. If such were the case, Christ would be an object at our disposal, an object that we could preside over. Quite the contrary for Bonhoeffer, christological inquiry concerns us with a *person* who lives and speaks today, a person who resists domestication. The christological question, Bonhoeffer writes, 'is [a question] about the revelation itself', about the God who discloses himself in his saving activity.⁵ The centrality of revelation for Bonhoeffer's account is of ultimate importance, then, for the degree to which an account yields to revelation is the degree to which it delineates a true understanding of God's identity.

In this paper I undertake three things. First, I expound and comment upon Bonhoeffer's account of Jesus Christ in *Christ the Center*. Particular attention will be paid to Bonhoeffer's unfolding of the presence of Christ as the key to understanding the person of Christ, as one who is both contemporary and historical. Second, I offer a critique of Bonhoeffer's account of the threefold form of Christ's contemporaneity as proclaimed Word, as sacrament and as church. Third and finally, I reflect on the ethical resources which Bonhoeffer's account of Christ as *pro me* offers to the church in its perpetual struggle against absolutism.

II. TOWARD A DOCTRINE OF 'THE CENTER'

Bonhoeffer's main concern in *Christ the Center* is to articulate a doctrine of Christ's person via a doctrine of Christ's presence, to provide a study of his person which is in accordance with his presence.⁶ The doctrine of Christ's person arises as a kind of commentary on and summation of

⁴ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translation ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 14 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957-1975), II/1, p. 470.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 37.

⁶ That is not to say that Bonhoeffer is uninterested in articulating a doctrine of Christ's work. Rather, it is simply the recognition that the intelligibility of the work of Christ depends upon the identity of the agent who executes the work. See *ibid.*, pp. 37ff.

the character of his presence. To speak of Christ as the present one is to acknowledge that he is not a person who is confined to the past, standing on the sidelines of our present as it were, awaiting realization. Rather, the Christ who was is indeed present now; Christ's past, for Bonhoeffer, is ingredient in his present identity. Christ, therefore, is contemporary with us; his contemporaneity is a function of the person he is. He thus stands with us, witnessing to, attesting and authenticating himself in the present.

Bonhoeffer's primary interlocutor, as he proceeds to articulate a doctrine of the person of Christ rooted in Christ's presence, is the liberal Protestant tradition. According to Bonhoeffer, 'two serious misunderstandings' have arisen in this tradition relative to its understanding of the presence and of the person of Jesus Christ.⁷ First, according to liberal Protestants like A. Ritschl, Christ's presence is depicted 'as the influence that emanates from him, reaching into the Church'.⁸ That is, Christ is present insofar as he influences human beings by an ideal which he himself is said to embody, an ideal such as 'timeless truth'.⁹ What matters, then, is 'the effect of his [Christ's] historical influence'.¹⁰ In effect, liberals like Ritschl were more concerned with the question of *what* Christ does, and not so much the question of *who* he is. As a result, Jesus Christ is depersonalized: he simply functions as a name which is concomitant with an idea(s) or a value(s).¹¹ Put again, Christ is representative of a particular religious idea that has been taken up in advance and then applied to his historical person.¹² The result is, necessarily, an exemplarist Christology: Jesus' humanity – his life in general – represents something that can be known apart from him. Jesus Christ becomes a 'mythological expression of the religious or moral value which Christians find in him or place upon him as an object of regard or worship'.¹³ His humanity, therefore, is

⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹ Of such attempts H. Frei writes, 'the endeavor . . . to represent the presence of Christ in and to our presence may well mean to the Christian the total diffusion of Jesus into our presence so that he no longer has any presence of his own. The cost of our being contemporaneous to him would then be, it seems, that he no longer *owns* his presence, or, if he does, that we cannot apprehend or comprehend that fact.' *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 34.

¹² See Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 80.

¹³ Webster, 'Incarnation', in *Word and Church*, p. 118.

accidental; or, to use Hans Frei's language, the 'unsubstitutable identity' of Jesus Christ is eclipsed.¹⁴

The second serious misunderstanding espoused by exemplars of the liberal Protestant tradition, such as W. Herrmann, is evidenced, for Bonhoeffer, in their attempt 'to pass beyond the limits of the historical to make the image of Christ visible'.¹⁵ Such an attempt proceeds on the assumption that Jesus did not rise from the dead; it stops 'with the Jesus of the cross, with the historical Jesus'.¹⁶ Its concern is, instead, with the Christ of faith. Throughout his work, Bonhoeffer controverts the distinction between the so-called 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith', insofar as the present Jesus Christ is indeed the historical Jesus Christ. One cannot elide the historical dimension precisely because the historical person is present: Jesus Christ rose on the third day.

In order to respond to the challenge posed by the liberal Protestant tradition, Bonhoeffer draws upon the classical christological tradition. In particular, he reinhabits the Chalcedonian formula – albeit not without criticism – to describe the character of Christ's presence as being the presence of one who is both wholly human and wholly divine.¹⁷ Bonhoeffer embraces Chalcedon because it does not try to say too much; it represents the supreme instance of an exercise in negative Christology. As such, Chalcedon does not isolate the two natures of Jesus Christ but assumes their unity in his person. Bonhoeffer explains: 'Since Chalcedon, it is no longer possible to ask how the natures can be thought of as different while the person remains one, but quite clearly who is this man, of whom it is declared, "He is God"?'¹⁸ As the one present among us, Christ does not have two natures which can be treated as two separate entities or two separate substances; rather, the one person is at once human and divine.

Because the two natures are united in this one person without confusion and without change, without separation and without division, the man Jesus Christ is not limited by time because he himself is simultaneously God, and God himself is not timeless because he too is identified by the man Jesus Christ. Thus, as one who is wholly God, Christ is 'eternally present'.¹⁹ And, as one who is wholly human – 'nothing human was alien to him' – Jesus Christ is 'present in time and space'.²⁰ The presence of this

¹⁴ The language of 'unsubstitutable identity' belongs to Hans W. Frei. See Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 103.

person is the presence of one who is both temporal and eternal. Put again, the man Jesus Christ is not in the past, in a temporally remote sphere: the man Jesus Christ is, as one who is human, divine and therefore present. Because Jesus Christ is divine he can indeed be and indeed is our contemporary. This being so, liberal Protestantism misconstrues the nature of Christ's presence when it equates it with influence, or accounts for it in such a way that the historical dimension of the present Christ is eclipsed in its entirety. Bonhoeffer's text can be read as a sophisticated refutation of the perennial attempt to isolate the humanity of Jesus Christ from his divinity, or to bifurcate the historical element of Jesus Christ from the present Jesus Christ.

A very important corollary of the motif of 'wholly human and wholly divine' in *Christ the Center* is that of Christ's humiliation and exaltation. Concerning humiliation, Bonhoeffer argues that it is an attribute of the incarnate one himself.²¹ That is, humiliation indicates the mode in which the incarnate one exists. As such, the incarnate one chooses to accomplish his work under the opposite, in 'the likeness of sinful flesh'.²² The incarnate one hides himself in weakness, then; he does not will to be separated from the *homoioima sarkos*. That the God-Man freely embraces the *homoioima sarkos* is regarded as a 'stumbling block' and, as such, 'the central problem of Christology'.²³ It is *the* stumbling block, explains Bonhoeffer, precisely because it controverts many of our basic assumptions about what is appropriate action for God. After all, how can God the Son be said to exist in the *homoioima sarkos*? Is God not far removed from the finite and material realm, from the vagaries of human existence? Quite the opposite, for Bonhoeffer: the great scandal and mystery of Christian faith is that the incarnate one goes to death: he embraces the *homoioima sarkos* without reservation, commandeering it as the instrument of his self-attestation even unto death.

The latter motif – exaltation – is never to be abstracted from Christ's humiliation. Just as humanity and divinity are united in this one person, so too are the modes of humiliation and exaltation. More specifically, Christ's resurrection, exaltation and ascension function as the very validation or assurance 'that in the incognito we have to deal with the God-Man'.²⁴ Accordingly, Christ's exaltation does not add to or take away from his humiliation. Christ's humiliation is not a stage on the way to exaltation; his humiliation is never to be regarded as something negated by

²¹ See further *ibid.*, p. 94.

²² Romans 8:3.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

the resurrection – ‘even as the risen one he does not lift his *incognito*’.²⁵ Hence the resurrection is historically ambiguous, for it is subject to doubt and to numerous other interpretations until his coming again. Christ’s *incognito*, his humiliation – that is, his being in the likeness of sinful flesh – is nevertheless the manner in which he freely chooses to be for us and to be contemporary to us. To know him as he is present, that is, as the risen one, is to know him even as the humiliated one who continues to pose and to raise the question of himself to the church. The one who was for his people, the one who hid himself in weakness, is for them now and present himself to them in his unassimilable presence. Indeed, Christ imparts himself in the present, for Bonhoeffer, and in so doing creates faith in himself, as the man who was and is God-in-flesh.

With those thoughts in place, inquiry must be made into the structure of Christ’s person. If Christ is wholly human and wholly divine, humiliated and exalted, then what does this say about who he is in the very core of his person? More specifically, what is it about the structure of his person which enables him, as the crucified and risen one, to be present, and present no less in the church?²⁶ For Bonhoeffer, Christ is *pro me*: ‘Christ is Christ, not just for himself, but in relation to me. His being Christ is his being for me, *pro me* . . . The core of the person himself is the *pro me*.’²⁷ Bonhoeffer leaves no room for speculation relative to Christ’s person and the character of his relationship to human beings. Christ is as the one who is *pro me*: his promeity is his own mode of existence. The person of the Christ who is present, then, is present according to the very *pro me* structure of his being. His being for me is thus not accidental: it is, rather, ‘of the essence of his nature’ and the mode of his existence.²⁸ Moreover, it ‘is an ontological statement and, as such, is the heart of who Christ is’.²⁹ That is to say, God’s act and God’s being in Jesus Christ are one and the same: the Son of God – Jesus Christ – *is* for us. To describe who he is, is to describe him as one who, in the very core of his being, is *for* those to whom he, as the crucified and risen one, is present. His act is thus reiterative of his person. For this reason, an ontological gap is never to be posited between his act and being, as the act of Jesus Christ bespeaks the being of Jesus Christ.

The second and last section of Bonhoeffer’s text – ‘The Historic Christ’ – maps the relationship of the present crucified and risen Christ

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁶ ‘Jesus is the Christ present as the Crucified and as the risen one . . . Christ, as person, is present in the Church.’ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁹ Jenson, ‘Real Presence’, p. 151.

who is *pro me* to the historical Christ. Bonhoeffer's ordering of the material in *Christ the Center*, beginning with the present Christ (Part One) and proceeding to the historical Christ (Part Two), is again significant, as it is reflective of his continual effort to undermine the perennial distinction of the 'Jesus of history' from the 'Christ of faith'. Bonhoeffer's continual engagement with this paradigm – despite the fact that he thinks the separation is a 'fiction' – is indicative of just how seriously he takes its concerns.³⁰ For example, he asks, 'how can the church be absolutely sure of the historical fact?'³¹ Bonhoeffer answers the question by deliberately moving from Christ's contemporaneity to his historicity, with a view to undermining the assumption that Jesus is other than Christ, that Christ is present only in terms of the effects of his historical being, or the influence that emanates from him. 'He [Christ] bears witness to himself as there in history, here and now', Bonhoeffer writes.³² That is to say, the Christ who is present *pro me* bears witness to himself in the present as the one who was then, too. The risen Christ has historical form; the One who is proclaimed is the One who is in history. In an arresting statement, Bonhoeffer writes, 'the historical becomes contemporary'.³³ By the power of the resurrection Christ attests himself as present, as 'a person who bears witness to himself' throughout time.³⁴

An important question remains, however: what is the *form* of Christ's presence? The form of Christ's presence, the form of the crucified and risen one who is *pro me*, is ecclesial; ecclesial because Bonhoeffer is deeply concerned 'for the social concreteness of Christology', because it is in the Christian community that the presence of Christ attains this very concreteness.³⁵ Bonhoeffer's account of Christ's presence and promise also checks individualistic and pietistical impulses, in that the Christian is subject to the Christian community because that is how Christ 'in his *pro me* structure [is for her] as Word, as Sacrament and as Community'.³⁶ First, as concerns Word, the divine Logos enters the human logos in the form of preaching, in the form of the sermon. In the sermon God's Word is present to us. As a form of his presence, it attests how he presents him-

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 69.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 72. At this point, Bonhoeffer acknowledges his indebtedness to Kierkegaard.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁵ A. Pangritz, 'Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. J. W. De Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 138.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 48.

self to us as the humiliated one 'to which we are bound and to which we must hold'.³⁷ That Christ would be willing to be present himself to us and would be willing to bind himself to us in the proclamation of human beings is a profound indication of the humility of the incarnate one. Second, something similar can be said of the sacrament of Holy Communion: it, as the second form of Christ's presence, is a form of 'the concealment of the God-Man in his humiliation'.³⁸ The Christ who is present for me 'is [thus] present in the sphere of tangible nature', in bread and wine.³⁹ Third, the presence of Christ as community or church bespeaks how the humiliated Christ 'wishes to have the form of a created body'.⁴⁰ That is to say, the exalted Christ, the risen Christ, exists in a humiliated form, as the church itself. 'He is head and also every member', Bonhoeffer writes.⁴¹ Again, 'Christ is the church by virtue of his *pro me* being'.⁴² He does not exist in any other way, for Bonhoeffer: Christ's 'ecclesiality' is a form of his promeity.

To summarize: the christological question, for Bonhoeffer, is the question 'Who?' – i.e. 'Who are you?' It is not the question 'How?' The question 'Who?' undertakes the crucial theological work of ensuring that the inquiry does not proceed according to naturalistic assumptions. That is, the 'Who?' thwarts immanentizing procedures in Christology, as it indicates that the object of inquiry transcends creaturely reality. The one who grips and masters the human logos, for Bonhoeffer, reveals himself as wholly human and wholly divine, humiliated and exalted. And the 'Counter-Logos' himself, the one who in the very being of his person is contemporaneous with me and who exists, accordingly, for me, is such in a threefold form as Word, as sacrament and as church.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 57. Bonhoeffer's Lutheranism comes through quite clearly in his doctrine of the sacrament, insofar as the sacrament is not a *sign* which signifies the One who is present; rather, Jesus Christ *is* indeed 'completely present' in the sacrament. See, further, J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 4.17.21; Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 59.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 59. Although Bonhoeffer recognizes that there is a separation of Christ and the church in the book of Ephesians, he dismisses the idea rather brusquely. In his mind, the two motifs – Christ as head and Christ as member – do 'not contradict one another'.

⁴² Ibid., p. 58.

III. CRITICAL REMARKS IN RELATION TO BONHOEFFER'S ACCOUNT OF 'THE CENTER'

On the basis of my discussion of Bonhoeffer's account of Christ as both the present one and as the historical one who is *pro me*, two points need to be made, one which is critical and one which is constructive in nature. The first (critical) point concerns the *form* of Christ's contemporaneity as Word, as sacrament and as church, a form which, I argue, compromises the necessary distinction between Christ and the church. The second point concerns Bonhoeffer's rather rich account of Christ's promise, an account which offers rich resources for the church today as it struggles against absolutism.

1. *The Form of Christ*

The threefold form of Christ's presence as proclaimed Word, as sacrament and as church is the manner in which Christ can be said to be present for me. Such an account performs crucial theological work, for Bonhoeffer, insofar as it controverts attempts to collapse the doctrine of Christ's promise into that of human subjectivity, and lends 'social concreteness' to his account of Christ's presence.⁴³ Bonhoeffer's account of Christ's promise, because it takes form as Word, as sacrament and as church, directs one to the Christian community and therefore to hear and obey Christ's address through the preached Word, to partake of the Holy Supper, and to live within the body of Christ. Yet, however salutary such an emphasis may seem, the question must be asked whether Bonhoeffer leaves adequate room for the freedom of the person of Christ relative to the church. Or, does the threefold form of the present Christ leave any room for the necessary distinction between Christ and the church?

Instead of arguing that the form of the present Christ is *as* Word, as sacrament and as church, I would suggest that it is better to say that Christ is present *to* the preached Word, to the sacrament and to the church. That is to say, the proclaimed Word and the Lord's Supper, in particular, are acts of obedience which attest Jesus Christ or point to Jesus Christ. In the case of the church, moreover, it is the body *to* which Christ, as the *Head*, is present in the Spirit. Indeed, Christ is pneumatologically present in such a way that he evokes these creaturely realities – Word, sacrament and church – and continues to sanctify them, in order that they may bear witness to himself. He is sovereignly present to these creaturely realities in the Spirit, as the very mode of his risen presence among us. Thus, proclamation, baptism and Eucharist, and even the church itself, are understood as that which is different from Christ, in the sense that he is

⁴³ Pangritz, 'Who is Jesus Christ?', p. 151.

the active agent who calls them into being, creates them *ex nihilo* as it were, and vivifies and sanctifies them by the power of his Holy Spirit. It is Christ who calls them into being and remains prophetically present to them in the Spirit, in such a way that they can never in any straightforward way be identified with himself, but always remain like the finger of the Baptist pointing beyond themselves to the one who establishes, maintains and perfects them.

Furthermore, to propose, in the case of the church, as does Bonhoeffer, that 'Christ is the head *and* [emphasis mine] also every member', is to dilute the truth of Christ's sovereign headship over his body and to compromise the 'relation-in-distinction' which exists between Christ and his body.⁴⁴ If Christ is to be the Lord of the church, a separation must exist between Christ and his church, a notion which Bonhoeffer, interestingly enough, agrees with in principle. 'He is the one who has really bound himself *in the freedom* [emphasis mine] of his existence to me', Bonhoeffer writes.⁴⁵ Mention of God's freedom is indeed crucial, as it demonstrates Bonhoeffer's awareness of the immanentizing tendencies of German Idealism. Thus Bonhoeffer can write, 'God's Logos does not become identified with the human logos, as is assumed by German idealism.'⁴⁶ Christ's humiliation in and under the preached Word, rather than being a forfeit of his sovereignty, is an act of sovereign self-disposal, for Bonhoeffer. Preaching is thus always subject to the judgement of the Logos. *And yet*, Bonhoeffer can say, virtually in the same breath, that 'Christ's

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 58; Webster, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology' in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 167.

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 48. The theological work that an account of God's freedom undertakes is that it denotes how God's immanent freedom *ad intra* is the basis of his relations *ad extra*. Although Bonhoeffer is self-consciously anti-Hegelian insofar as God's activity is not necessary in order for God to be God, he nonetheless ties the being of the Word too closely to history. On Bonhoeffer's view, 'Christ can never be thought of as being for himself, but only in relation to me.' (Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 47.) On my view, the Christ who is for me is as such, precisely because he, in an immanent sense, is for the Father (as the Father is for him) in the unitive power of the Spirit. God's immanent identity, therefore, is the basis of his economic activity *ad extra*. Put again, the freedom of the divine persons for the other in God is reiterated in their activity toward us: each is for us as each is for the other in the inner life of God. For a very sophisticated treatment of this theme, see P. D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2002).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

presence *is* [emphasis mine] his existence as proclamation. The whole Christ *is* [emphasis mine] present in preaching, humiliated and exalted.⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer's salutary emphasis on the freedom of the Logos with respect to the human logos is undermined, I suspect, by his concomitant emphasis on the identification of Christ with the human logos in preaching. I suspect that a more robust account of the sovereign freedom of Christ in and under these forms, and thus the sovereign self-presence of Christ to these forms, is necessary if the immanentizing tendencies of German Idealism are to be fully blunted and resisted.

It is at this point that the Reformed tradition is of assistance, for it emphasizes, far more incisively than Bonhoeffer's Lutheran tradition, the importance of the separation between our words and acts and Christ's own word and act concerning himself, so as to point to the freedom of Christ himself relative to human words and acts. This is an important point, as Bonhoeffer's articulation of the form of Christ's presence as Word, as sacrament and as church, continually risks the freedom of Christ in relation *to* the preached Word, sacrament and church. Thus, Christ in the power of the Spirit commandeers, in the case of preaching, human words, sanctifying them in such a way that they may be a fit witness to himself, but only a witness, for he himself is not collapsed into them, but remains over them, thereby ensuring their integrity as *human* words caught up in the prophetic activity of the Son of God.

Similarly, in the case of the church, inasmuch as Bonhoeffer defines the church as '*the mode of existence* [emphasis mine] of the one who is present in his exaltation and humiliation', the headship of Christ in relation to the community is compromised.⁴⁸ I wonder whether the church, the community whose task is fundamentally that of attesting the 'inherent effectiveness' of Jesus' reality, comes rather close, in Bonhoeffer's account, to supplanting Christ.⁴⁹ This is precisely why an emphasis on the sovereign self-presence of Christ is necessary. As Barth states, 'Jesus Christ cannot be absorbed and dissolved in practice into the Christian kerygma, Christian faith and the Christian community.'⁵⁰ Following Barth, Bonhoeffer's account does not adequately maintain, I would argue, the 'profound contrast between the revelation and the community

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59. The same is said of the sacrament: 'This Word, Jesus Christ, is completely present in the Sacrament, neither his Godhead alone, nor only his humanity.' *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁹ J. Webster, "'Eloquent and Radiant": The Prophetic Office of Christ and the Mission of the Church', in *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 142.

⁵⁰ Barth, CD IV/3, p. 349.

of which Christ is the agent'.⁵¹ In sum, the proclaimed Word, sacrament and church, are better understood as *witnesses* to, or signs instituted by, the sovereign self-presence of the God-man who is *pro nobis*, rather than as his very *form*. In other words, Christ is always the acting agent in relationship to them and is never to be immediately identified with them.

To be sure, such a (Reformed) emphasis on divine freedom does not sacrifice the 'social concreteness' of Christ's presence; one ought not to think that a robust emphasis on Christ's freedom is antithetical to an emphasis on the 'social concreteness' of his presence. Barth himself, for example, spoke of the church as the 'earthly historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ Himself'.⁵² That is, the church is visible and concrete precisely because the Lord – the church's invisible head – wills to exist in an earthly form. But Barth does not mean the same thing as Bonhoeffer at this point, for Barth emphasizes 'the work of the Holy Spirit' to which the church owes its concrete and historical existence.⁵³ A Reformed emphasis on divine freedom is quite at home, I suspect, with an equally robust emphasis on the social concreteness of the church, insofar as that concreteness is effected by the Spirit and not creaturely media identified with Christ himself. Stated differently, the Reformed tradition, as Barth represents it, safeguards the asymmetrical relationship of Christ and the church: 'Because He is, it is; it is, because He is.'⁵⁴ Barth's concern, and I would argue the Reformed tradition's concern in general, is to account for and honour the invisible centre as that which makes possible and guarantees the very existence of the visible church. Accordingly, the invisible is the 'third dimension' of the church, its 'spiritual reality', the very 'awakening power of the Holy Spirit'.⁵⁵ And it is precisely this 'third dimension' which evokes the phenomenal being of the church and legitimizes its existence. In short, a Reformed perspective emphasizes the pneumatological as that which effects the concrete and historical form of the church, which is then said to be the 'earthly-historical form' of Christ's existence. And so, the difference between Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran and Barth as a Reformed theologian is that Barth is more keen to emphasize the invisible, though not 'in the direction of a *civitas platonica*', but rather in order to point to the Spirit as the one who effects the church's visibility, its

⁵¹ P. Selby, 'Who is Jesus Christ, for Us, Today?', in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition: Paper Presented at the 7th International Bonhoeffer Congress, Cape Town, 1996* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 21.

⁵² Barth, CD IV/1, p. 656.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 656.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 661.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 657, 660.

concrete and historical form.⁵⁶ Such an emphasis is always to be in the service of safeguarding the distinction of Christ and the church and the freedom of Christ relative to the church. In this consists, I suspect, the difference between the Reformed and Lutheran tradition with regard to Christology and ecclesiology.

2. *The Ethics of Christ's Promeity*

Second, and more briefly, Bonhoeffer's account of Christ's promeity is salutary for it disrupts not only naturalistic understandings of the 'us', but also evokes a rich account of the character of the church's witness to the gospel in the world.⁵⁷

Concerning the former, that is Bonhoeffer's account of the promeity of Christ's person, it must be said that just as Christ does not 'accommodate himself to any self-chosen "us"', so, too, the church must not think that it exhausts the 'us'. Instead, Christ decides the 'us': Christ has the right to the definition of 'us'. Accordingly, Peter Selby writes, 'the question of who Jesus Christ is for us today cannot be interpreted so as to mean that we know who "us" is and the question therefore is how Jesus Christ is somehow to be accommodated to that us'.⁵⁸ In other words, the doctrine of Christ's promeity is expansive: it calls the church to evaluate whether its form(s) of life compromise the inclusive character of God's overcoming of creaturely disorder and opposition by his judgement and grace.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 142.

⁵⁷ The church cannot be said, as Jenson maintains, to have to '*flesh out* [emphasis mine] the life of the humiliated one', for the reason that the Christ who is *pro me* is effectively present in the power of the Spirit. Jenson, 'Real presence', p. 160. The language of 'fleshing out' bespeaks an incipient naturalism as far as the relation of Christ to the world is concerned. So Webster: 'God is not absent or mute but present and communicative, not as it were waiting to be "made sense of" by our cognitive or interpretive activities, but accomplishing in us the knowledge of himself.' Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', in *Word and Church*, p. 64.

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer's edifying account of Christ's promeity is compromised, however, precisely by his connected notion of Christ existing as Word, sacrament and church. Both the individual Christian and the church, for Bonhoeffer, are to be for others because Christ himself is for others. See further D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, ed. E. Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 381f. Such a notion, however, has different force in Bonhoeffer's own formulation than in the scheme modified along Reformed lines because of the different status afforded to human action. In Bonhoeffer's account, the church is an extension of Christ, as it is his form;

Concerning the latter, that is, an account of the character of the church's witness to the world, Bonhoeffer reminds the church that the doctrine of Christ's promise is imperative in character, as it includes a summons to radical discipleship in the church and in the world. As the church receives the word of forgiveness, it must proclaim that word to the world, as a word which is for the world. The promise of the new humanity grounded in the Christ who is for us is thus a promise which stands opposed to those individuals, churches and nations whose absolutist ambitions would identify such a promise with themselves and their activity. God in Christ controverts such claims, freeing us to be for the world which he loves and which he is for in the very core of his being. And by the Holy Spirit the church is renewed in its witness to the one who by his own self-definition exists for others and is present to them.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures offer the church of Jesus Christ the theological resources necessary for resisting absolutist and totalitarian claims. Few people in 1933 could have fathomed the horrific direction which National Socialist ideology would take, and the capitulation of many Protestant churches to that ideology. All the more reason, then, for a clear articulation of the church's christological confession as the basis for its moral and ethical activity in the world. More specifically, christological confession reminds the church that it 'is responsible *in* its context but not in any straightforward way *to* its context'.⁶⁰ Note: the church is not responsible *to* its context because the context – either in Bonhoeffer's

the church does what Christ does, for Christ exists as church. In a scheme modified along Reformed lines, however, there is again more of a concern for the asymmetrical order of Christ and the church, and concomitantly Christ's action and the church's action. The church, in all its corruption and lostness, does seek to obey the command of God by existing for others, by serving others, but it does so only as a reflection, as an illustration, in order that 'in that way [it can] attest in its own activity His activity' (K. Barth CD IV/1, p. 662). Such a disjunction between Christ and the church is salutary, for only then can his promise in all its uniqueness and in its once-for-all character be acknowledged and honoured. When the church is seen to *attest* Christ and not to *represent* him as if there were a more direct correspondence between him and the church, the fragility of the church's witness in the world is all the more reason for it to pray to the one who can and indeed does sanctify it in such a way that it may indeed bear witness in its activity to the Christ who is for it and therefore for the whole world.

⁶⁰ Webster, 'Eschatology and Anthropology', in *Word and Church*, p. 266.

day or in our own – does not have and cannot therefore assume ‘a necessary character’.⁶¹ That is to say, the church is not bound *to* the context but rather *to* the one who is present, in a hidden manner, to the church in its context.⁶² Christ commands the church to act in its context in accordance with the true shape of reality which Christ himself proclaims and has effectively enacted. Jesus Christ remains what is *necessary*; he transcends given circumstances in such a way that the context is not ‘anything other than a contingent set of cultural arrangements which stands under the judgement of the Christian gospel’.⁶³ A theology which remains under the tutelage of the gospel will be genuinely responsible to that very same gospel *in* its context, and thus only so can the church be genuinely *for* its context. The church can only be for its context if it is free in relationship to it, taking its cues from one who transcends the context. ‘It [the church] is the boundary of the state in proclaiming with the cross the breaking-through of all human order’, Bonhoeffer writes.⁶⁴ Just as Christ, for Bonhoeffer, is *pro nobis* in the very core of his person, so too must the church exist for others.⁶⁵ Only thus will the church be able to resist hegemonic claims, in both word and deed, because it recognizes, in faith, that the one who is present to it is the great relativizer of all such claims and continually commands the church to pray, proclaim, worship, and witness in such a way as to faithfully bear witness to ‘the man who is there only for others’.⁶⁶

Indeed, it is legitimate and perhaps necessary, I suspect, to read *Christ the Center* as one of the most potent – albeit it a potency which is not without its problems – twentieth century theological attempts to resist immanentizing and domesticating tendencies in Christology and ecclesiology. When the church is so cozy with the state and the oppression that is committed in its name under the auspices of racial purity, then it is simply reduced to the status of a beggar, of an organ or extension of the state. Whereas, what Bonhoeffer does, by arguing that the historical Christ is the present Christ who is both humiliated and exalted as Word, as sacrament and as church, is to present a *politics* of Christ’s presence, the presence of one who always and indefatigably questions us, our assumptions, our words and ways of being. Thus, the present Christ – ‘the Counter

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 266.

⁶² ‘The church also must be understood as the center of history.... Again this is a hidden and not an evident center of the realm of the state.’ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 63.

⁶³ Webster, ‘Eschatology and Anthropology’, p. 266.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 63.

⁶⁵ See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 381.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 381.

Logos' – is not an ideal who can be swallowed up by the church.⁶⁷ He is present to the church even as he is the church, for Bonhoeffer, and is therefore present to the world and for the world in the church, as he calls the church to die to itself and relinquish its sinful way of being, that it may live in and for the world. Christ indissolubly binds himself to the church for the sake of the world, and remains present in the church, pronouncing upon the church and the world his word of judgement and pardon, commanding the church, in its situatedness, to acknowledge him, the reconciliation he is and the peace that he has made. Thus it is necessary for the church, in both Bonhoeffer's time and in our own, to speak to and to welcome the Jew, and indeed all others, in obedience to the peace which Christ himself effected between Jew and Gentile by his all-encompassing sacrifice. Such a response is indeed fitting and necessary for the church as it attests the Christ who is truth, and as it commends a form of individual and of cosmic existence which corresponds to Christ's own proclamation of and enactment of the Kingdom of God.

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, p. 33.