BONHOEFFER, CHRIST AND CULTURE

Contributors include Jim Belcher, Lori Brandt Hale, Joel Lawrence, Charles Marsh, Stephen Plant, Daniel Treier, Reggie Williams, Philip Ziegler
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INTRODUCTION

KEITH L. JOHNSON AND TIMOTHY LARSEN

INTEREST IN THE LIFE, MINISTRY, WRITINGS AND THOUGHT of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) has grown to the point that we now take his ubiquity for granted. It is therefore worth pausing a moment to realize just how unlikely this is. He has been dead for nearly seventy years now. While respected by his peers during his lifetime, they themselves would not have recognized him as one of the most important thinkers or leaders of their era. Many of the endeavors he spent the most time and energy upon turned out to be, at best, moderate successes; just as often, his efforts produced little or nothing worthy of note at the time. He left a corpus of writings, some of them unfinished, and that often are difficult to read and contain references and ideas increasingly removed from the context of contemporary readers. Add to that the fact that we live in a time when people are less and less likely to read books from the past or to attend to figures from previous generations, and it seems remarkable that his writings are read at all.

Yet today in the second decade of the twenty-first century Bonhoeffer is read as much or more than ever—and that is saying something, since in the years following his death he became one of the most widely read and respected Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. More remarkable is the fact that he has become one of those rare figures who is read and cited widely both inside and outside the academy. As to the latter, despite being some six hundred pages long, Eric Metaxas’s Bon-
hoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy rose to the top spot on a New York Times bestseller list. As to the former, the carefully edited sixteen-volume series of the English edition of the Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer being produced and published at considerable expense by Fortress Press reveals the serious commitment of the scholarly community to continue exploring Bonhoeffer’s thought and developing his legacy.

While a prisoner of the Nazis, Bonhoeffer wrote a haunting poem, “Who Am I?” in which he contrasted his own impressions of himself with what others said he was like. He wonders, “Am I then really all that which other men tell of?” Since his death, people from various perspectives have often wondered how others see such a different Bonhoeffer from the one they see. Or, to put it another way, Bonhoeffer’s works at times can seem almost a kind of Rorschach test, telling us primarily something about what the people encountering them stand for and believe rather than something about Bonhoeffer himself. This is to frame the matter too subjectively, however, as Bonhoeffer’s thought was variegated and complex. To take just one seeming dichotomy, the fact that Bonhoeffer often is claimed as an ally by both pacifists and just-war theorists tells us something not only about the commitments of the person viewing Bonhoeffer’s legacy, but also about the nature of that legacy itself. Indeed, one could make the case that any one of the four descriptors in the subtitle of Metaxas’s book—pastor, martyr, prophet and spy—could be used to describe the defining contribution of Bonhoeffer’s life. His involvement in any one of these areas by itself would be enough for a single life, let alone one cut short at the age of 39. Yet even these four diverse identifiers do not include the one that is perhaps most prominent in this collection: Bonhoeffer the theologian.

This volume was collected from the papers delivered at the 21st Annual Wheaton Theology Conference held on the Wheaton campus in April 2012. One of the themes of Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison is the “world come of age,” and with the theme “Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture,” the Wheaton Theology Conference came of age. The first conference was organized by Dennis L. Okholm and the late Timothy R. Phillips. Phillips was a gifted teacher of theology. When a former MA student in theology returned to visit in the early 1990s,
Professor Phillips asked him about his perspective on the theology program. Among other things, the student mentioned that he was surprised that Wheaton had not introduced him to the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Phillips replied with what had been the standard view, that Bonhoeffer was only a minor theologian. So, in the wake of a conference dedicated exclusively to Bonhoeffer’s theology held on the Wheaton campus less than two decades later, we return again to the startling fact that Bonhoeffer’s reputation continues to grow beyond anyone’s expectations.

Evangelicals, of course, have appreciated Bonhoeffer’s writings for at least several decades now, but they have primarily appreciated them as devotional literature. *The Cost of Discipleship* is undoubtedly evangelicals’ favorite Bonhoeffer book, and it is overwhelmingly read by them not primarily for theological information but for spiritual formation. Likewise, *Life Together* is beloved by many evangelicals as an edifying classic of the spiritual life. Increasingly, however, Bonhoeffer also is becoming a more important conversation partner for evangelical theologians. Not every contributor to this volume would necessarily self-identify as an evangelical, but many would, and therefore this book can be seen as representing—in part and among other things—a current sampling of a serious evangelical theological engagement with the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

This engagement produces fruitful results not only because Bonhoeffer shares many characteristics and commitments with evangelicals, but also because, in significant ways, he lived and thought in a world far removed from the evangelical tradition. Philip G. Ziegler’s essay explores Bonhoeffer’s unique background by assessing the influence of Bonhoeffer’s time, place and tradition—particularly represented by the influence of Martin Luther and Karl Barth—on his life and thought. Ziegler’s focus on Bonhoeffer’s unique background forms a nice pairing with Timothy Larsen’s often surprising account of the evangelical reception of Bonhoeffer’s theology from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present. Larsen explores how and why some evangelicals embraced Bonhoeffer while others rejected him, and his account of the shifting nature of evangelical thought about Bonhoeffer’s theology re-
veals much about changing attitudes within the tradition. Charles Marsh shows that Bonhoeffer's own views and self-perception changed at a key moment in his personal and theological development, and his biographical essay helps us understand better how Bonhoeffer the theologian relates to Bonhoeffer the Christian.

Many of the essays in the volume appropriate Bonhoeffer's theology constructively in order to engage contemporary questions. Stephen J. Plant's essay explores the unique political challenges facing Bonhoeffer and his colleagues in Nazi Germany, and he then applies several of Bonhoeffer's most striking theological and ethical insights to the contemporary political situation and the church's thinking about its relationship to the state. Daniel J. Treier's essay explores Bonhoeffer's various remarks about technology and puts him into conversation with Jacques Ellul in order to help the church discern how best to use the technological resources that are so prominent in the contemporary world. Keith L. Johnson's essay creatively appropriates Bonhoeffer's theological insights to some of the key questions driving Christian higher education in order to help the Christian academy figure out how to best integrate the insights of the Christian faith with academic learning while also staying firmly connected to the life and ministry of the church.

Reggie L. Williams's groundbreaking essay shows how Bonhoeffer himself creatively appropriated insights from many of the African American intellectuals, writers and poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance during his visit to the United States. His deep engagement with the realities of the race divide shaped his thinking profoundly, not least by enabling him to see sooner than most that the racist implications of Nazi policies could not be accommodated by the German church. Williams's work is a sign that there is still much to discover in the Bonhoeffer corpus, because new eyes can find things in Bonhoeffer's writings which have hitherto gone unobserved.

One of our goals for the conference always has been to offer intellectually rigorous and scholarly work that would be of service to the academy while also being attentive to issues of the spiritual lives of ordinary believers in the wider church. This ecclesial commitment is most thoroughly expressed in this volume in Lori Brandt Hale's reflections on
questions of Christian vocation in light of Bonhoeffer’s remarks on that issue. Her essay offers a poignant account of how our often messy lives can be transformed by God’s grace. Joel D. Lawrence takes one of Bonhoeffer’s most transformative ideas—the notion that the church is called to exist as a “church for others”—and asks the question of how the church can actually move toward this vision. His deeply moving vision for a community that shifts from selfishness to selflessness through ecclesial practices ordered by and around Christ’s death provides an excellent example of how the insights of the academy can be applied to the concrete life and ministry of congregations. Finally, Jim Belcher’s account of his pilgrimage through some of the key locations in Bonhoeffer’s life shows how Bonhoeffer’s commitment to spiritual disciplines and a life ordered by worship provided him the resources he needed to confront the challenges he faced at the end of his life. Belcher suggests that the contemporary church has much to learn as it considers its own challenges in a much different time and place.

Taken together, these essays show that not only does this volume refuse to engage in academic theology in a way that is divorced from the life of the church, but it also refuses to handle Bonhoeffer’s thought in an antiquarian way that traps it in a time and context that becomes more remote with every passing decade. Far from this, a major contribution of this book is that it deploys insights from Bonhoeffer to address issues in our twenty-first-century world: higher education now, the present state of technology, the vocational realities of today, spiritual disciplines for a new generation and so on. Bonhoeffer was, of course, very much a man of his time in many ways, but because he also was centered on Jesus Christ—the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever—his life and writings continue to speak to believers long after his death.

This volume is possible only because of the rich partnership between the Wheaton Theology Conference and InterVarsity Press. Once again, we are grateful to IVP for their insight, guidance and support. We are also grateful for the leadership of Jeffrey P. Greenman, associate dean of the biblical and theological studies department at Wheaton. Not only was this conference topic originally his idea, but his love for Bonhoeffer,
the academy and the church set the vision for this conference and the volume that resulted from it. As this is his last year at Wheaton, we are particularly aware of the enormous contribution he has made and of the gift of his presence and friendship. For leadership, both professional and personal, and his mighty contributions to making the Wheaton Theology Conference what it is today, this volume is dedicated to him.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer
A Theologian of the Word of God

Philip G. Ziegler

Introduction

What kind of theologian was Dietrich Bonhoeffer? What motivated his theological questioning? What commanded his attention in matters of Christian doctrine? From whence did his theological thinking and writing proceed? At what did it aim? In what follows, I suggest a way in which we might begin to ask and answer such questions. I do so aware that more than a half century after Bonhoeffer’s execution in Flossenbürg in April 1945, women and men by the thousands continue to be fascinated by the story of his life and death, and moved by the integration of clear Christian conviction, civil courage and “moral leadership,”¹ which mark him out as an extraordinary figure in recent church history. This capacity of Bonhoeffer’s life story to continue to seize imaginations is remarkable and welcome. And yet among the proliferating portraits of this Protestant saint it is more than possible to lose sight of Bonhoeffer’s central vocation as a theologian.² It can be difficult

¹For an appreciation of Bonhoeffer centered on this last theme, see Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
²The phrase alludes to Stephen Haynes’s instructive survey of the diverse receptions of Bonhoeffer which populate the history of his influence: The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004). It is also notable that theologian is conspicuously absent from the subtitle of Eric Metaxas’s recent and widely read biography, Bon-
for contemporary readers to access and understand the character, substance and import of Bonhoeffer’s work as a teacher of Christian doctrine in its historical context despite being very well positioned to do just that, possessed as we are of a complete critical edition of his writings and many recent historiographically sophisticated studies of the landscape of church and theology in early twentieth-century Germany.3

There are two decisive contexts for understanding Bonhoeffer’s theological identity. The first, and more narrow, is the German church struggle of the 1930s and its wider ecumenical environment in which Bonhoeffer was immersed. The struggle for the integrity of the Protestant churches in Germany under Nazism was a matter of burning concern for Bonhoeffer, and he aligned himself from the very first with its most radical proponents and served its cause up to the time of his imprisonment. Explaining his decision to return to Germany from America in the summer of 1939, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Edwin Sutz simply: “I am being pulled irresistibly back toward the Confessing Church.”4 The second and wider context within which to understand his profile as a theologian is that provided by the intellectual ferment of European Protestant thought during the first decades of the twentieth century. Bonhoeffer learned and practiced his theological art amidst the churn of the “high” liberal theology of his Berlin teachers, impulses from the contemporary “Luther renaissance” and the explosive devel-

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opment of dialectical or crisis theology, of which Karl Barth was the leading exponent.

In this essay, I want to recommend that we approach Bonhoeffer as a theologian of the Word of God in order to illumine something crucial of the form, substance and scope of his theology as a whole in view of these two decisive contexts. The phrase “Word of God” is a compact and polyvalent designation for the center of Bonhoeffer’s theology, and provides, I suggest, a key for its interpretation. A theology of the Word of God comprises several motifs. It sets out from acknowledgement of revelation understood as a divine performative address which judges, forgives and commands. It sees this divine activity concentrated definitively in the person of Jesus Christ. Attending to the Bible as a unique creaturely medium of the Word, such a theology affirms the concreteness and contemporaneity of God’s promise and claim. It does so because it acknowledges the vital and eloquent presence of Christ to the world. Given that God’s Word of redemption determines the very reality of the world in some deep sense, such theology seeks further to discern the contours of the world as it has been remade by grace and to reflect on the shape of a truly human life therein. As Bonhoeffer observed, “Revelation gives itself without precondition and is alone able to place one into reality.”

Whether treating the doctrine of God, the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of the church or the matter of Christian life, the vocation of a theologian of the Word of God is always to hold reason in obedience to Jesus Christ, for “the relevant is and begins where God himself is in his Word.” The prospect for an authentic and powerful Christian theology exists, Bonhoeffer argued, “as long as only one word, that is to say, the name of Jesus Christ, is not extinguished in us. This name abides as a word, the Word, around which all our words revolve. In this Word alone lies clarity and power.”

My concentrated effort here to profile Bonhoeffer as a theologian of the Word of God involves two steps. First, I offer a few remarks con-

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5Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, DBWE 2:289.
7Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945, DBWE 16:208.
cerning Bonhoeffer’s relationship with the theologies of Martin Luther and Karl Barth—two great and formative practitioners of the theology of the Word. Second, I explore some tracts of Bonhoeffer’s corpus which may not be so familiar but which—as the scale of this material in the new critical edition suggests—represent his main theological preoccupations throughout his extended engagement in the German church struggle after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Here I focus in particular on his vigorous embrace of the evangelical truths attested in the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934, the chief text of the church struggle. Reflecting on the intensity and focus of Bonhoeffer’s devotion to Barmen as a confession of the church may serve to help illustrate simultaneously the crucial importance of Scripture in Bonhoeffer’s theology as well as the unshakable centrality of Jesus Christ, the present and powerful Word of God’s own freedom ever addressing himself to the church. While not “evangelical” in the sense this term now carries broadly in English language theology, Bonhoeffer’s theology is profoundly *evangelisch* in the historic sense of that term in the European usage: that is, his theology is a sustained effort to learn afresh the substance and significance of Pauline and Lutheran faith and to attain to a better witness to the gospel of God which has been honored, as he once styled it, by “all genuine Christian thinking from Paul, Augustine, Luther, to Kierkegaard and Barth.”

**Between Martin Luther and Karl Barth**

Bonhoeffer was a highly cultured European intellectual of his era—widely read, musically talented and trained, uncommonly well-traveled, excellent at tennis, fond of smoking. He was a prolific amateur (in the

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best sense) in the study of languages and literatures, philosophy, history and popular scientific writing. His family home and formal education led to theological studies at the leading German faculties of the day, most importantly in Berlin where he worked under world-leading modern historians of the Christian tradition including Karl Holl, Reinhold Seeberg and Adolf von Harnack. While Bonhoeffer would ever acknowledge his personal debt to his Berlin teachers, he came rather quickly to chafe against them and steadily moved beyond their theological ambit through the influence of two encounters, on the one hand with Martin Luther and on the other with Karl Barth.  

Having previously only known Barth from his writings, Bonhoeffer enthused about his first meetings with the older Swiss theologian in Bonn in 1931, saying: “There is really someone from whom one takes away much; yet I sit in the impoverished Berlin and complain because no one is there who can teach theology. . . . When you see Barth you know at once . . . that there is something worthwhile to risk your life for.” It is fair to say that Barth was for Bonhoeffer the most significant contemporary theological authority and that he wrote his own theology with Barth always in mind. Right up into the late years of the war, Bonhoeffer understood himself to be one of Barth’s few loyal advocates in Germany, and saw to it that he both visited Barth and acquired proof copies of the newest volumes of Church Dogmatics on each of his trips into Switzerland. His criticisms of Barth—present forthrightly from the outset though varied in content over the years—were ever fraternal and friendly, looking for ways to do better justice to the promise

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12See Bonhoeffer, Conspiracy and Imprisonment, DBWE 16:278.
of the essential theological convictions they shared, chief among them the primacy, particularity and concreteness of God’s gracious self-revelation in Jesus Christ as the formal and material principle of any Christian theology.13 From his early dissertation criticisms of what he considered Barth’s abstract view of God’s freedom through to his late prison worries about the atrophy of the Confessing Church into a fixation on orthodoxy owed in part at least to a “positivism of revelation” arising from Barth’s teaching, Bonhoeffer aimed to take Barth’s insights and to drive them further—in these two cases respectively, first, to press beyond a formal notion of divine freedom (freedom from) to a substantive one (as freedom for) christologically understood; and second, to radicalize even further the theological critique of religion pioneered by Barth in order to win a new and powerful hearing of the claim of the gospel upon the world through a “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts.”14

Beginning with Act and Being, Bonhoeffer openly aligns himself with Barth’s struggle to reaffirm the sheer contingency of divine revelation and, on this basis, to understand theology itself as form of thinking decisively shaped by the utterly gracious and effective reality of revelation in Christ. Though he disagreed with Barth over various particulars—disputing, for example, the place of dialectics in theology as well as certain Reformed elements of Barth’s Christology and theology proper—Bonhoeffer always affirmed this central thrust of Barth’s theological revolution.15 Such a view of revelation must, Bonhoeffer contends, “yield an epistemology of its own” in which we know ourselves only as people


14On these see, respectively, Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, DBWE 2:84-85, 124-25 and Letters and Papers, DBWE 8:429.

15These disputes over theological method—the extra calvinisticum, the finitum non capax infinitum and the formal definition of divine freedom—are considered closely in the literature cited above in n. 10.
who have been “placed-into-the-truth” by God’s address, and thus admit that our very existence is “founded by means of and ‘in reference to’ God’s Word,” that is, the Word of the person of Christ. Christian theology must be theology of the Word of God because Christian faith itself arises solely from this source, or not at all.

Both Bonhoeffer’s alignment to and his arguments with Barth on such matters have their mainsprings in the influence of Martin Luther. Recent scholarship is increasingly alert to the abiding influence of Luther and the theological traditions of classical Lutheranism on Bonhoeffer. Luther remained for him a living dialogue partner and is the most frequently cited theologian in Bonhoeffer’s writings. The German Protestant church was, for Bonhoeffer, essentially a Lutheran church, which is to say, a church of the Reformation. For this reason, Bonhoeffer’s theology self-consciously engages in the protracted debate concerning the reception and interpretation of Luther’s legacy for the church in modern Germany. From the time of his two dissertations, Bonhoeffer repudiates Karl Holl’s widely influential portrait of Luther as progenitor of the religion of individual conscience. He does so precisely because Holl’s view illegitimately “circumvents” Luther’s insistence that God has “bound the divine self to the mediating Word.” In works like


19 Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, DBWE 2:141. On the debate with Karl Holl, see DeJonge, Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation, p. 118.
Discipleship he openly polemicizes against misunderstanding and abuse of Luther’s teachings on radical grace and good works, and indeed throughout the period of the church struggle he refutes as merely pseudo-Lutheran the racialist exploitation and distortion of the doctrines of the two regiments and orders of creation. He consistently called on his students to rediscover the authentic teaching of the Reformer; they should, he said, “just listen to the Bible. Just read what Luther wrote,” because in confusing times one must “go back to the very beginning, to our wellsprings, to the true Bible, to the true Luther.”

This true Luther was himself, in Bonhoeffer’s judgment, simply a skilled hearer of the gospel. And what Luther heard in the gospel was the gracious promise of divine righteousness in Jesus Christ. The most decisive thing Bonhoeffer took over from Luther was precisely this insistence on the solus Christus: the Christian thinks and speaks of God evangelically only as she thinks and speaks of Jesus Christ, the Word of God come low in humility to save.

For this reason, becoming a theologian, Bonhoeffer held, involves responsible study and listening to the witness of Scripture in order to become “attentive to the Word of God, which has been revealed right here in this world,” for it is a matter of life and death that one hear this truth.

We do well to note that Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the Word comes to us right here in this world. This stress on the concreteness of the worldly site of our encounter with God in Christ is something Bonhoeffer learned from Luther: a theology of the Word of God is concerned precisely for this gospel truth in the midst of and for the sake of this created and fallen world.

At the conclusion of his 1931-1932 lectures on the recent history of Christian systematic theology, Bonhoeffer laments the disjunction between the work of academic theology and the present situation of the churches. Observing that Luther himself had been perfectly able to

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20 Bonhoeffer, Berlin: 1932-1933, DBWE 12:443, 435. In the latter lecture, “What Ought a Student of Theology to Do?” he also adjures that “one should learn from the Holy Scriptures and the confessions of the Reformation what is the pure and true teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (p. 434, emphasis added).

21 A point eloquently made and developed by Wolf Krötke, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther,” p. 56.

preach powerfully into the church’s need in his own time and write technical theology of a high order, Bonhoeffer pleads rhetorically: “Who will show us Luther?” We can rightly say that in some sense Bonhoeffer labored to provide an answer to this question in his own subsequent theological work. Central to this effort was his theological leadership in the Confessing Church and his advocacy of the strong reading of the Barmen Theological Declaration advanced by the “Dahlemite” party to which he publicly belonged. Moving now to consider several key aspects of Bonhoeffer’s theological work in this vein, we may come to see more sharply the overarching importance of his self-understanding as a theologian of the Word of God.

The Barmen Theological Declaration and the Bible

In a circular letter from October 1935, Bonhoeffer describes the establishment of the Preachers’ Seminary in Finkenwalde, including its physical appointments and setting. Amidst the “utterly plain” and “functional” furnishings of the rooms which serve as lecture hall, dining hall and chapel together, Bonhoeffer notes that “on the wall hang the two great portraits of the Apostles by Dürer.” Bonhoeffer calls them great (grosse), presumably not only because of their size—over two meters tall if reproduced to scale—but because of the significance of their subject matter. The paintings, originally done by Dürer as a gift to the city council of Nuremberg in 1526, depict four apostles in two pairs: to the

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left, John and Peter; to the right, Mark and Paul. Though intended from the start for display in magistrates’ buildings, both the subject matter and monumental size of the images are redolent of a painted altarpiece. At the base of each, Dürer had inscribed the text of four biblical passages in Luther’s translation from 2 Peter 2:1-2, 1 John 4:1-3, Mark 12:38-40 and 2 Timothy 3:1-7.\textsuperscript{26} At the head of these scriptural verses, he had the calligrapher set this preface: “In these dangerous times all worldly rulers should take care that they do not mistake human seduction for the word of God. For God wants nothing to be taken from or added to it. Therefore, hear these four excellent men, Peter, John, Paul and Mark.”\textsuperscript{27}

In its original polemical context, the paintings constituted a “Reformation broadside” aimed to refute “both visually and verbally” Catholic and enthusiastic challenges to the principle of sola scriptura.\textsuperscript{28} In the different but no less polemical context of the German church struggle, Bonhoeffer’s decision to set up these same images prominently at the heart of the seminary at Finkenwalde is no less a “broadside.” It is of course aimed squarely at the German Evangelical Church as instrumentalized by the Nazis, the German Christian movement and, later, also toward the “compromise” party within the Confessing Church itself. It is aimed, in short, at the opponents of Barmen/Dahlem for the sake of affirming what was confessed by these two synods. Bonhoeffer was deeply convicted by the evangelical truths of Barmen and their radical implications for church order and governance drawn out at Dahlem, and his position in debates surrounding them was “radically and uncompromisingly one-sided.”\textsuperscript{29} It was Bonhoeffer’s bold conviction that

\textsuperscript{26}These texts were sawed off the works in 1627 when the paintings were moved from Protestant Nuremberg to Catholic Münich, though later restored to their place in 1922. For the complete text of the original German inscriptions, see ed. H. Rupprich, Dürer Schriftlicher Nachlaß, Bände 1 (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1956), pp. 210-13.

\textsuperscript{27}Rupprich, Dürer Schriftlicher Nachlaß, p. 210, referencing Revelation 22:18.

\textsuperscript{28}Price, Albrecht Dürer’s Renaissance, p. 273.

the Holy Spirit had stirred the church to “join the battle at a specific place,” brought about a “true confession of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and thus acted to preserve the true church. As he said, “We can no longer go back behind Barmen and Dahlem, because we can no longer go back behind the Word of God.”

As the depiction of the crucifixion from Grünewald’s Isenheim altar-piece is taken to express something of the essence of Karl Barth’s theological endeavors, so Dürer’s *Four Apostles* together with its inscription may be taken to epitomize both “visually and verbally” Bonhoeffer’s theological program during the years of the church struggle. His writing and teaching, especially after 1933, is a single sustained effort to “hear these four excellent men;” that is, to suffer the full force of the promise and claim of the gospel attested in Scripture, and as a corollary, to summon the Christian church to “take care . . . not [to] mistake human seduction for the word of God.” In the same letter in which he mentions Dürer’s painting, Bonhoeffer makes this clear, explaining to his correspondent that “the Bible stands at the focal point of our labor. For us, it has become once more the starting point and the center of our theological endeavor and all our Christian action. Here, we have learned to read the Bible prayerfully once again.”

Bonhoeffer works out his allegiance to Barmen in no small part by advocating relentlessly for the centrality and exclusivity of the biblical witness as the locus of Christ’s self-presentation to and for the Christian congregation. His concern is ever with the force of the first article of the declaration, which confesses that “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” It is no doubt true
32Bonhoeffer, DBW 14:91.
and important, as John de Gruchy and others have argued, that Bonhoeffer served the cause of Barmen by drawing out very concretely its practical implications for the church in the Third Reich and that, in so doing, he made himself “one the main links” between that confession of faith and contemporary struggles for justice and peace in the world. And it is also true that Bonhoeffer’s involvement with the nascent organs of the ecumenical movement helped to bring the ecclesiological substance of Barmen into view both at the time and since. Yet at the heart of all this was an even more basic struggle, namely the struggle to hear, to trust and to obey the one Word of God attested in Scripture, Jesus Christ, as God’s unparalleled assurance of our forgiveness and royal claim on our whole life, as the second Barmen article has it. It is emblematic of the utter seriousness of Bonhoeffer’s concern on this score that he should have redundantly amended in his own hand the dam-natus clause of the first article on his personal copy of the text of the Barmen Declaration to read: “We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should acknowledge as a source of revelation and its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historical figures, and truths as God’s revelation.”

Franz Hildebrandt certainly understood himself to speak on behalf of his lost friend when he remarked in 1984 that all of the social, political, ecclesiastical and ecumenical implications of Barmen, even the “stor[y] of the church under the cross, are but footnotes and commentaries on the es-


35Article two reads, “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.”

36A photograph of this can be seen in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Life in Pictures, ed. R. Bethge and C. Gremmels (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 145.
sential message: the Word, the whole Word, nothing but the Word.”37

If it is not too much to claim that the “record of Finkenwalde” represents an essential part of Bonhoeffer’s “responsible interpretation” of Barmen, then we should find this radical concern for the Word at the heart of the church to be borne out in texts from this period.38 And so we do. These works evince that Bonhoeffer understood that the question put to the church at Barmen was first and foremost the question of the truth of the Word of God. In allegiance to this confession, this question, that is, the question of the truth that Jesus Christ is and the “formative power of its particularity”39 for church and world—became Bonhoeffer’s central concern.40 Some few examples may suffice to demonstrate that this is the case.

On the eve of the start of the first course at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer addressed a Confessing Church gathering in Saxony on the theme of the interpretation of the New Testament. In his programmatic lecture, Bonhoeffer sets the struggle for the truth of the living and present witness of Christ through his appointed witness, namely the Scriptures, over against all efforts to justify Christianity to the present age.41 The church qua church cannot forfeit its proper concern for evangelical truth in favor of an overriding concern for relevance. As he says, “where the question of relevance becomes the theme of theology, we can be certain that the cause has already been betrayed and sold out.”42 Why should this be? Programmatic concern for relevance grants to the world, rather than the Word, the status of decisive reality; it effectively “fetters” the properly unfettered word of God and affords the present—in Bonhoeffer’s case the so-called “German hour of the church”—de facto status as “another source” of divine promise and claim which delimits the hearing

38Betram, Time for Confessing, p. 76.
41Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, pp. 308-9.
42Ibid., pp. 309-10. He takes as examples of this fate then recent works by Paul Althaus and Adolf Schlatter on the “Germanness” of the church.
of the Word and channels the church’s message.\textsuperscript{43} Put otherwise, to pursue “relevant theology” in this sense is to confess the perspicacity of our social-political contexts and the obscurity of the Scriptures.

Against this, Bonhoeffer avers that what is truly relevant “is and begins where God himself is in his Word.” The “relevant fact” is the present presence of the Spirit, who as the “subject of [biblical] interpretation,” commits the church to attend afresh to the biblical witness as the “sole and exclusive means” by which Christ speaks. The Word of God is present to the church in the power of the Spirit, and Christ comes on his people in the proclamation of the gospel with the power to “judge, command and forgive.”\textsuperscript{44} The Word provides the really relevant criterion for discerning the truth of the present situation, such that it will be the alien gospel which comes upon the world from beyond and over against it (\textit{extra nos}) that will prove itself to be supremely relevant in each and every case.

The “one Word of God” which the church has to hear will thus not be a religio-ethical programme or application arrived at by its contextual domestication.\textsuperscript{45} What makes Christian truth relevant—and this for Bonhoeffer means concrete, rampant and critical, able to arrest, turn around and sanctify women and men—is the same thing which makes it formative and effective, namely that it is the real and eloquent presence of “Christ himself as the Lord, the Judge and the Savior.” He writes,

Precisely because the so-called concrete situation of the congregation is not taken with the utmost seriousness there is room to see the true situation of [humanity] before God. God does not ask us about our being men or women or National Socialists, he asks about our faith in him and his forgiving love and our obedience towards the Word which is witnessed in the Bible.\textsuperscript{46}

In short, in as much as the church in its listening to Scripture “really takes this text as a testimony to the living Christ” it will discover “every-

\textsuperscript{43}The phrase is the title of an indicative work by Paul Althaus, The German Hour of the Church. For discussion, see Robert P. Ericksen, Theologians Under Hitler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 79-119.

\textsuperscript{44}Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, p. 316.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., p. 309.

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. 316.
thing is here.” The view Bonhoeffer advances here—in which the most effective and concretely relevant engagement with the world is a function of our exposure to the Word of God attested in Scripture—is of course redolent of Barth’s famous injunction about the salutary merit of “doing theology as if nothing had happened.” And like Barth’s tract, Bonhoeffer’s aim is to heighten the human and political significance of Christian theology precisely by demanding that it “mind its own business.” But its business, of course, is to keep abreast in thought and speech with the Word of God which is pressing on the entire world over which Christ is Lord. Hence,

the Bible knows nothing of the pathos and problem of [the question] about “our path.” Our path follows self-evidently, plainly and necessarily from the truth that is witnessed to. Our path does not have its own weight, its own problem, and certainly not its own particular tragic aspect. It is simply “doing the truth” (John 3:21), whereby the emphasis is entirely on the truth.

What is critical in all this is, as Bonhoeffer says, that “through the Bible in its fragility, God comes to meet us as the Risen One.” Such a view of the centrality and exclusivity of the truth of Scriptures in the life of the church is only credible when the biblical witness is understood to be at the disposal of Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, present in the present, addressing himself to his people with his word of freedom and direction. As such, the Scriptures never provide a cognitive “guarantee” for the course of our actions, because it is the work of the biblical witness to call Christians “to faith and obedience to the truth once acknowledged in Jesus Christ.” Outside of such a robust theology of the living Word, Bonhoeffer’s exclusive privileging of the Scriptures would dissolve into an evidentialist obscurantism which in its longing to be spared the need for faith is all-too readily instrumentalized by the

47Ibid.
50Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, p. 312.
powers of the age. But to listen for the one Word of God attested in the Scriptures is to harken unto the voice of the Risen One himself, who summons us to the venture of faith and obedience and then also strengthens us in it by the power of his Spirit. Precisely this is the motive force behind Bonhoeffer’s provocative remark that a doctrine of verbal inspiration is “a poor surrogate for the resurrection.”

With origins reaching back as far as Bonhoeffer’s time at Union Seminary in 1929-1930, his Discipleship published in 1937 can rightly be read as an exemplary iteration of his theological concerns during these most intense years of the church struggle. Like the occasional pieces considered to this point, it is also a work which clearly displays the depth of Bonhoeffer’s commitment to achieving a “responsible interpretation” of the Barmen Declaration. Further, it continues to demonstrate the priority over all other matters Bonhoeffer gives to the truth of the gospel understood as a fruit of the living Word of God attested in the Scriptures. Here we will attend briefly to the two short prefaces Bonhoeffer set at the beginning of parts one and two of the work. These prefaces are late compositions written it seems during the summer of 1937 just prior to the closure of the seminary at Finkenwalde. They breathe the same polemical air as other works from these years of crisis within the Confessing Church and concentrate just as clearly on the themes we have been canvassing.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the opening words of Discipleship are the famous programmatic claim: “Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle is for costly grace.” In fact, the discussion of grace is preceded by introductory remarks whose brevity belies their significance. The opening words of the book are in fact these:

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Bonhoeffer, Theological Education Underground, DBWE 15:420.

Bonhoeffer, Berlin, DBWE 12:331: “Verbal inspiration means to deny the Christ who alone is present as the Risen One. Inspiration from the literal words [Verbalinspiration] is a poor surrogate for the resurrection. It eternizes the historical, instead of recognizing the historical as coming from God’s eternity and God’s resurrection.”


See the editors’ introduction, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, DBWE 4:27-28.

Ibid., p. 43.
“In times of church renewal, holy scripture naturally becomes richer in content for us.” Addressing himself explicitly to the church struggle—and echoing the inscription of Dürer’s great portrait of the evangelists—Bonhoeffer says that the most basic labor of the Christian community is also its most important one, namely, to brush aside the “many dissonant sounds, so many human, harsh words, and so many false hopes and consolations, which still obscure the pure word of Jesus.” There is but one hope to see this done, and Bonhoeffer trumpets it here: “Let us be led back to scripture, to the word and call of Jesus Christ himself,” for the only sure defense against the enemies of the gospel is “the overpowering and winning word of the gospel” itself. Only this same word is able to lift us out of the “poverty and narrowness of our own convictions and questions” and to set our feet down once again in that “broad place” (Psalm 37) opened up by the calling and promise of the living Lord. Once again, Bonhoeffer sees that the Word of God must overtake and overreach the putative demands of our “situation” in order for truth and freedom for faithfulness, that is, for discipleship, to emerge. The crucial discrimination he goes on to draw out between cheap and costly grace is one which can only be discerned in a fresh hearing of the gracious voice of Jesus Christ, or not at all.

In the second short preface set at the head of his discussion of Pauline ecclesiological texts in the final part of Discipleship, Bonhoeffer points out once again a cardinal error that underwrites the frantic pursuit of contextual relevance for Christianity. What all anxious questioning about the appropriateness, applicability and force of the gospel bespeak is the fact that “we place ourselves outside the living presence of the Christ”; our handling of Scripture evinces all too clearly that “we refuse to take seriously that Jesus Christ is not dead but alive and still speaking to us today through the testimony of scripture.” But Christ is present calling his people to discipleship. And just as by the Spirit the first disciples looked to their Master, believed and followed Christ, so too for us: “we hear the word and believe in Christ.” Held firmly within context of the reality of Christ’s present presence, the Scriptures are understood to

56 For the text of the first preface cited in this paragraph, see ibid., pp. 37-40.
bear the “clear word and command” of the Lord himself, and they become the means by which we are encountered by him. So heeding the call to discipleship demands that the follower first and foremost “listen” to the proclaimed word because “the Christ who is present with us is the Christ to whom the whole of scripture testifies.” Faith together with discipleship comes through hearing, as Paul said, and hearing comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

In such remarks as these, we hear once again the distinctive echoes of the Barmen Declaration. And these prefaces specify the “one Word of God” as the single basis for the gripping account of the Christian life and controversial ecclesiology Bonhoeffer develops in the rest of Discipleship. Although the themes of discipleship and church community are often taken to be Bonhoeffer’s primary concerns, it is no small thing to keep in view that their importance is in fact derivative, following from a finally more basic concern with the hearing of the one Word of God, the present address of the living Lord Jesus Christ in the church.

A Theology of the Word of God

What kind of theologian was Dietrich Bonhoeffer? I have endeavored to show that one important answer to this question is a theologian of the Word of God. This category registers his formative indebtedness and living dialogue with the theologies of Martin Luther and Karl Barth, as well as his unstinting allegiance to the radical application of the evangelical confession of the Barmen Declaration within the German church struggle. Materially, it draws attention to the central and abiding role played in Bonhoeffer’s theology by the utterly gracious and concrete self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ represents the very enactment of God’s transcendence, not its forfeiture or compromise. In him God addresses himself to the fallen world of Adam with saving effect, bringing about a new reality, namely the one reality of the world reconciled and made new. With Luther, Bonhoeffer radically concentrates Christian attention solely on the person of Jesus Christ because in him God declares himself to be utterly

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58 Ibid., p. 206.
for us. As he wrote, “what we imagine a God could and should do—the God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that. We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus’s life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfils.”\textsuperscript{59} Christian dogmatics must therefore cleave to the confession that Jesus Christ \textit{is} God and admit that “the \textit{is} may not be interpreted any further” for having been established in the incarnation it must stand as “the premise of all our thinking and not be subject to any further constructions.”\textsuperscript{60}

The evangelical promise always addresses us from outside through the appointed witness of the Scriptures which stand fully in the service of the risen and crucified One, who is uniquely present in the power of his person as God’s word of forgiveness, claim and direction. In the spirit of Dürrer’s painting of the four apostles, Bonhoeffer’s theology pursues relevance by an ever greater concentration on listening for Christ’s voice as attested in the manifold biblical witness, and by discerning it over against “the voice of the stranger.” As Bonhoeffer himself put it,

\begin{quote}

God’s Spirit battles only through the Word of Scripture and of confession and only where my insights are overwhelmed by Scripture and confession can I know myself to be overwhelmed by the Spirit of God. . . . At such moments of responsible decision our attention must remain directed solely towards the truth of the Word of God.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

To focus on the Word in such an exclusive way, Bonhoeffer contends, does not abstract or distract from reality, but quite the opposite. For what is really going on amidst what is taking place in the world around us wins whatever reality it has only by reference to Christ, who is present as its Lord, conforming it to his gracious will and ways through the humble power of divine love. The work of the present Word is always

\textsuperscript{59}Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers}, DBWE 8:515.

\textsuperscript{60}Bonhoeffer, \textit{Berlin}, DBWE 12:350. Bonhoeffer aims to defend the graciousness and provenience of God’s contingent self-revelation in Christ by “in effect . . . doubling down on the ‘exclusive ‘Jesus Christ’-pit of the Lutherans’” as Karl Barth had once characterized it—so DeJonge, Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation, p. 105. The cited phrase is from an April 1924 letter from Barth to his friend Eduard Thurneysen.

\textsuperscript{61}Bonhoeffer, \textit{No Rusty Swords}, pp. 305-6 (DBW 14:111).
world-making. Theology becomes of worldly use precisely by discerning and keeping pace with this work of the Word in its own thought and speech. As it does this, it need not adopt an apologetic posture, either positive or negative. This last point became increasingly clear to Bonhoeffer in his last years: Christian theology does not need to disparage the world or aggravate the neediness of women and men for the sake of trying to display the relevance of the gospel. As he put it, “the Word of God does not ally itself with this rebellion of mistrust [of humanity]. . . . Instead, it reigns.”

The struggle for true Christian community and life is thus fought by renewed devotion to receiving the truth of the gospel from the hand of the living Lord of the church. Ingredient in the witness made by the faithfulness, obedience, message and order of the church will be its supreme confidence in the Word of God which has come on it. In Bonhoeffer’s own words,

In all speaking and acting in the church I am concerned with the primacy, with the sole honour and truth of the Word of God. There is no greater service of love than to put men in the light of the truth of this Word, even where it brings sorrow. The Word of God separates the spirits. There is . . . only the humble and dismayed recognition of the way which God himself will go with his Word in his church.

And the hallmark of a church gathered in faith around the self-presenting Word of God in this way will be its evangelical freedom. The liberty of the church from the “godless fetters” of this age is a function of the effective presence of its Lord, and naught else beside. The acuity with which Bonhoeffer perceived, practiced and attested this fact is arresting. Writing in the summer of 1939 Bonhoeffer explained,

The freedom of the church is not where it has possibilities, but only where the gospel is truly effective in its own power to create space for itself on earth, even and especially when there are no such possibilities for the church. The essential freedom of the church is not a gift of the world to the church but the freedom of the word of God to make itself heard. . . .

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62 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, DBWE 8:457.
63 Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, pp. 304-5 (DBW 14:110).
Only where this word can be concretely proclaimed in the midst of historical reality as judgment, commandment, gracious salvation of the sinner, and deliverance from all human ordinances is there freedom of the church.\(^{64}\)

On Bonhoeffer’s account, when the Word of God gains such a hearing for itself it does so solely for the sake of the salvation of this world of ours: the church’s freedom arises from the Word and as such takes shape in concrete service to the gospel’s cause in the world. Writing from prison in the Spring of 1944 Bonhoeffer explained,

What matters is not the beyond of this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there for this world—not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.\(^{65}\)

The point of a theology of the Word of God is that Christian faith is concerned solely with what is given in the gospel, and what is given in the gospel is God for us in Jesus Christ. At the heart of Bonhoeffer’s theological legacy is his powerful witness to the identity of the God of Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture, a God who, coming low to us in humility to save, rightly becomes and ever remains our highest concern, the very basis, measure and goal of life itself.\(^{66}\)

\(^{64}\)Bonhoeffer, Theological Education Underground, DBWE 15:448-9.

\(^{65}\)Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, DBWE 8:373.