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Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church

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FROM THE BEGINNINGS OF Bonhoeffer scholarship there has been a debate about whether there is one basic topic in his thinking. Regardless of the many changes and different concerns of his work, is there one main topic that he dealt with throughout his life, one topic that could be called the “*cantus firmus*” of his whole thinking?

Since Ernst Feil’s book on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,¹ there has been a consensus among Bonhoeffer scholars that Christology provides this *cantus firmus*. It can be discovered in Bonhoeffer’s earliest writings with their formula “Christ existing as church-community,”² in the book from Finkenwalde in which he unfolds discipleship as following after Christ, and in his final prison writings in which he explores the question “who is Christ actually for us today?”³

Yet one could also argue that ecclesiology provides the *cantus firmus*. Ecclesiology is a constant concern for Bonhoeffer; it is central to his early dissertation on the sociological structure of the church, to his book on discipleship in which he unfolds the church as the community of those who follow Christ (and are distinct from the world), and to his latest writings in prison in which he describes the church as fundamentally being-there-for-others. This is of course not a different *cantus firmus*; ecclesiology and

Christology go hand in hand for Bonhoeffer. One aim of this essay, then, is to set out why this is the case by analyzing Bonhoeffer's early thoughts on the *ontological structure* of the church. Bonhoeffer initially developed these in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* and in his postdoctoral dissertation *Act and Being*; his goal in these was to understand what it means that there *is* the church. How is this *being there* of the church to be understood? What does it mean to say that the church *is*?

I will present Bonhoeffer's early ontological theory of the church, then, firstly by explaining the theological premise of Bonhoeffer's early concept of the church, secondly by analyzing his ideas on the premise of theology, thirdly by presenting the fundamental sociological theses of Bonhoeffer's concept of the church, and fourthly by unfolding the ontological relationship of Christ and the church. The fifth and final part of my lecture will present the ontological structure of the church directly. In this sense the first four parts present the foundation for this fifth part. While I do not begin my lecture with the ontological structure of the church, by the end it should have become apparent why it is that Bonhoeffer conceives of the church in this way.⁴ Bonhoeffer's aim with this is to show that in the church God encounters human beings in a manner which has fundamental relevance for their whole existence.

The Theological Premise of Bonhoeffer's Early Concept of the Church

Bonhoeffer's dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* was one of the first sociological approaches to the church in Christian theology. When describing the essence of the church, Bonhoeffer uses insights from the fairly young disciplines of sociology and of social philosophy. Bonhoeffer nevertheless stresses that his dissertation belongs "not to the discipline of sociology of religion, but to theology."⁵ In his analysis of the church, it is theology and not sociology that is given priority. Although sociology can assist with this analysis, this is only after theological premises have been accepted.

With this approach to the essence of the church, then, Bonhoeffer differs significantly from those contemporary uses of sociology in ecclesiological theory which describe how people feel connected with each other through religious communities, or which analyze how taking part in certain communal religious actions can help people to live their

lives. Such uses are concerned solely with the anthropological function of communal religion, and neglect the question of truth; they explicitly avoid taking into account any theological or “dogmatic” perspective. Although Bonhoeffer was one of the first theologians who was open to sociology, he does not use sociology in this manner. What is fundamental for Bonhoeffer is theology and its premise. Sociology is useful only when describing the social dimensions of this premise.⁶

What then is Bonhoeffer’s theological premise of the church? It is that “the church . . . is simultaneously a historical community and one established by God.”⁷ Let’s begin with the second part of this premise. That the church is “established by God” (*gottgesetzt*)⁸ means that the very essence of the church is characterized by “new basic-relations *established by God*.”⁹ (At a later point, we will consider the shape of these new relations. Here we need to note that God is the first and fundamental actor in the church.)¹⁰ That these new relations are established by God cannot be seen because “every empirical formation is subject to the ambiguity of all human action.”¹¹ You cannot see that God is the one acting behind human beings’ activities in church. That the church is established by God is a real premise, which means that it has to be believed.¹²

This raises the question of whether it would be more accurate to maintain that the second part of the premise (if you will the “establishment clause”) is theological in nature, whereas the first part (the church as a “historical community”) is a sociological premise. This is not the case because the church is not a historical community by accident.¹³ The main reason for the historical dimension of the church is that it is “God’s will that all God’s revelation, both in Christ and in the church, be concealed under the form of historical life.”¹⁴ While the church as a historical community is visible, this historicity is also grounded in God’s will.

At a later point we will examine the relation of church and revelation and why specifically the historical dimension of revelation is essential. Here it is sufficient to summarize that both aspects—being established by God and being a historical community—belong to the theological premise of Bonhoeffer’s concept of the church in that both refer to God’s will and action. That the church essentially is “God’s church”¹⁵ means the “concept of the church . . . cannot be deduced.”¹⁶

The Premise of Theology

The reason that a strictly sociological analysis as such cannot grasp the essence of the church, as Bonhoeffer explains in *Sanctorum Communio*, is that what the church is can only be understood through believing its premise. This is similar to how Bonhoeffer argues against the ability of philosophy to understand who human beings are in his habilitation thesis *Act and Being*.

Philosophical concepts attempt to understand the human self only out of itself. They always present “a system in which the I understands itself through itself and can place itself into the truth.”¹⁷ In this way they ignore the fact that who one is, from a theological perspective, can only be understood by beginning with revelation, with “an occurrence originating with God.”¹⁸

What exactly is the structure of Bonhoeffer’s theological critique of philosophy? Does he begin with philosophy and then prove that philosophy with its self-relatedness cannot reach the truth? Or does he instead begin with a certain theological concept of truth and then prove that philosophy cannot comprehend this truth? In other words, when he assesses the usefulness of philosophy, does he begin with philosophy, or does he begin with theology? I will argue that Bonhoeffer (in a way that parallels his use of sociology) begins with theology. He begins with the thesis that the human being as a sinner “refers everything to himself, puts himself in the center of the world, does violence to reality, makes himself God, and God and the other man his creatures.”¹⁹ In this way the human being misses his or her own reality entirely.

This self-enclosed structure is what defines the sinful human being and how this being uses his or her reason philosophically. Human reason after the fall is such that “[t]hrough the act of knowing, the known is put at the disposition of the I.”²⁰ Every “[g]odless thought . . . remains self-enclosed.”²¹ In other words, philosophy cannot understand who human beings really are, simply because it is not theology. Insofar that it only deals with reason (without faith), it has the same sinful, self-enclosed structure as the sinner as such.²²

Bonhoeffer is very much aware that this insight into the insufficiency of philosophy has been gained from a theological perspective: “Those who have been placed in the midst of such presuppositions [namely, that it is not possible for human beings to place themselves into the truth] must alone judge to be untruth Dasein’s [that is: a human being’s] attempts to

understand itself out of its own possibilities . . . This means that nothing can justify this presupposition save God—which is to say, the presupposition justifies itself.”²³ What this means, then, is that theology always begins with revelation. Furthermore faith is the only adequate relation to revelation. It is only through faith that one is able to acknowledge revelation and know of its truth: “Faith is acceptance of God’s sovereign will, submission to the divine truth.”²⁴ Consequently, “faith is the given prerequisite for positive theological knowledge.”²⁵ In summary: the premise of theology is revelation and faith in this revelation.

This also means that it is important to conceive revelation correctly. In Bonhoeffer’s judgment, many theological concepts fail to do this in a satisfactory way. Either they fail to understand the historical dimension of revelation, or they neglect its God-established dimension.

Karl Barth, for example, fails to understand the historical dimension of revelation. In Barth’s theology (and Bonhoeffer is here referring to the theology of the second edition of his Letter to the Romans), God reveals himself in his historical word. In Bonhoeffer’s assessment, however, “God is bound to nothing, not even the ‘existing,’ ‘historical’ Word.”²⁶ His “real word [*eigentliches Wort*]” is free.²⁷ In this way Barth has too weak an understanding of the historical dimension of revelation and of how God through revelation has somehow bound himself to history. In Bonhoeffer’s opinion, revelation “is a matter of God’s *given* Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God’s own action . . . God freely chose to be bound to *historical human beings* and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God’s freedom.”²⁸ In other words, God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings! This is therefore why revelation has such a strong historical dimension; revelation really has to be found in history, rather than always already in the past when human beings think they have encountered it. For Bonhoeffer, there has to be a continuity of revelation in history.

Rudolf Bultmann, by contrast, fails to adequately preserve the “God-established” dimension of revelation. According to Bonhoeffer, Bultmann correctly stresses the importance of the historicity or “*Geschichtlichkeit*” of human existence. This *Geschichtlichkeit* especially means for him that human beings must constantly and at every moment of history decide how they want to live, either authentically or inauthentically. Or, put theologially, they must decide whether they want to live as sinners or in faith. Even if Bultmann stresses that faith is not possible without grace,

faith for him is an “ontological possibility” of human existence.²⁹ In Bonhoeffer’s judgment, Bultmann therefore thinks of revelation “within the *static* possibilities of Dasein.” He fails to see “that the essence of revelation lies in its *event-character* . . . it . . . has the essential character of an event, one that comes from God’s freedom.”³⁰ In other words, Bultmann neglects how revelation is comprehensively established by God. In this way Bultmann neglects the actuality of revelation.

Some theological concepts deny the historical character of revelation (Barth), whereas others deny how it is established by God (Bultmann). For Bonhoeffer, by contrast, revelation is both; it is something historical *and* something that is established by God.

In Bonhoeffer’s theology, then, it is the church which meets both of these criteria of revelation: it has a historical dimension and it is established by God. But what about the aspect of community: “the church . . . is simultaneously a historical *community* and one established by God”³¹? Before identifying the church as the place where revelation takes place we need to understand why revelation requires this communal aspect. Why do we encounter revelation only in a community of human beings? On this basis we now turn to Bonhoeffer’s interest in sociality.

The Sociality of Human Spirit and of the Christian Concept of Personhood

Bonhoeffer approaches the question of sociality of human beings from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, he discusses the sociality of the human spirit; on the other, he discusses the sociality of the Christian concept of personhood. The first is a discussion at the level of the characteristics of human mind; the second is a discussion at the level of ethics.

We turn first to the sociality of the human spirit. For Bonhoeffer, the basic capacities of human spirit—i.e., thinking, willing and feeling—all presuppose and require sociality. These capacities require a certain *structural openness* to other human beings.³² At the same time, however, he also insists that they require a corresponding *structural closedness*. These capacities require an independent *I* who is both conscious of these capacities and determines him or herself in them.³³

Of special interest for our concern is Bonhoeffer’s description of the human will. What proves definitive for the human will? For Bonhoeffer, the human will becomes active only when it encounters resistance: “Will

comes into being where there is ‘resistance.’”³⁴ Bonhoeffer emphasizes that this resistance cannot be physical in nature, because something physical is a boundary only for human power, but not for human will. Let me give an example for this: If we *will* to go through a wall, then this wall is clearly a limit on a physical level. However, it still does not limit our willing to go through the wall; this is something we are still able to will. Only the *will of another human mind that can provide real resistance*: “Will itself experiences resistance only in the will of a person who wills something different.”³⁵ In other words, when I encounter the will of another human being, either he submits to my will or I submit to his or her will. It is for this reason, then, that will as such only exists in sociality.

With both of these aspects in mind—the openness and closedness of the human spirit—Bonhoeffer concludes that “one cannot speak of the priority of either personal or social being.”³⁶ This openness and closeness, then, or being open to another human being and yet still being a self-conscious and self-determined I, is the formal presupposition for becoming a person.

With this in mind we can now turn to Bonhoeffer’s concept of personhood. If human beings are such that “[t]hrough the act of knowing, the known is put at the disposition of the I”³⁷ and that every “[g]odless thought . . . remains self-enclosed,”³⁸ then a decisive change for human existence only becomes possible when this power of the I encounters a real boundary, that is, something that cannot simply be put at the disposal of the I but which breaks open its self-enclosedness. Where can human beings experience a real encounter or boundary of this kind? Bonhoeffer argues that this becomes possible only “within the ethical sphere.”³⁹ The ethical sphere is the place in which a human being stands “in the situation of responsibility.”⁴⁰ Specifically, it is where he or she has to respond to the claim of the other.

Why is it that the other human being constitutes a real encounter for me? To be clear, this is not because he or she is different or occupies a place which I myself do not. Rather, it is because this other human being makes a claim that I *should* be responsible to him or her. It is through this claim that our wills encounter one another. The will of the other person presents a limit for me (as could be seen in the characteristics of the human spirit). By recognizing that there is another will that I cannot simply put under my disposal, then I recognize that there really is a “You”⁴¹, that is, someone transcendent who comes from the outside.⁴² What is also important here is that this is a *concrete* transcendence, a transcendence

“experienced only by those facing a decision.”⁴³ As Bonhoeffer insists, “it can never be demonstrated to someone on the outside.”⁴⁴ This situation of decision, then, is the situation in which I become *a person*.⁴⁵

In this sense, becoming a person is only possible when I recognize the *other* and answer to him or her (openness), and do so precisely as an *I* (closedness). In summary: spirit at one level requires social existence (i.e., as its formal presupposition). More importantly, however, becoming a person requires an encounter with others; personhood requires community.

This ethical concept of personhood *could* be understood as if Bonhoeffer is claiming that it is only in the ethical encounter with another human being that we encounter God; the ethical encounter of humans is the *mediator* for encountering God. Some sentences in *Sanctorum Communio* seem to suggest just this, and he writes, for example that the “you-character is in fact the essential form in which the divine is experienced.”⁴⁶

In *Act and Being*, however, Bonhoeffer clearly criticizes this understanding of an ethical concept of personhood: “Only *through Christ* does my neighbor meet me as one who claims me *in an absolute* way from a position outside my existence . . . Without Christ, even my neighbor is for me no more than a possibility of self-assertion through ‘bearing the claim of the other.’”⁴⁷ It is through Christ, in other words, that I hear this claim as absolute and understand that I can bear the claim only in Christ: “The human being perceives the claim of the neighbor as the absolute only if God’s absolute claim in Christ *has encountered* him and *given* him the answer to the question about himself.”⁴⁸ In this way the encounter with Christ has ontological rather than temporal priority: “There is a boundary only for a concrete human being in its entirety, and this boundary is called *Christ*.”⁴⁹ It is the church that the encounter with Christ takes place.

The Ontological Relation of Christ and the Church

Bonhoeffer unfolds the priority of Christ through his concept of the church as not simply a community of human beings, but fundamentally as “*Christ existing as church-community*.”⁵⁰

What is important in this formula of “Christ existing as church-community” is its ontological character. The church-community is not something which is somehow qualified by Christ, rather it is itself a form of Christ’s existence: the church-community is “the present Christ

himself.”⁵¹ What consequences does this have for the question of where we experience a real encounter with the other?

Christ as the revelation of the absolute God is the only one who is able to claim me in an absolute way from the outside. Therefore it is *only through Christ* that human existence can be encountered. Moreover, because the church is the only form in which we now have access to Christ, this encounter with Christ must take place within the church: “[O]nly through the person of Christ can the existence of human beings be encountered, placed into truth, and transposed into a new manner of existence. But as the person of Christ has been revealed in the community of faith, the existence of human beings can be encountered *only* through the community of faith.”⁵²

Why is this *present Christ*, who is *existing* in the church-community, so important for the idea of revelation? Finally, we come to the necessity of history. If God is a person then his revelation has to be such that the character of this personhood is preserved. In particular, personhood includes freedom and uniqueness, both of which are possible only in the context of history.⁵³ Human beings cannot themselves conceive of this contingency and cannot include it in their system of ideas. Here the freedom and uniqueness of the person in principle can be maintained. If God wants to reveal himself as person, history is therefore the only place where this can take place.⁵⁴ Whereas for Jesus’ contemporaries this revelation of God in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth really was contingent, however, we now hear the story of Jesus Christ as a story from the past. Yet the problem with past stories is that they are not really able to challenge us; we can too easily explain them by locating them in their context. For this reason the story of Jesus Christ can have relevance for us only where it encounters us today. This is why Jesus Christ has to encounter us as a present Christ. This is why he has to encounter us in the church as Christ’s mode of being for us today. Specifically, this happens in the present proclamation of the church in word and sacrament. In this proclamation the past is incorporated into the present.⁵⁵

The concept of Christ existing as church-community, then, does *not* mean that Christ is existing *only* in the church-community and nowhere else (i.e., as some death of God theologians have maintained). As Bonhoeffer writes, “Christ has ascended into heaven and is now with God, and we still await Christ’s coming.” What this means is that a “complete identification between Christ and the church-community cannot be made.”⁵⁶ Or as Bonhoeffer elsewhere puts it, “the tension between ‘Christ

existing as community' and the heavenly Christ, whom we await, persists."⁵⁷ In other words, the church-community is no more and no less than *one* mode of being of Christ: namely, that mode of being in which Christ is there for us today.

To be clear, "Christ existing as community" is not a metaphysical claim about the church. Rather, it describes what takes place concretely when one church member becomes *Christ to the other*. It is when we become Christ to the other in the church-community that then Christ is present. This occurs in the *structure* of being with-each-other and in the *action* of being for-each-other.⁵⁸

On the one hand, the structure of *with-each-other* means that wherever one member of the church is, "the church-community is with this individual."⁵⁹ This sense is one in which we bear the burdens and sufferings of each other and become "Christ in relation to the neighbor."⁶⁰ At the same time, the action of *for-each-other* means that through "self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor; intercessory prayer; and . . . the mutual forgiveness of sins"⁶¹ we can again become "Christ to the other."⁶² This fact that we exist *with each other* in the church is something that has to be believed.⁶³ Furthermore, faith is also necessary for being *for each other*; in order for this to occur one has to be able to hear the claim and need of the other as the claim of Christ, which is in turn only possible through faith.

Finally, the fact that the other is not only a You, who has a claim on me, but also an I, a person, who understands my claim as qualified absolutely through Christ, means that I can only fully experience this other when he or she *is revealed* to me *as love*.⁶⁴ This happens when the other is there *for me* in the church-community: "In the community of saints . . . the You reveals itself to the I as another I, as heart, as love, as Christ."⁶⁵ My recognition of this revelation again depends on faith: "One person cannot know the other, but can only acknowledge and 'believe' in the other."⁶⁶

In summary: the structure of the *with-each-other*, the action of the *for-each-other*, and the encounter with the other as a loving I are all only possible within the church and through faith.

There is one final aspect of the ontological relation of Christ and the church that requires our attention before we proceed to the final section: Bonhoeffer's concept of the collective person. This concept indicates how a community is more than only an accumulation of individuals standing in I-You-relations to each other; community is "a spiritual reality that

is more than the sum of all the individuals.”⁶⁷ As a collective person it has its own “center of activity.”⁶⁸ With respect to the church, then, it is Christ who is both the center of activity of the church-community and its collective person.⁶⁹ At the same time, every single member of the church-community is able to represent the collective person; this is precisely why every member is able to become *Christ* to the other.

On this basis, then, it is apparent that Bonhoeffer’s ontological account of the *church* has to be understood in personal categories: “The Protestant idea of the church is conceived in personal terms—that is, God reveals the divine self in the church as person.”⁷⁰ It is in the church as the community qualified by Christ, then, that real encounter happens. Furthermore, it does so in a *historically* and *God established* way;⁷¹ in the church we encounter revelation.

The Ontological Structure of the Church

It is finally possible, then, to directly examine the ontological structure of the church as the place where we encounter revelation. Bonhoeffer identifies three aspects of this ontological structure in particular. He insists, first, that in the church “the being of revelation can be conceptualized in continuity”; second, that “the existence of human beings is really affected”; and third, that “the being of revelation can be conceptualized neither as what exists, as something objective, nor as non-existing, as something nonobjective.”⁷² It is necessary to examine each of these aspects in further detail.

The significance of the first aspect, then, is that it again indicates how God has bound himself in revelation. The being of revelation is able to be conceptualized in continuity precisely because of its presence in the church. Further, it is the fact that God has bound himself to the proclamation of the church—specifically to its preaching and the sacraments—that allows for the reliable communication of this revelation.

In the church-community, then, people are not only able to talk about their personal experience of being forgiven, but “[t]he community of faith really does have the word of forgiveness at its disposal.”⁷³ Bonhoeffer insists that “the congregation may declare in sermon and sacrament that ‘you are forgiven.’”⁷⁴ In this sense Christ actually is the subject of this proclamation.⁷⁵ It is through this forgiveness which is at

the church's disposal that the continuity of revelation takes place in the church.⁷⁶

Second, the continuity of revelation requires that it *really* affects the individual; its continuity has meaning only because it addresses us. How does this affection of the individual become possible? Specifically, it becomes possible through the encounter with Christ which is in turn made possible by "Christ existing as church-community." It is because Christ makes the other's claim and love relevant to me in the church that revelation encounters me existentially.⁷⁷ It is also when this happens that I find myself within the collective person "Christ existing as church-community." For both the continuity and the existentiality of revelation, then, it is necessary that the church is a collective person.

This leads us to the third aspect: namely, the question of how the being of revelation in the church should be conceptualized. As Bonhoeffer writes, "the being of revelation can be conceptualized neither as what exists [*als Seiendes*], as something objective [*Gegenständliches*], nor as non-existing [*als Nichtseiendes*], as something nonobjective [*Nichtgegenständliches*]."⁷⁸ Although there has to be continuity and existentiality of the revelation, then, the ontological structure of the church cannot simply be understood as a synthesis of act and being. It is neither *Seiendes* (being) nor *Nichtseiendes* (act).

This is again necessary in order to preserve the existentiality and continuity of revelation. On the one hand, if revelation were to be "fixed in what exists" (i.e., *Seiendes*) it would be "existentially of no interest." Correlatively, were it evaporated into nonobjectivity (i.e., *Nichtseiendes*), then its continuity of revelation would be lost.⁷⁹ Consequently, the ontological character of revelation must, as Bonhoeffer writes, entail a "tension [*Schwebe*] between entity and nonentity."⁸⁰ In my own understanding, this indicates a third mode of being beyond *Seiendes* and *Nichtseiendes*. It is this third ontological mode that maintains revelation in its continuity and existentiality.

It is this third mode of being which can be found in Christ as "the revealed person of God and the personal community that is founded through God's person."⁸¹ The person of Christ and the community of persons founded through Christ have "genuine objectivity" (which differs from the ordinary objectivity and of course from the non-objectivity).⁸²

To be clear, this character of "genuine objectivity" in the strictest sense pertains solely to the person of Christ. Although Christ encounters us in objective things (*in Seiendem*), and specifically in the concretely

visible⁸³ community of the church, Christ is not identical with them. He cannot be drawn into the circle of the I. Bonhoeffer is clear that the person of Christ “concretely stands-over-against” the I. It “does not let itself be drawn into the power of the I, because it itself puts limits on existence, since it is the ‘outside’ per se.”⁸⁴ In other words, Christ encounters us in *Seiendem*, but is not himself *Seiendes*. However, because he encounters us in *Seiendem*, he is also not *Nichtseiendes*. Christ is neither act nor being, but, rather belongs to this third ontological category.

For this reason it is also only Christ who gives the other human being the same ontological character. Without Christ, the other human being remains “something that exists, a thing, a ‘there is,’ in relation to which a neutral behavior is possible which does not touch my existence.”⁸⁵ It is only through Christ, and therefore in the church, that the other human being is qualified by a transcendent being who is beyond my disposal. It is as they are constituted by Christ, then, that those who are in the church have the ontological character of neither act nor being as well.

At the same time, there is another ontological structure present in the church—namely, the “dialectic of faith and church.”⁸⁶ Human beings belong to the church only through faith: “In order to ‘become’ members of the church, human beings must believe.”⁸⁷ The fact that human beings *are* in the church only through an act of faith again means that they understand the personhood of the others only through faith.⁸⁸ On the other hand, faith is in turn only possible for those who are within the church: “Faith has, as its presupposition, being in the church. Faith invariably discovers itself already in the church.”⁸⁹ In other words, to believe means to discover that it is not we who constitute God’s grace, but rather that God and his grace are already there. The fact that we now can encounter God only in the church means to discover that the church is already there,⁹⁰ or that we already *are* a member of this church. In this sense the act of faith itself becomes possible only through a preceding being.

If these claims initially appear contradictory—i.e., that the act of faith requires being in the church, and that being in the church requires the act of faith—they nevertheless belong together: “only in faith do human beings know the being of revelation, their own being in the church of Christ, to be independent of faith.”⁹¹ Faith and being in the church mutually found or form a “synthesis of act and being.”⁹²

It is on this basis, then, that Bonhoeffer also speaks of the person as a synthesis of act and being.⁹³ Does this mean that I was mistaken in arguing that the person is neither an act nor a being? I do not think so;

it is possible to differentiate between what *constitutes* a person and what *characterizes* a person. On the one side, a person is constituted by the synthesis of the act of faith and the being in the church. As Bonhoeffer writes, persons “are what they are on account of membership in the new humanity . . . All this they ‘are’ only in referential-act toward Christ,” i.e., in faith.⁹⁴ He is also clear, however, that “their being-‘in reference to’-Christ is rooted in their being in Christ, in the community of faith.”⁹⁵ This describes how the synthesis of act and being in the church constitutes the person.

At the same time, the person is *characterized* as both existing historically (i.e., a person *does not* evaporate into nonbeing) and as constituted by something transcendent, namely Christ (i.e., a person is not a reified existing thing). The “being of human beings . . . is *not* to be thought of as a reified existing thing *nor* as having evaporated into nonbeing [*weder als Seiendes erstarrt, noch ins Nichtsein verflüchtigt gedacht*].”⁹⁶ In this sense the person is and remains in “tension [*Schwebe*] between entity and nonentity.”⁹⁷

If it is true that faith is only possible in the church and that the church can only be understood by believing its claim to be the revelation of God, then it’s absolutely clear why Bonhoeffer says that understanding the church is possible only “by stepping inside it,”⁹⁸ and that the essence of the church cannot be understood from *the outside*, but only from *within*.⁹⁹ What this ontological structure of the church means, then, is that only members of the church (i.e., believers) can properly understand. The essence of the church is available neither to sociology nor to philosophy. To quote Bonhoeffer one final time: “The church can in its essence be understood only *as a divine act, which means, through a statement of faith.*”¹⁰⁰

This chapter has argued that for Bonhoeffer the character of the church can only be understood from a theological premise, because the church is established by God and even its historical shape has its reason in God’s will and deed. It has explained Bonhoeffer’s opinion that only in the church, through the encounter with the present Christ, human beings become persons. For only here they hear the absolute claim of the other which breaks open their self-centeredness and become aware of the other. Only in the church, which is the present Christ himself, am I able to understand the ethical claim of the other as absolute, and only in Christ am I able to bear and answer the claim of the other. The ontological structure of the church corresponds to these insights: the ontological continuity of

the church allows for a reliable communication of the revelation of Christ and the ontological existentiality of the church makes revelation really touch human existence. Accordingly, Bonhoeffer conceives the personhood of Christ and—through Christ—of the members of the church as being a mode of being of its own which guarantees both.

Notes to Chapter 3—Tietz

1. Feil, *Theology*.
2. E.g., DBWE 1, 121.
3. DBWE 8, 362.
4. I here refer to the results of my dissertation *Bonhoeffers Kritik der verkrümmten Vernunft* (*Bonhoeffer's Critique of Incurved Reason*). Those interested in this topic further may also want to look at deJonge's *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation* and the standard work by Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*.
5. DBWE 1, 21.
6. See *ibid.*: There is a “social intention of all the basic Christian concepts. ‘Person,’ ‘primal state,’ ‘sin,’ and ‘revelation’ can be fully comprehended only in reference to sociality. If genuinely theological concepts can only be recognized as established and fulfilled in a special social context [German: “eigenen sozialen Sphäre,” DBW 1, 13; it should better be translated as: “in a social sphere of its own”], then it becomes evident that a sociological study of the church has a specifically theological character” [German: “so läßt sich von hier aus der spezifisch theologische Charakter einer Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche wahren”];

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it should be translated as: “from here on the specifically theological character of a sociology of the church can be protected”].

7. DBWE 1, 126.

8. DBW 1, 79.

9. DBWE 1, 125 (my emphasis).

10. Bonhoeffer explains this by quoting “You did not choose me, but I chose you” from John 15. DBWE 1, 125.

11. DBWE 1, 125.

12. Cf. DBWE 1, 126–27: “The new ontic basic-relations are the foundation of a social entity that, viewed from the outside, can only be called a ‘religious community’ . . . [T]he claim of the church to be God’s church [has to be taken] . . . seriously . . . One premise . . . will not have to be justified further, namely that we take the claim of the church seriously, i.e., not as being historically comprehensible, but as being grounded in the reality of God.” Bonhoeffer distinguishes between the *essential* and the *empirical* church. With this he changes the traditional pair of the invisible and the visible church, because the “concept of the invisibility of the church is dangerous mainly because it implies that the visible, i.e., the empirical church, is not church.” Bonhoeffer instead wants to say that the “‘essential’ church becomes literally visible in the empirical church. Its members are very concretely visible, but only faith sees them in their capacity as members” (DBWE 1, 221); only faith sees them as members of the essential church which is set up by God.

13. Cf. DBWE 1, 125–26.

14. DBWE 1, 126.

15. *Ibid.*

16. DBWE 1, 127.

17. DBWE 2, 76.

18. DBWE 2, 110.

19. DBWE 10, 453.

20. DBWE 2, 94.

21. DBWE 2, 89.

22. This self-enclosure of reason is so fundamental that reason is unable to recognize its self-enclosure. For recognizing it would mean to recognize at least some truth (cf. DBWE 2, 80). But then sin would not be an existential category shaping a human being’s whole existence: “For it would mean that human beings could place themselves into the truth, that they could somehow withdraw to a deeper being of their own, apart from their being sinners, their ‘not being in the truth’” (DBWE 2, 136). In philosophy, that thinking tries to understand

itself out of itself “really means, however, that it basically does not understand itself. Indeed it does not understand itself until this I has been encountered and overwhelmed in its existence by an other” (DBWE 2, 45).

23. DBWE 2, 110 (translation altered).

24. DBWE 1, 202.

25. DBWE 1, 127.

26. DBWE 2, 82. Cf. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 295, quoted in DBWE 2, 82–83: “The relation between God and human beings, in which God’s revelation to me, to a human being, is truly imparted, would have to be free and not static in the sense that its constancy could never mean anything other than the constancy of an action that is not only continuous but in every instance beginning, in all seriousness, at the beginning.”

27. DBWE 2, 82 (translation altered).

28. DBWE 2, 90–91 (second emphasis is mine).

29. Letter of Bultmann to Barth, February 16, 1930, in Barth and Bultmann, *Briefwechsel 1911–1966*, 102 (my translation).

30. DBWE 2, 78n89 (my emphases).

31. DBWE 1, 126 (my emphasis).

32. Bonhoeffer explains that all actions of the mind at least could be communicated with others—e.g., we use language, when we think. Yet: “The phenomenon of language would be meaningless . . . were not the understanding of the listener or reader potentially correlated to each word. Thus, with language, a *system of social spirit* has been built into human beings” (DBWE 1, 69–70).

33. Cf. DBWE 1, 67.

34. DBWE 1, 72.

35. Ibid.

36. DBWE 1, 75.

37. DBWE 2, 94.

38. DBWE 2, 89.

39. DBWE 1, 47.

40. DBWE 1, 49.

41. Cf. DBWE 1, 51.

42. Cf. DBWE 1, 52.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Cf. DBWE 1, 49: “It is a Christian insight that the person as conscious

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being is created in the moment of being moved—in the situation of responsibility, passionate ethical struggle, confrontation by an overwhelming claim; thus the real person grows out of the concrete situation.”

46. DBWE 1, 55. Cf. DBWE 8, 501: “The transcendent is . . . the neighbor within reach in any given situation.”

47. DBWE 2, 127 (my emphases). Cf. DBWE 2, 126: It is only the “encounter . . . by the person of Christ in judgment or in the incorporation into the community of faith,” which really comes from the outside.

48. DBWE 10, 403 (my emphases).

49. DBWE 2, 45.

50. E.g., DBWE 1, 121.

51. DBWE 1, 190 (emphasis in the original).

52. DBWE 2, 114 (my emphases).

53. Cf. DBWE 10, 456. This can also be deduced from Bonhoeffer’s concept of ethical responsibility which creates a person: to be ethically responsible you need to be free and unique.

54. Cf. *ibid.*

55. Cf. DBWE 2, 110–11. Cf. the trenchant wording in *ibid.*: The Christian revelation “for those human beings living in the church, in each present, this once-and-for-all occurrence is qualified as future” [“dies einmalig Geschehene [ist] qualifiziert . . . als Zukunft für den je in Gegenwart lebenden Menschen in der Kirche”] (DBW 2, 107–8).

56. DBWE 1, 140.

57. DBWE 2, 112n39.

58. Cf. DBWE 1, 178, my translation of the phrases “strukturelles Miteinander” and “tätiges Füreinander” (DBW 1, 117).

59. DBWE 1, 181 (emphasis in the original).

60. DBWE 1, 178.

61. DBWE 1, 184 (emphasis in the original).

62. DBWE 1, 183.

63. Cf. DBWE 1, 182.

64. Cf. DBWE 1, 56.

65. DBWE 1, 213.

66. DBWE 1, 54.

67. DBWE 1, 190.

68. DBWE 1, 78.

69. Cf. DBWE 1, 140.

70. DBWE 2, 112.

71. Cf. DBWE 2, 111.

72. DBWE 2, 113.

73. DBWE 2, 112.

74. DBWE 2, 113.

75. Cf. DBWE 2, 129.

76. There is also continuity on the side of the hearer of the sermon. As it is not mainly the individual who hears, but the church that hears (even in the person of the preacher himself) the proclamation is always heard. It is not me as a hearer who has to guarantee that the revelation always reaches people; it is the church that guarantees the continuity of the hearer as well; cf. DBWE 2, 113–14.

77. Cf. DBWE 2, 114.

78. DBWE 2, 113.

79. DBWE 2, 114.

80. DBWE 2, 115 (= DBW 2, 111: “Schwebe zwischen Seiendem und Nichtseiendem”).

81. DBWE 2, 122 (translation altered).

82. DBWE 2, 114–15.

83. Cf. DBWE 2, 115.

84. DBWE 2, 115.

85. DBWE 2, 112 (translation altered).

86. DBWE 2, 114.

87. DBWE 2, 117.

88. This happens very concretely: only when you believe in Christ will you then believe that the church is established by God and thus will understand what the church is about; cf. DBWE 2, 116.

89. DBWE 2, 117.

90. Cf. *ibid.*: “To believe means much the same as to find God, God’s grace, the community of faith of Christ already present.”

91. DBWE 2, 118.

92. DBWE 2, 120.

93. Cf. *ibid.*

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*

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96. DBWE 2, 119–20, my emphases (= DBW 2, 117).

97. DBWE 2, 115 / DBW 2, 111: “Schwebe zwischen Seiendem und Nichtseiendem.”

98. DBWE 1, 127.

99. Cf. *ibid.*: “[T]he church can be understood fully only from within, on the basis of its own claim; only on this basis can we develop appropriately critical criteria for judging it.”

100. DBWE 1, 277.