

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Apocalyptic Theology, and the Possibility of Christian Ethics”

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### Abstract:

If one takes the assertions of Christianity seriously – that God became incarnate, was crucified, resurrected, and will come again – then one faces complex questions about worldly human responsibility and agency. Indeed, God’s apocalyptic intervention in history appears to override the possibility of meaningful human responsibility or agency, seemingly eliminating the possibility of Christian ethics. In this paper, I explore this ‘problem of Christian ethics,’ finding a solution in a reading of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer through the lens of Pauline apocalyptic. I argue that Bonhoeffer restores the viability and integrity of Christian ethics by adopting a thoroughly apocalyptic theology, affirming human responsibility and agency in a world that is ultimately in the hands of a sovereign God. Far from issuing a call to follow an ethical program or a facile imitation of Jesus, Bonhoeffer develops what scholar Philip Ziegler calls a “theological ethics of God’s apocalypse,” one in which human knowledge, agency, and ethics are radically transformed by the apocalypse of Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid proposition or a law,  
but... God became man.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

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“Christian ethics” is a precarious concept. If one takes the otherworldly assertions of Christianity seriously – that there is an omnipotent God who entered history as a human being and will return to do so again – then one faces complex questions about worldly human responsibility and agency. It seems as if the consideration of ethics in light of Christian belief and the revelation or apocalypse (ἀποκάλυψις) of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ might encourage the adoption of one of two competing perspectives:<sup>1</sup>

(1) *Irresponsible Otherworldliness*. The world has been condemned through God’s righteous judgment on the cross and therefore Christians should reject the world. In other words, the ‘old world’ is passing away and will be replaced by the otherworldly kingdom of God. Christians should focus their efforts and attention on the coming kingdom of God and not on the passing problems and institutions of this world.<sup>2</sup>

(2) *Irresponsible This-worldliness*. The world has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Through Christ’s work on the cross, sinners have been justified. In effect, God has sanctioned the world or, at least the Christian, who is therefore able to live in the world carefree. Nothing humans do (to one another, to the environment, etc.) can alter what God has already accomplished and is accomplishing in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> DBWE 6, 236-237. Bonhoeffer describes the church’s assumption that there is a ‘worldly’ principle and a Christian principle is a grave error “found throughout the history of the church.” To be clear, however, there are countless ways to articulate these problems or modify them. I merely present the two options here as a means for framing the discussion in terms closely related to questions that I, and I believe Bonhoeffer, wrestle(d) with.

<sup>2</sup> I think back to a conversation I had with a church friend in Oxford in 2020. My friend, who was an intern/apprentice at the church I was attending, told me that she participated in a training in which the central question was whether or not Christians should care about or engage in climate advocacy in light of the coming kingdom of God and the inevitable ‘passing away’ of this world. More on this below.

The first option effectively results in a *retreat from the world*. Protestant Christians, from Martin Luther to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have criticized (whether fairly or not) Catholic monasticism for its escapism and anti-worldliness. Bonhoeffer writes of monasticism that “the futile attempt to escape from the world takes seriously neither God’s No, which applies to the whole world including the monastery, nor, on the other hand, God’s Yes, in which God reconciles the world with himself.”<sup>3</sup> On this particular view, there is no imperative to engage the world if one understands it as temporary or somehow ‘less real’ than the otherworldly kingdom of God. What’s more, if Christ’s return is going to usher in a new kingdom, what business does the Christian have fighting climate change, racial injustice, or extreme poverty?<sup>4</sup> These realities will fade away with the advent of the coming kingdom of God when Christ returns.

The second option, on the other hand, results in a *rushing-into the world*. If one understands oneself to be living in a world in which God’s work is already done – His judgment and reconciliation pronounced and left upon the cross – then one might believe that God has effectively sanctioned the status quo and that the world has taken on an autonomous nature. What is to stop the one who believes this from simply enjoying the world without regard for the otherworldly kingdom of God? This reasoning is supported by an understanding of the world as independent from – or at least inconsequential to – the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup>

Though these two perspectives are oversimplifications of conversations surrounding Christian behavior, they capture some, though not all, of the formal problems facing Christian ethics. In both of these perspectives, there is an additional element that is particularly troubling for

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<sup>3</sup> DBWE 6, 291.

<sup>4</sup> See “The Loneliness of the Climate Change Christian.” *NPR Radio*. Listen especially to the 12-minute mark for a discussion on understandings of ‘dominion’ in Genesis, as well as 16:30 for the influence of evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell on this issue. See also: Allen, Bob. “Pro-Trump pastor Robert Jeffress uses Bible to debunk science of climate change.” *Baptist News Global*.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” may be understood as a secularized version of this 2<sup>nd</sup> perspective that functions to criticize the 1<sup>st</sup> perspective offered here.

the possibility of Christian ethics: the conception of an omnipotent, utterly sovereign, and historically active God. God's ultimate control or rule over history appears to override the possibility of meaningful human responsibility or agency. Christian apocalypse (i.e., the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and its consequences), which is in some sense fundamental to a Christian theological vocabulary, further complicates this dilemma.<sup>6</sup> In readings of Pauline apocalyptic theology, not only do people fail to act ethically or morally, but they are incapable of doing so for they have been enslaved to the otherworldly power of Sin.<sup>7</sup> God's action in history becomes a battle of liberation between powers of light and powers of darkness, with the human being a mere pawn, the object of liberation in a divine game.<sup>8</sup>

How could, or should, a Christian ethicist sensitive to these issues reconcile these competing perspectives, each with equally devastating consequences for the possibility of Christian ethics? As someone who takes Christian revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) seriously, I have been wrestling with this question for some time now. One could say that we are living in 'apocalyptic' times, in a world confronting the effects of climate change, social injustice, political strife, and a global pandemic. The feeling of urgency to act in response to these challenges is palpable. Yet, paired with belief in an omnipotent God who 'makes all things work according to His purpose,' those who share similar theological commitments may feel left with only the two options above.<sup>9</sup> If God is truly 'steering the ship,' as it were, then why don't Christians just retreat from the chaos? Do Christians have any meaningful responsibility or agency, or are they just caught in the inevitable tide of divine will? These are the questions motivating the following project and that

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see Philip Ziegler's "The Shape and Sources of an Apocalyptic Theology" in *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 7, especially vs. 14-25.

<sup>8</sup> This is a caricatured description of apocalyptic theology, but it illustrates the point.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28.



have led me to the Christian ethics of German pastor, teacher, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrestled with similar issues. Thanks to his radically Christocentric approach to theology (inspired in part by his intellectual hero and later friend, Reformed theologian Karl Barth) as well as his courageous resistance to the Nazis, Bonhoeffer provides a promising guide through these thorny issues posed by Christian ethics.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a 20<sup>th</sup> century German Lutheran theologian, pastor, and teacher. Born in 1906 in Breslau (modern-day Poland), Bonhoeffer witnessed the rise of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. As a youth pastor in Berlin, he saw disillusioned young people put all their faith and hope into Hitler.<sup>10</sup> Later as a university professor and seminary director, Bonhoeffer witnessed his colleagues either support the Nazi regime or risk losing their careers. Not only was Bonhoeffer outspoken against the regime in his ecumenical work, but he also operated an illegal seminary (Finkenwalde, 1931-1935) in the German countryside that was eventually shut down by the Nazis. As the war progressed, Bonhoeffer became involved in covert *Abwehr*, or Military Intelligence Office, resistance efforts, including attempts to assassinate Hitler. It was Bonhoeffer's involvement in resistance efforts that would lead to his eventual arrest, imprisonment, and execution by the Nazis at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout this wartime period between 1940 and April 1943, as he traveled around the country as a part of counter-intelligence efforts, Bonhoeffer wrote 13 manuscripts which now compose his posthumously published *Ethics*.<sup>12</sup> Though the work is incomplete due to Bonhoeffer's arrest and execution by the Nazis, a reader finds here a culmination of Bonhoeffer's thought. One

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<sup>10</sup> See Bonhoeffer's essay "The Younger Generation's Altered View of the Concept of Führer," in DBWE 12, 266-268.

<sup>11</sup> Schlingensiefen, Ferdinand. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance."

<sup>12</sup> Green, Clifford J. "Editor's Introduction to the Reader's Edition of *Ethics*." Vii.

scholar has dubbed it “one of the greatest works of twentieth-century theology,”<sup>13</sup> and indeed, Bonhoeffer himself considered it his major work, writing to his close friend Eberhard Bethge from prison that “I sometimes feel as if my life were more or less over, and as if all I had to do now were finish my *Ethics*.”<sup>14</sup> The work is quite remarkable, not only for the circumstances under which it was written but also for its content.

Despite Bonhoeffer’s reference to the work as *Ethics*, a title appended to the work by Bethge for its posthumous publication, several chapters throughout the book open by calling ethics (or at least Christian ethics) into question. The opening essay, “Christ, Reality, and Good,” for example, begins with a claim that rejects ethics or, at least, our usual understanding of the ethical:

Those who wish even to focus on the problem of a Christian ethic are faced with an outrageous demand – from the outset they must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: “How can I be good?” and “How can I do something good?” Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: What is the will of God?<sup>15</sup>

Two points immediately stand out to the watchful reader. First, Bonhoeffer is well aware of the ‘outrageous’ difficulties presented by Christian ethics. Second, Bonhoeffer’s formulation of the ethical question subordinates human agency to the will of God. Rather than asking how *I*, the human agent, can *be* good (as in classical virtue ethics) or else *do* good (as in modern utilitarian or Kantian ethics), I must ask first and foremost what God wills.<sup>16</sup> Does this reorientation mean that Bonhoeffer recreates the first of the ethical alternatives identified above, namely that a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> DBWE 8, 163.

<sup>15</sup> DBWE 6, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a1-3. The text reads: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good...”

Christian's energy and attention should be directed toward the otherworldly kingdom of God? This position would be rather odd, given Bonhoeffer's concession that his demand is 'outrageous' and also given his active resistance to the Nazis throughout the war. Apparently, Bonhoeffer has some conception of Christian ethics that requires decisive action within – rather than divestment from – the world. How are we to understand Bonhoeffer's provocative opening, then, along with the rest of the work that follows it? What's more, how does this text relate to the 'problem' of Christian ethics in our times?

In what follows, I contend that Dietrich Bonhoeffer is working out an apocalyptic ethics, offering an alternative to the two competing perspectives outlined above.<sup>17</sup> Although Bonhoeffer makes no mention of scholarly work on so-called apocalyptic theology, his radically Christocentric theology bears much in common with apocalyptic theology (as opposed to natural theology or secular philosophical alternatives). As a result, I argue that an apocalyptic theological lens serves as a useful key for interpreting Bonhoeffer's thought, which focuses centrally on the revelation, or apocalypse (ἀποκάλυψις), of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Bonhoeffer's theology may be aptly described as a theology of revelation, i.e., a theology of apocalypse.<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this point and its ramifications for Christian ethics, I begin by outlining the most important claims in the scholarship concerning Christian apocalyptic theology, paying particular attention to the apocalypticism of the apostle Paul because as a reader of the New Testament, Bonhoeffer was

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<sup>17</sup> To be clear, one of the problems Bonhoeffer was concerned to address was a liberal Protestantism which thought it could discern the will of God without recourse to scripture. Bonhoeffer, along with Karl Barth, conceived of the solution to this problem in strong Christological and scriptural terms (See the Bethel Confession, DBWE 12, 383). After adopting this Christocentric view, however, Bonhoeffer faces additional ethical problems that I find to be more characteristic of his later work, particularly his work in *Ethics*. This problem, as I have identified above, is the problem of worldliness/otherworldliness.

<sup>18</sup> Again, "The Bethel Confession" is a valuable source for this question. Here there is an explicit rejection of natural theological thinking: "natural knowledge... remains mired in the unresolved contradictions of the world."

Bonhoeffer helped author the Bethel Confession. For more on the Bethel Confession, see Ferdinand Schlingensiefen, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance," 134-140.

<sup>19</sup> DBWE 6, 428.

certainly a reader of Paul. The discussion of Bonhoeffer and apocalypse to come will be framed by the work of biblical scholars J. Louis Martyn, Douglas Campbell, David Shaw, and Leander Keck. With their understanding of apocalyptic theology in mind, it becomes easier to see that Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* bears several decisively apocalyptic qualities. Specifically, the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ as articulated by both Bonhoeffer and scholars of apocalyptic theology has transformative impacts on epistemology, human agency, and therefore ethics. Rather than jettisoning the possibility of a Christian ethic, as some scholars such as Larry Rasmussen might suggest, Bonhoeffer restores the viability and integrity of Christian ethics by recovering a decisively apocalyptic theology.

As I read him, Bonhoeffer is trying to make sense of – indeed trying to affirm – human responsibility and agency in a world that is ultimately embedded in the reality of a sovereign and active God. The Christian has neither the option to retreat from the world in the face of God's ultimate sovereignty nor the right to behave as if the world were independent of or free from God's divine lordship. Instead, the Christian has the responsibility to act in accordance with reality to do the will of God. Far from being a call to follow an ethical program or a facile imitation of Jesus, Bonhoeffer develops what scholar Philip Ziegler calls a "theological ethics of God's apocalypse," one in which human knowledge, agency, and ethics are radically transformed by the apocalypse of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.<sup>20</sup>

### *Apocalypse*

#### Contemporary Trends

What do we mean when we say when we say "apocalyptic?" Certainly, the word apocalypse often invokes a flood of images of great disasters and the end of the world. Movies and

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<sup>20</sup> Ziegler, Philip. "Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology." 169.

TV shows such as 2012, the Walking Dead, etc., encapsulate this popular understanding of the word apocalypse. These popular portrayals of apocalypse, however, are sensationalized understandings of the term.

For our purposes, apocalypse, derived from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις, simply means revelation. Though this definition is straightforward enough, scholars in religious studies disagree about what precisely constitutes ‘apocalyptic’ narratives and/or theology. The consequences of this disagreement are significant. Depending on how one understands apocalypticism, ethics may appear to be implausible. Similarly, differing understandings of apocalypticism have shaped scholarly conversations surrounding Bonhoeffer and his association with apocalyptic thought. Consequently, any discussion of Bonhoeffer as an apocalyptic thinker necessitates a clarification of what is meant by the term ‘apocalyptic.’

In this paper I will focus on apocalypticism in the tradition of J. Louis Martyn. Martyn’s understanding of apocalypse includes radical implications for epistemology and agency, two concepts which will be of particular importance in my discussion of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*. I will begin, however, with the subject of epistemology, for apocalyptic epistemology informs agency in the discussion that follows.

### Apocalyptic Epistemology

Scholars working in the tradition of J. Louis Martyn have identified key characteristics of apocalyptic epistemology. First, apocalyptic epistemology is *disjunctive*, creating discontinuities with old ways of knowing God and the world. Second, apocalyptic epistemology is fundamentally *retrospective*, causing the recipient of the ‘apocalypse’ to reorient, or understand anew, not only their present situation but also their past. Third, robust Christology is key; the ‘Christ-event’

becomes the locus for ‘apocalyptic knowing.’ Finally, apocalyptic epistemology is intimately related to the problem of human agency. I will explore each of these claims in turn.

To begin, apocalyptic epistemology is characterized by a disjunctive quality. J. Louis Martyn develops this idea, particularly in his essay “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages.” In this work, Martyn examines the epistemological implications of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17, which read:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view [κατά σάρκα]; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has become new!<sup>21</sup>

Through an analysis of the Greek text, as well as careful attention to the historical context and community to which Paul is writing, Martyn explains that Paul would have been extremely careful with his language of ‘knowing’ in writing to the Corinthians, for they “were certain that they were the perfected recipients of the spirit... filled with perfect knowledge, already in possession of complete freedom, and thus already liberated from the constraints imposed both by bodily existence and by responsibility to the neighbor.”<sup>22</sup> Simply, the Corinthians fully believed that they were already living in a ‘new age,’ filled with knowledge according to the spirit.<sup>23</sup> Martyn contrasts this ‘knowing according to the spirit’ with ‘knowing according to the flesh,’ asserting that these two forms of knowing constituted a common dichotomy in the ancient world.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, he suggests that Paul is distancing himself from this common dichotomy – and from the

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<sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Martyn, J. Louis. “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages.” 98-99.

One could understand the Corinthians as a corollary for the liberal protestant enthusiasts who were the target of both Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s ethical criticisms.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 96-101.

understanding of those in the community at Corinth – to make an important point: “[Paul] is saying that there are two ways of knowing, and that *what separates the two* is the turn of the ages, *the apocalyptic event of Christ’s death/resurrection.*”<sup>25</sup> The separation of these two ways of knowing by Christ’s death and resurrection is crucial; now we know neither according to the flesh [κατά σαρχα], nor according to the Spirit. Rather, we know κατά σταυρον, or according to the cross of Christ.<sup>26</sup> The simple contrast between the two ways of knowing is thrown into flux by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. As Martyn says, the cross is “the absolute epistemological watershed.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ does not just transform old ways of knowing, it is radically discontinuous with them.<sup>28</sup>

Building on Martyn’s work, Douglas Campbell furthers this understanding of discontinuity in his essay, “Apocalyptic Epistemology.” He explains that “the revelation of Christ clearly functioned to illuminate and to judge many aspects of Paul’s [epistemological] location...”<sup>29</sup> Certainly, many aspects of Paul’s thought were reorganized or reoriented, making it necessary, in Campbell’s view, to employ “the language of discontinuity.”<sup>30</sup> Paul’s new ‘location’ in Christ has resulted in a break from his past ways of knowing and talking about God. Being ‘in Christ’ becomes the only appropriate way to talk about God, for stepping “outside of God’s self-authenticating self-disclosure that has taken place definitively in Christ, by the Spirit,” is to “immediately step outside the lordship of God as revealed in Christ and to assert the existence of a set of truth criteria independent of, and superior to, this location. And consequently, this is to deny the *lordship* of Christ, here at its most critical moment.”<sup>31</sup> To deny the lordship of Christ,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 95. Emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 108. cf. 1 Corinthians 12

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Keck, Leander. “Paul and Apocalyptic Theology.” 87.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, Douglas. “Apocalyptic Epistemology.” 76.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 77.

Campbell explains, is akin to denying that the Lord is truth and thus that the Lord is Lord. In other words, to deny the lordship of Christ through the assertion of independent epistemic criteria would be a grave form of apostasy.

The discontinuity of apocalyptic epistemology also results in an essentially *retrospective* view of history. According to Leander Keck, Paul did not merely “make adjustments in inherited thought. Instead, he rethought everything in light of Christ’s death and resurrection.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Keck argues that “over against all theologies which see continuity between God and world... Paul sees disjunction. God and the redemptive future stand over against the world and its history, including the history of Israel (Rom 9–11) and the future of the church (1 Cor 10:1-22).”<sup>33</sup> Elaborating on Keck’s position, Jamie Davies explains that

because history’s decisive event lies in the past, what must result is a theology of history fundamentally opposed to any forward-moving utopian vision of history as progress... Rather, viewed retrospectively, Paul’s account of history is not tied to a *telic* narrative of salvation history but to the scriptural witness to the “constancy of God.”<sup>34</sup>

Campbell adopts a similar position, arguing that Paul crafts a new narrative of Israel’s salvation history, taking Christ as his ‘epistemological starting point.’<sup>35</sup>

With Christ serving as the ‘epistemological starting point’ for apocalyptic knowing, it is apparent that apocalyptic epistemology relies on robust Christology.<sup>36</sup> The revelation of Christ and one’s subsequent ‘location’ *in Christ* are prerequisites for true perceptions of reality. David Shaw

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<sup>32</sup> Keck, Leander. “Paul and Apocalyptic Theology.” 77. Interestingly, Keck places this observation against an apocalyptic reading of Paul, for Keck identifies ‘apocalyptic’ strictly with readings of ancient Jewish apocalypses, such as the book of Daniel. I cite him here because he does have an insightful reading of Paul and his understanding of history is in keeping with Martyn, Campbell, and my own view of what constitutes ‘apocalyptic.’

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 87. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> Davies, Jamie. “Paul’s *Ex Post Facto* Logic: Leander Keck.” 156.

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, Douglas. “Apocalyptic Epistemology.” 81-82.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the centrality of Christology to apocalyptic theology, see Philip Ziegler’s *Militant Grace*, 27.



claims that Martyn and Campbell best illustrate this point, showing that a strong Christology is “exegetically grounded in 2 Cor. 5:16 and theologically *required* by the apocalyptic account of the human plight—the enslavement to powers precludes the possibility of... true perception.”<sup>37</sup> The apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ frees one from enslavement to Sin, and thus freeing one to know and perceive truly ‘in Christ.’

### Apocalyptic Agency

Finally, apocalyptic epistemology has significant, transformative effects on human agency. It is often assumed that an apocalyptic worldview – one in which God is omnipotent, historically active, and sovereign – eliminates the role of the human agent. Such thought has led individuals like Larry Rasmussen, for example, to assert that apocalyptic theology is an embarrassment for ethics.<sup>38</sup> Admittedly, there is something to this claim. In fact, it forms the basis of the problems of Christian ethics outlined above. On Martyn’s reading of apocalyptic theology, however, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ actually *restores* agential status to the human being within Christian community. As David Shaw points out, Martyn links apocalyptic epistemology to agency. In Martyn’s “Epilogue: An Essay on Pauline Meta-Ethics,” the “epistemological reliance of Christology serves, in part, to underscore the point about agency. Epistemological and moral faculties are incapacitated outside the sphere of Christ and the Spirit, but with their arrival, the Christian community is newly addressable and reconstituted as a moral agent.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, the freeing of the individual to accurately know and perceive in Christ restores to them their status as a moral agent. Martyn also challenges the idea that divine agency necessarily competes with

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<sup>37</sup> Shaw, David. “Mapping the Apocalyptic Landscape.” 23. 2 Cor. 5:16 reads: From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

<sup>38</sup> Rasmussen, Larry. “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans.” 75.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

human agency. The divine agent neither usurps human agency nor restrains itself to ‘make room’ for human agency. On the contrary, the divine agent steps into history,

not in a renewed word of exhortation, but rather in the *logos tou staurou*, the totally strange word-event that shatters ‘the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning’, thus *destroying prior images of the human agent* as well as old-age images of God (1 Cor. 1.18– 19). And in that meeting the divine agent does something unheard of. Destroying old-age images of the human agent, *God changes human agency itself!* That is to say, meeting the incompetent and enslaved human agent in the gospel of his Son, God creates *the corporate, newly competent and newly addressable agent...*<sup>40</sup>

Whereas the “epistemological and moral faculties” of the individual are “incapacitated outside of the sphere of Christ and the Spirit,” the Christ event forms a new agential community in which human beings are free to know and perceive accurately in Christ.<sup>41</sup> This “new community,” comprised of individuals collectively united in Christ by the Spirit, takes the form of Jesus Christ. This community of individuals is collectively mobilized through the Spirit of God working *throughout* it, meaning that God “participates in human morality itself.”<sup>42</sup> Through this participation, the collective agent “is neither alone nor passive, being literally inspired and collectively called by God to vigorous, world-wide activity.”<sup>43</sup>

In Martyn’s reading, an apocalyptic worldview does not vacate human agency. The divine agent does not override or overwhelm human agency, rendering the human agent a mere pawn in a divine game. Neither, however, does the human being have the freedom to act arbitrarily! On the contrary, human agency and worldly activity are newly empowered through the Holy Spirit

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<sup>40</sup> Martyn, J. Louis. “Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Meta-Ethics.” 180.

<sup>41</sup> Shaw, David. “Mapping the Apocalyptic Landscape.” 23.

<sup>42</sup> Martyn, J. Louis. “Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Meta-Ethics.” 182.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

working *through* human beings collectively in church-community. Indeed, the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ is not the destruction of Christian ethics, but its renewal, transformation, and empowerment.

Unfortunately, Martyn does not develop a picture of the ethics of the new competent communal agent that he teases here. However, I argue that Bonhoeffer ‘picks up’ where Martyn leaves off, demonstrating throughout his *Ethics* a deep concern for the sovereign action of God while maintaining the worldly responsibility of the corporate *and* individual human agent. As Martyn makes clear, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. I contend that if we read Bonhoeffer in light of Martyn’s understanding of apocalypse – with radical implications for human agency and epistemology – then we might catch a glimpse of what it means for a Christian to live unembarrassedly and unashamedly in a world that is in the hands of a sovereign and active God.

### Bonhoeffer and Apocalyptic

Bonhoeffer has not traditionally been read as an apocalyptic thinker. It has only been in recent scholarship that the subject of Bonhoeffer and apocalyptic theology has been positively explored, and even still, this exploration has been limited to a few scholars. More commonly, it seems, scholars have rejected any association between Bonhoeffer and apocalyptic theology. Larry Rasmussen, for example, argues that Bonhoeffer’s theological education would have obscured any apocalyptic undertones, whereas other scholars simply seem to believe that apocalyptic theology takes the subject ‘out of the world’ in a way that Bonhoeffer’s theology would not allow.

Though he entertains an apocalyptic eschatological<sup>44</sup> reading of Bonhoeffer, Larry Rasmussen ultimately asserts that Bonhoeffer's Lutheran heritage and theological education would have obscured any 'affinities' with an apocalyptic reading of the gospel. He writes that

There are good reasons why... Bonhoeffer was [not] attracted to apocalyptic eschatology... suffice it to note... that Bonhoeffer was apparently almost immunized against whatever 'elective affinities' (Max Weber) might have been drawn between the "apocalyptic" character of his time and place and apocalyptic themes in Scripture... Bonhoeffer also suffered an education in which Lutheran core doctrine... had long since lost sight of its biblical roots in apocalyptic eschatology... [and] found apocalyptic eschatology an embarrassment for ethics.<sup>45</sup>

Rasmussen does not go into further detail as to why Bonhoeffer's theological education would have obscured any traces of apocalyptic theology, giving his comment the character of assumption. In any case, Rasmussen's passing acknowledgment that Bonhoeffer's theological education found apocalyptic eschatology to be an embarrassment for ethics is telling, recalling a persistent objection to apocalyptic theology more broadly.

As we have seen, another related problem that often confronts proponents of apocalyptic theology is the apparent disregard for life in this world and the ultimate displacement of human agency. These effects have profound implications for the possibility of ethics and are no less relevant to claims of Bonhoeffer's apparent apocalypticism. Barry Harvey writes that "the assumption made by many who downplay the significance of eschatology in Bonhoeffer's later

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<sup>44</sup> To be clear, I do not regard 'apocalyptic' and 'eschatological' to be interchangeable terms. I take eschatology to merely refer to the 'last things' – the second coming of Christ and the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Apocalyptic theology, on the other hand, is a more encompassing term that refers to an entire theological outlook – one in which the revelation of God in Christ transforms the way that we know and understand our place in the world *now* and the world to come. In other words, apocalyptic theology may imply a particular view of eschatology, but not necessarily the other way around.

<sup>45</sup> Rasmussen, Larry. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans." 75.

theology is due no doubt to its association with otherworldliness and the neglect of life on this earth.”<sup>2</sup> Those concerned to point out Bonhoeffer’s concern for this world are be right to do so; Bonhoeffer consistently stresses worldliness and reality, for he says that the justificatory work of Christ frees human beings *for worldliness*. Charles West is sensitive to Bonhoeffer’s language here, asserting that his emphasis on reality is indicative of his “deep respect for the Enlightenment, for rationality, and empiricism.”<sup>46</sup> What Rasmussen calls a ‘new’ world, West argues is only the ‘ultimate,’ not a new world. On the contrary, the ultimate is the realization of Christ in the reality before us. In adopting this position, West argues that “participation, preservation, and building of structures of relative justice in a sinful world,” are necessarily at odds with a “revolutionary [apocalyptic] eschatology” in which the church is “to struggle against the world.”<sup>47</sup> West believes, then, that Bonhoeffer’s theology must be entirely exclusive of apocalyptic eschatology.

West’s analysis, however, rests on the false assumption that apocalyptic “eschatology and concern for living fully and completely in this world constitute a zero-sum game.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, West believes that one cannot be concerned with the end of things *and* life in this world. However, Harvey rejects West’s contention and is quick to point out that Bonhoeffer asserts that “what is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, *to be there for this world*.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, concern for the coming kingdom of God is meant to impact how one lives one’s life *here and now*. Harvey explains that

For Bonhoeffer the decisive content and term of reference for apocalyptic, as Alexander Schmemmann so insightfully puts it, is “not the world but the kingdom of God,” and thus, rather than being “anti-world” it is “pro-Kingdom.” The

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<sup>46</sup> West, Charles. “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans.” 471.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 471-472.

<sup>48</sup> Harvey, Barry. “Taking Hold of the Real.” 35.

<sup>49</sup> DBWE 8, 357-358. Emphasis mine.

eschatological reign of Israel's God, "announced, inaugurated, and given by and in Christ," thus *governs the church's distinctive relationship with this world*.<sup>50</sup>

On this view, not only are living fully in the world and apocalyptic eschatology compatible, but they form the very basis of Christian ethics. In fact, Bonhoeffer takes this as his starting point for *Ethics*:

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that Christian ethics rests on the full participation of the individual in both the reality of God and the reality of the world *together*. If one is truly concerned with the coming kingdom of God, Bonhoeffer says, this will place one even more firmly in the world. The task of Christian ethics becomes the realization of the reality of God within the reality of the world.

### ***Bonhoeffer's Theological Work***

Clifford Green writes that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* represents the culmination of an "interest in ethical thinking found in [his work] from the beginning."<sup>52</sup> Many of the ideas recurrent throughout *Ethics* are introduced and developed in Bonhoeffer's earlier works, including *Sanctorum Communio*, *Creation and Fall*, and *Discipleship*. Concepts such as the church, the

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<sup>50</sup> Barry, Harvey. "Taking Hold of the Real." 45.

<sup>51</sup> DBWE 6, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Green, Clifford J. "Editors Introduction to the Reader's Edition of *Ethics*." ix.

ethical collective person, responsibility, and vicarious representative action are developed throughout these works and embedded within them are critical apocalyptic readings of epistemology and agency. Accordingly, these early publications warrant our careful attention. Through an analysis of *Discipleship* and *Sanctorum Communio*, I will draw out key ideas that will illuminate Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as a "theological ethics of God's apocalypse."

### *Discipleship*

In Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, readers are introduced to a compelling if perhaps shocking account of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. In Part One of the book, Bonhoeffer offers an exegesis of Jesus's call to discipleship in the book of Matthew, followed by a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. In Part Two, Bonhoeffer synthesizes material from Pauline epistles into a 'concrete' account of what it means to follow after Christ in the church today, with chapters entitled *Baptism*, *The Body of Christ*, *The Visible Church-Community*, *The Saints*, and *The Image of Christ*. Throughout the work, Bonhoeffer's language calls to mind scholarly work on apocalyptic epistemology, beginning with his account of 'the call' to discipleship.

In Bonhoeffer's theology, Jesus Christ's 'call to discipleship' is a radically disjunctive event. Those who receive the call to discipleship are "called *away* and are supposed to 'step out' of their previous existence... Former things are left behind; they are completely given up."<sup>53</sup> One does not have the option to maintain the status quo and follow Jesus, for "staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude each other."<sup>54</sup> When Jesus Christ calls one into discipleship, the

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<sup>53</sup> DBWE 4, 58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

call itself... breaks ties with the naturally given surroundings in which a person lives... It is not the disciple who breaks them; *Christ himself broke them as soon as he called.* Christ has untied the person's immediate connections with the world and bound the person immediately to himself. *No one can follow Christ without recognizing and affirming that the break is already complete.*<sup>55</sup>

The language of disjunction could hardly be more explicit – Bonhoeffer is clear that a life of following Christ entails a complete break from one's previous life. But how is this connected to epistemology? For Bonhoeffer, the rejection of one's past 'situation' entails a rejection of previous forms of knowing; it means the giving up of one's old ways of knowing for knowledge 'mediated' by Christ.<sup>56</sup> The language of 'mediation' makes it seem as if objective reality is now merely filtered through a Christ-like lens, but Bonhoeffer says that knowledge of Christ cannot be a simple addition to previously held knowledge. On the contrary, it entails a complete rejection of it.<sup>57</sup> Perception of true, God-given reality is only possible *in Christ*.<sup>58</sup> To drive the point home, Bonhoeffer explains that with Christ as mediator, the disciple has no "spiritual power of their own, nor experience or knowledge they can refer to," but only a "heart in which the will of Jesus rules instead of one's own conscience."<sup>59</sup> The disciples are not concerned with their own wisdom, but rather, are "fully absorbed in seeing God" alongside one another in community.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 93. Emphasis mine.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 93-94.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 108-110.



Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* is also marked by an intense Christological focus. Jesus is the one who calls the individual from their previous life into a new existence, accomplishing the break between the 'old' and the 'new.' Christ is the substance of this new existence, as he mediates not just the relationship "between God and human persons, but between person and person, and between person and reality."<sup>61</sup> In fact, Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that "no further content [of discipleship] is possible because Jesus is the only content. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it."<sup>62</sup>

Bonhoeffer's analysis of human relationships through an intensely Christocentric lens underscores the important connection between epistemology and agency. Notably, the disciples are stripped of all their immediate relationships in the world and are instead 'bound to Christ.' What's more, the disciples lose all recourse to personal knowledge and judgment with which they might make ethical determinations concerning themselves and others. One might be tempted to argue that Bonhoeffer's account of discipleship, then, isolates the individual entirely in a world in which, to use Bonhoeffer's words, "Christ is the only content," leaving no room for involvement in human community and the agential status required for it. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer argues that one can only truly participate in loving community *through Christ*. In a long passage worth quoting in full, Bonhoeffer explains:

The disciples' own righteousness is... hidden from them in their communion with Jesus. *They can no longer see, observe, and judge themselves; they only see Jesus and are seen, judged, and justified by grace by Jesus alone.* No measuring standard for a righteous life stands between the disciples and other people; ...only Jesus Christ stands in their midst.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 59.

The disciples view other people only because they approach them *together with Jesus*. Jesus goes ahead of them to other people, and the disciples follow him... disciples can encounter other people only as those to whom Jesus himself comes. Jesus' struggle for the other person, his call, his love, his grace, his judgement are all that matters. Thus the disciples do not stand in a position from which the other person is attacked. Instead, in the truthfulness of Jesus' love they approach the other person *with an unconditional offer of community*.<sup>63</sup>

Before, the disciples' self-possessed knowledge and judgment separate them not only from Christ but also from one another; participation in true, loving community is an impossibility for them.<sup>64</sup> However, following Christ's transformative call, the disciples' old way of knowing no longer "stands between the disciples and other people."<sup>65</sup> In Christ, the disciples are empowered to live alongside others in a loving community that becomes the locus for Christian ethics and the meaningful exercise of human agency.

### *Sanctorum Communio*

While being 'in Christ' has epistemological implications that resonate with Pauline apocalyptic theology, it also has a concrete impact on the individual's agential status. Like Bonhoeffer states in *Discipleship*, being in Christ draws one immediately into a community of believers. This community of believers, of course, is the church.<sup>66</sup> *Sanctorum Communio*, then,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>64</sup> Bonhoeffer also cites Luther at length at the end of this chapter "Discipleship and the Cross." Relevant to this passage and Bonhoeffer's claims is Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518. The Disputation opens with the line, "Distrusting completely our own wisdom, according to that counsel of the Holy Spirit, »Do not rely on your own insight« ([Prov. 3:5](#)), we humbly present to the judgment of all those who wish to be here these theological paradoxes..."

<sup>65</sup> DBWE 4, 170.

<sup>66</sup> DBWE 1, 216-226. Bonhoeffer has a conception of both the empirical or visible church community *and* the eschatological church community. They are *not* one in the same. Bonhoeffer evidently believes there are human

Bonhoeffer's first dissertation, is a natural place to turn to next, for it is here that he develops his theological account of the church. As I will show, the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ results in a 'new creation' – the church-community – in which individual human beings are collectively empowered through the Holy Spirit to carry out the will of God. To illustrate this, I will first show how Bonhoeffer's entire project in *Sanctorum Communio* is framed by the 'apocalyptic knowing' that features prominently in *Discipleship*. Next, I will provide an overview of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology, which posits that individuals exist in fundamentally ethical relations to one another. Then I will explain how Bonhoeffer expands the vision of these 'social-basic relations' to the church community. Finally, I will demonstrate that Bonhoeffer envisions the church community as the locus for Christian ethical behavior, where human beings take on a new agential status and serve one another in 'acts of love.'<sup>67</sup>

First, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer views his work in *Sanctorum Communio* as fundamentally theological, and he appeals to apocalyptic knowing as the only means for understanding the church. He explains that the true nature of the church

can only be understood from within, *cum ira et studio* [*with passionate zeal*], *never by nonparticipants*. Only those who take the claim of the church seriously – *not relativizing it in relation to other similar claims or their own rationality, but viewing it from the standpoint of the gospel* – can possibly glimpse something of its true nature.<sup>68</sup>

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beings who are a part of the empirical church community who are not members of the eschatological church community, and vice versa.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 184.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 33.

In other words, only apocalyptic knowing is adequate to the task of understanding the church, for it is a reality “revealed in Christ.”<sup>69</sup> Only a thoroughly theological perspective – the perspective of the faithful – may glimpse the church in and of itself.<sup>70</sup>

After framing his project in a thoroughly apocalyptic knowing, Bonhoeffer begins his account of the church with the outline of a theological anthropology in which “the concepts of person, community, and God are inseparably and essentially interrelated.”<sup>71</sup> Bonhoeffer explains that

*For Christian philosophy, the human person originates only in relation to the divine; the divine person transcends the human person, who both resists and is overwhelmed by the divine... The Christian person originates only in the absolute duality of God and humanity; only in experiencing the barrier does awareness of oneself as ethical person arise. The more clearly the barrier is perceived, the more deeply the person enters into the situation of responsibility.*<sup>72</sup>

In other words, the concrete person is realized in the absolute and infinite barrier between God and oneself. The realization of one’s limitation in relation to God is a fundamentally ethical one, putting the human being in a particular role of responsibility vis-à-vis God.<sup>73</sup> Bonhoeffer extends this analogy of relationship to human beings:<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>73</sup> The language of responsibility will return as an important concept in our discussion of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*. For now, it will be helpful to note that Bonhoeffer’s conception of responsibility involves apocalyptic knowing and subsequent acts of love and service for one’s neighbor. These acts of love and service, Bonhoeffer will say, find their limit in the other person, meaning one cannot use them to violate or usurp the agency of another human being.

<sup>74</sup> Borrowing from Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer argues that the likeness of humankind to God is not *analogia entis*, but rather, *analogia relationis*. This notion is clearly reflected in Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology, shedding light on his claim that the concepts of Person and God are fundamentally interrelated. For more on this, see DBWE 3, 65.

From the ethical perspective, human beings do not exist ‘unmediated’ qua spirit in and of themselves, but only in responsibility vis-à-vis an ‘other’. In this sense we call the ethical concept of the individual *the social-basic relation*, since one cannot even speak of the individual without at the same time thinking of the ‘other’ who moves the individual into the ethical sphere.<sup>75</sup>

Here, just as in the relationship between God and human beings, the relationship between individual human beings is one of responsibility. It is only in this social-basic relation that “I” or “You” may even be spoken of, revealing that “in some way the individual belongs absolutely with the other, according to God’s will, even though, or precisely because, the one is completely separate from the other.”<sup>76</sup> Bonhoeffer wants to show that the place where the individual and the other coexist is in the church. This is the next step in Bonhoeffer’s analysis.

The place in which these social-basic relations between You and I are realized – in fact, made *new* – according to God’s will is the church.<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer explains that “here [the social-basic relations] are renewed and as such actualized, thereby producing a concrete form of community.”<sup>78</sup> Recalling Bonhoeffer’s exposition of community in *Discipleship*, he explains that this “community of the I-You-relationship” provides the individual “the assurance of being loved, and through faith in Christ” grants them the “power to love also, in that this person, who in Christ is already in the church, is led into

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

the Church.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, the church is formed via renewal of the social-basic relations by the revelation of God’s love in Christ. Bonhoeffer asserts that

new social relations have been created, and that the breach of sin has been closed, both of which came about through the revelation of God’s heart in Christ, and through God implanting God’s own heart, God’s will and Spirit, in human beings, *thus realizing God’s will for the church-community to exist.*<sup>80</sup>

Importantly, Bonhoeffer follows up this explanation with the statement that “the main problem now is to grasp how ‘love’ can entail this social significance.”<sup>81</sup>

When Bonhoeffer launches his exploration of the role of God’s love in the church-community, he makes five important points: Christian love (1) is not a human possibility, (2) is possible only through faith in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, (3) is purposeful, (4) loves the real neighbor, and (5) knows no limits. On the first two points, Bonhoeffer says that Christian love is not about our own eroticism or compassion. Rather, it is about giving up all of our claims on God and neighbor – abandoning them to God’s will – which is only possible through faith in Christ. Bonhoeffer’s third point, that Christian love is purposeful, follows from the second; by abandoning our claims upon others to God’s will, “the purpose of love is exclusively determined by God’s will for the other person.”<sup>82</sup> Christian love is purposeful, then, insofar as it is love according to God’s will. And just what does love according to God’s will look like? As if in reply to this question, Bonhoeffer offers his fourth and fifth points: that Christian love loves the real neighbor and that it knows no limits. Indeed, Christian love “seeks to realize God’s rule in each and every

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 168.

place.”<sup>83</sup> We may ask, then, what it looks like for Christian love to be realized not only among the church-community but also among all of humanity.

Despite Bonhoeffer’s claim that the love which is constitutive of the church-community is not a human possibility, he is insistent that human beings maintain an important role in the life of the church, for the church is actualized through a movement of individual members’ wills by the Holy Spirit.<sup>84</sup> Linking the formation of the church-community explicitly to the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer illustrates that it is human beings who, with God’s will working through them, realize the church community:<sup>85</sup> “in the church community, every member is moved by the Holy Spirit; all have their divinely appointed place and their wills moved by the Spirit.”<sup>86</sup> Notice, Bonhoeffer does not say the Holy Spirit *overtakes* the wills of individuals. Rather, the will of the individual is empowered and energized by the Holy Spirit. This means that the individual will is preserved, as well as the significance of individual action, for the “whole seriousness of the relation with God is not taken from the individual’s shoulders.”<sup>87</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s concept of “vicarious representative action,” illuminates the enduring ethical significance of the individual believer within the church-community. He explains that Christ, in becoming human, “bore vicarious representative responsibility for *all human beings*,”<sup>88</sup> bringing them into the church-community.<sup>89</sup> Because of Christ’s work on the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 178. See also page 144 for a discussion on actualization. Bonhoeffer wants to avoid any reading that would suggest that the church is merely a latent potentiality that needs human actors, albeit through the Spirit, to actualize it. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer says that the reality of the church has already been established in Christ and is *necessarily* actualized. This, too, invokes questions of agency.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 145. Recall our discussion of the intense Christological focus of apocalyptic epistemology.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 181.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 179.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 146. For more on vicarious representative action (*stellvertretung*) in *Sanctorum Communio*, see pages 178-184. Bonhoeffer’s discussion of “Being-with-one-another” and the concrete acts of love of the church community

cross, individual believers within the church-community may similarly bear vicarious representative responsibility for the whole of the community through ‘concrete acts of love.’<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Bonhoeffer understands vicarious representation *to be* love.<sup>91</sup> Among these vicariously representative acts of love, Bonhoeffer includes self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor, intercessory prayer, and the mutual forgiveness of sins. Each of these acts at once involves the individual *and* the collective, providing us with a robust image of individual and collective agency working in concert with divine agency, not in competition or contradiction with it. As an example, intercessory prayer is at once an individual and collective act of the church-community, empowered by the will of God:

Like any other form of prayer, intercession does not compel God, but, if God does the final work, then one member of the church community can redeem another, in the power of the church. This conclusively eliminates the ethical self-confidence of one human being toward another... our strength comes to us from the church-community... when one person intercedes in the name of Christ on behalf of the other, the whole church-community – which actually means ‘Christ existing as church-community’ [...] – participates in that person’s prayer.<sup>92</sup>

Here, intercessory prayer is an act in which the individual *and* the whole church-community participate. The individual may initiate intercession, but it is only through the power of the collective, formed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that intercession is efficacious. Indeed, only the individual acting in the collective person of the church –

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are exemplary of this notion. I will discuss it further when I turn to *Ethics*, but for now it is simply important to note the connection *stellvertretung* has with the concrete acts of individuals within the church community and/or collective personhood.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 189. Emphasis mine.



Christ existing as church-community – can be vicariously representative and intercede on behalf of their neighbor.

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer's example of intercessory prayer (and *Sanctorum Communio* more broadly) provides us with an important early blueprint for his apocalyptic ethics. The transformation of the social-basic relations between humans beings draws one into the church-community and empowers them to perform acts of love and service. Though Bonhoeffer hinted at 'acts of love' in *Discipleship*, in *Sanctorum Communio* we see the concept and its implications for agency articulated clearly: to be incorporated into the church-community, the body of Christ, is to be agentially empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the church-community, human agency becomes corporate. Through concrete acts of love, the individual member of the church is vicariously representative of the entire body of believers. Returning to Bonhoeffer's example of intercessory prayer, whenever an individual prays, the entire church-community prays with them. The individual does not merely act for a collective good but represents the collectivity itself in individual actions. Though one may be tempted to argue that Bonhoeffer dissolves the individual agent in favor of the collective, the opposite is true: the Christian individual *gains* ethical efficacy within the community. Indeed, the church-community is the only place in which individual Christian action is meaningful.<sup>93</sup> On this view, the church becomes the focal point for Christian ethics.

### *Ethics*

Up until this point, I have endeavored to show that Bonhoeffer lays the groundwork for a 'theological ethics of God's apocalypse' across his works. *Discipleship* provides us with a

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 188-189.

radical account of the epistemological transformation that occurs when one is called to discipleship; being called into communion with Christ means being able to see or know only according to Christ. Everything that one sees or knows is oriented by, or framed by, one's location in Christ. *Sanctorum Communio* paints a more in-depth picture of that location in Christ. Bonhoeffer explains that to be in Christ is to be in church-community where the individual is agentially empowered as part of a *collective* that serves the neighbor in concrete acts of love through the power of the Holy Spirit. Between *Discipleship* and *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer has constructed an account of epistemological and agential transformation in Christ that culminates in a novel account of Christian ethics. The development of this account is the task of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. *Ethics* provides the last piece of the puzzle in our search of a truly apocalyptic account of Christian ethics, one in which the church, i.e., "*the corporate, newly competent and newly addressable agent*," is thrust into concrete engagement with the world in radically loving service and care for the neighbor.<sup>94</sup> In effect, Bonhoeffer shows us the application of J. Louis Martyn's work by bringing us fully into the realm of Christian ethics.

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* begins with an acknowledgment of the problem of Christian ethics outlined at the outset of this paper. In "Christ, Reality, and Good," Bonhoeffer writes that

those who wish to even focus on the problem of a Christian ethic... must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the two very questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: 'How can I be good?' and 'How can I do something good?' Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: What is the will of God? This demand is radical precisely because it presupposes a decision about ultimate reality.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Martyn, J. Louis. "Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Meta-Ethics." 180. Emphasis Martyn's.

<sup>95</sup> DBWE 6, 47.

Bonhoeffer rejects what one may normally think of as ethical questions (e.g., about right action or virtuous character) in favor of an appeal to the will of God. This move places Christian ethics not only outside the realm of philosophical ethics but also seemingly in an otherworldly realm. Bonhoeffer is well aware of this fact, noting that Christian ethics presupposes that the reality of the self and the world are embedded in the reality of God. In other words, it is the reality of God that is of ultimate importance in the realm of Christian ethics.

With this emphasis on God and God's will, more specifically, one might be tempted to think that Bonhoeffer recreates one of the main problems with Christian ethics by making it dependent upon an otherworldly reality. However, this view would be a gross misinterpretation of how Bonhoeffer understands God's revelation in Christ. Bonhoeffer writes that "the *subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real [Wirklichwerden] among God's creatures.*"<sup>96</sup> In other words, Christian ethics has everything to do with the world for Christ became *incarnate*. Moreover, the reality revealed in the incarnate Christ is still "becoming real" in *this* world.<sup>97</sup>

If one is tempted to think that Bonhoeffer runs the risk of overcorrection here – favoring 'worldliness' over the 'otherworldliness' of God – they would be wrong again: Writing in the essay "History and Good [1]," Bonhoeffer stresses the fact that God's affirmation of creation in Christ is not "because human beings and human reality were worthy of divine affirmation. Instead, it is because human beings and human reality deserved the divine No that God took on humanity and affirmed it."<sup>98</sup> In short, Christ's incarnation is a pronouncement of judgment just as much as

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 49. Emphasis Bonhoeffer's.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 262.

it is a pronouncement of affirmation. For Bonhoeffer, the world is important not because of its own inherent value but because God loves the world enough to create it, judge it, and redeem it.

Resolving the problem of Christian ethics rests in holding these two realities – the reality of God and the reality of the world – together in Christ. Put differently, resolving the two main problems of Christian ethics requires a proper understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer explains:

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world *at the same time, the one not without the other*. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world... I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled to the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ. The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world.<sup>99</sup>

In other words, it would be wrong to say that Christian ethics is solely concerned with either the ‘the reality of God’ *or* the reality of the world. To adopt either of these perspectives would be to fragment the whole of reality. The solution to this problem lies within an epistemological transformation that takes Christ as its starting point. Recalling Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship*, this epistemological transformation removes one from their old ways of knowing – their fragmented, broken view of the world – and plants one firmly in Jesus Christ, who accomplishes the reconciliation and unification of the reality of God and the world in His person.<sup>100</sup> The task of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 55. Emphasis mine.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 300. Bonhoeffer’s essay “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World” is also a rich resource for this argument. He writes “For Christian ethics, the mere possibility of knowing about good and evil is already a falling away from the origin. Living in the origin, human beings know nothing but God alone. They know other human beings, things, and themselves only in the unity of their knowledge of God; they know everything only in God, and God in all things.”

Christian ethics, then, becomes “*participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today.*”<sup>101</sup>

If Christian ethics depends on participating in the reality of God through Jesus Christ, we may ask what Christian participation looks like. In his essay “Ethics as Formation,” Bonhoeffer suggests that participation in Christ requires formation. Bonhoeffer’s account of formation is important for my argument because it emphasizes the role of the divine agent in transforming and empowering the individual in community for ethical action. Accordingly, I want to draw out three key aspects of Bonhoeffer’s conception of formation: (1) that formation is primarily an act of God’s will, not something human beings achieve simply through their own striving; (2) that formation frees the human being to be truly human and (3) finally, that formation presupposes the existence of the church-community.

First, formation is not something that human beings achieve through the assertion of their will, but something that Christ achieves through human beings. Bonhoeffer says that formation is “not *primarily* concerned with formation of the world by planning and programs, but... is concerned only with the one form that has overcome the world, the form of Jesus Christ.”<sup>102</sup> He rejects ‘planning and programming’ (a feature of liberal Protestantism, according to his critical appraisal at least) because they cannot accomplish what Christ accomplishes. Bonhoeffer says

formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen. This does not happen as we strive ‘to become like Jesus,’ as we customarily say, but as the form of

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 55. Emphasis Bonhoeffer’s.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 93.

Jesus Christ himself works on us that it molds us, conforming us to Christ's own (Gal. 4:9).<sup>103</sup>

Bonhoeffer's intense Christological concentration comes into focus again here, as he stresses the human being's identification with Jesus Christ. This identification with Christ through formation, Bonhoeffer seems to want to suggest, accomplishes something much more radical than human beings could ever accomplish on their own. Conformation to Christ does not merely endow human beings with new knowledge of the good life or pious teachings, but rather, fundamentally transforms the human being.<sup>104</sup> Importantly, this transformation and conformation to Christ is necessary for the realization of human freedom.

Conformation to Christ is necessary for the realization of human freedom for conformation frees the human being to be truly human. Reversing the traditional theological formulation "God became man so that man might become God," Bonhoeffer says that God became human so that human beings might be fully human.<sup>105</sup> Bonhoeffer rejects theosis or human divinization not only because he believes it leads to destructive self-idolization but also because it removes the human subject from the world when in fact God became a human subject. Bonhoeffer writes that the

real human being is the object neither of contempt nor of deification, but the object of the love of God. The manifold riches of God's creation are not violated... by forcing people to submit to an ideal, a type, or a particular image of the human... Pretension, hypocrisy,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 96. Editorial footnote 86 reads: "contrast this to the patristic formulation that God took human form in order for human beings to be 'divinized.' See, for example, Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, §54 (*The Christology of the Later Fathers*, 107) and Augustine, *The City of God*, 1076 (21.16)."

compulsion, forcing oneself to be something different, better, more ideal than one is—are all abolished. God loves the real human being. God became a real human being.<sup>106</sup>

God's becoming a human being and freeing human beings to be truly human has important consequences for Christian ethics. Most notably, it enables human beings to live alongside one another without either idolizing or despising one another. Instead, human beings are freed for and empowered by the love of God for human beings to love one another in community.<sup>107</sup>

As suggested above, conformation to Christ presupposes the existence of the church-community. Because the church *is* the body of Christ, “the church is [also] the human being who has become human, has been judged, and has been awakened to new life in Christ.”<sup>108</sup> Because Christ bore vicarious representation for all of humanity through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, so the church bears vicarious representation for all human beings.<sup>109</sup> This observation has a critical corollary, namely that the church's “first concern is not with the so-called religious functions of human beings, but *with the existence in the world of human beings in all their relationships.*”<sup>110</sup> Bonhoeffer's emphasis on relationality within the church recalls the social-basic relations of *Sanctorum Communio*, reminding us that the church is the locus not only for human *being* but also Christian ethics.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, Bonhoeffer writes at the conclusion of “Ethics as Formation” that “the starting point of Christian ethics is the body of Christ,” i.e., the church.<sup>112</sup> With the church taking center stage, Bonhoeffer's “Ethics as Formation” compels us to ask “*how Christ may take form among us today and here*” within the church.<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer wants to draw

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 87-88.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 99.

his reader's attention away from abstract speculation about the ethical individual and towards the real human beings whom they live alongside in community.<sup>114</sup>

Some might assume that Bonhoeffer's emphasis on an otherworldly conformation to the figure of Jesus would lead him to endorse an indifference to others. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer believes that because Jesus made himself responsible for others through vicarious representation, the individual Christian and the church-community must also be vicariously responsible for others. So, Bonhoeffer explains in his essay "History and Good [2]" that to live ethically is to live *responsibly* "before God and for God, before human beings and for human beings."<sup>115</sup> His conception of responsibility presupposes the existence of the individual in community, for Bonhoeffer says that responsibility depends on vicarious representation or substitution. This vicarious representation "is most evident in those relationships in which a person is literally required to act on behalf of others, for example, as a father..." who acts on "behalf of his children by working, providing, intervening, struggling, and suffering for them."<sup>116</sup> Responsibility, then, apparently involves performing actions on behalf of others. In effect, the human being who acts for others follows the model of Jesus, who, according to one of Bonhoeffer's later *Letters and Papers from Prison*, "only 'is there for others'" and also the church, which "is church when it is there for others."<sup>117</sup> One might reasonably object –

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<sup>114</sup> At the conclusion of this essay in DBWE 6, 102, footnote [113] offers valuable historical insight to Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the Church as the locus of the ethical. It reads: "The commanding character of ethical speaking was more obvious when faced with the pressure placed on human decision by the Nazi regime than it is in a broadly pluralistic society that is ordered by tradition and governed by just law. Bonhoeffer sees the starting point of Christian ethics (see above, pages 97-98) not in the faith of the individual but – like Barth, who developed doctrine and ethics as church dogmatics—in the church, which, in a situation like that of the Third Reich, was engaged in a battle that was being fought for the whole of society and humanity."

<sup>115</sup> DBWE 6, 256.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 258.

<sup>117</sup> DBWE 8, 501, 503.



particularly given his example of choice – that Bonhoeffer is merely promulgating an ethic of paternalism.<sup>118</sup> Bonhoeffer is sensitive to this issue, however, as he writes:

The vicariously responsible life is in danger of being corrupted in two different ways, namely, by absolutizing either my own self or the other person. In the first case, the relation of responsibility leads to violation and tyranny... in the second case, the welfare of the other person for whom I am responsible is made absolute while ignoring all other responsibilities.<sup>119</sup>

Bonhoeffer is not only concerned to prevent a tyrannical absolutizing of the one who acts on behalf of others (a danger he knew too well as a resident of Nazi Germany) but also the uncompromising service of the other at the expense of all else. He accomplishes this balance by reminding his reader that all responsible vicarious representation has its foundation in Jesus Christ, who empowers human responsibility while establishing its decisive limitations.

Because Jesus Christ became human, Bonhoeffer argues that vicariously responsible action is limited by “creatureliness.”<sup>120</sup> One aspect of this limitation is that “other people who are encountered must be regarded as responsible as well. What distinguishes responsibility from violation is this very fact of recognizing other people as responsible persons, indeed making them aware of their own responsibility.”<sup>121</sup> If we think about this claim with regard to community, it means that human beings recognize all members of their community to be responsible, agential beings. One does not have a right simply to usurp the agency or responsibility of another; this would constitute a violation of that person’s agency. On the contrary, everyone has a role in

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<sup>118</sup> Karen Guth lodges a similar criticism in “To See from Below: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Mandates and Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* (2013), 131-150. Guth complains that Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the father’s responsibility for the family, including the wife as well as the children, is not only paternalistic but also implicitly misogynistic. See especially 140.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 259.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 267.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 269

ensuring that all members of the community realize their own responsibility. Bonhoeffer provides the example of a father and child here, where the father is entrusted with the responsibility of providing for the child and bringing to the child's consciousness their own responsibility.<sup>122</sup>

Vicariously responsible human action is also limited by human knowledge and judgment. Bonhoeffer affirms the necessity of ethical deliberation but nevertheless suggests that the responsible individual cannot not judge their action on the basis of the knowledge of good and evil; Bonhoeffer believes that moral deliberation and ethical argument are too often irresponsible strategies for self-justification.<sup>123</sup> Put differently, he believes that we use moral theories and arguments to suggest that we are good people with clean hands so that we might enjoy guilt-free consciences. Instead, Bonhoeffer says responsible action necessitates that while one engages in ethical deliberation, one gives up ultimate knowledge of their goodness or evil. Ethical deliberation happens in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ which empowers one to act responsibly.<sup>124</sup> In other words, Christian ethics does not rest upon knowledge of good and evil, but rather, apocalyptic knowing, i.e., knowledge that takes Christ as its epistemological starting point and is transformative of human agency.

*The Acts of Apocalyptic Ethics: Confession and Political Action.* Thus far my discussion of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* has been largely theoretical. I have established that Bonhoeffer identifies Christian ethical behavior as (1) taking place primarily in the church and (2) involving a responsibility towards God and neighbor that is rooted in Jesus Christ. Along the way, I have attempted to show that Bonhoeffer's concept of church, formation, and responsibility rest upon an apocalyptic theological framework – that God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid. Again, one may critique Bonhoeffer as paternalistic. However, Bonhoeffer's discussion here is explicitly concerned to identify the limited nature of any individual's responsibility for the other.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 268.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

radically transforms the way that the Christian knows what they know, how they relate to others, and consequently, how they go about the task of Christian ethics. Still, for all of his talk of ‘concrete’ ethics, Bonhoeffer’s discussion, and consequently, my own, has been rather sparse regarding particular Christian ethical practices. With that, I want to spend the final portion of this paper discussing two specific activities that Bonhoeffer identifies as critical to responsible Christian action, namely: confession and political action.

*Confession.* Before turning to the crucial and perhaps more obvious discussion of political action, I want to focus first on the more surprising ethical act of confession. For Bonhoeffer, penitential confession is a deeply important and fundamental practice for those concerned with Christian ethics. On some basic level, Bonhoeffer believes that one cannot engage in responsible action if they cannot recognize where they have failed to be responsible in the past. What’s more, Bonhoeffer sees the confession of guilt as a prerequisite for the restoration of justice, order, and peace.<sup>125</sup> Thus any discussion of Bonhoeffer’s account of political action depends on his account of confession, which features most prominently in his essay “Guilt, Justification, Renewal.”<sup>126</sup> Here Bonhoeffer identifies both individual and corporate confession as a concrete means for participation in and/or conformation to Jesus Christ. In fact, Bonhoeffer says that confession is the starting point for “the process of human conformation with Christ” because it is the necessary corrective for having fallen away from Christ.<sup>127</sup> When human beings recognize that they have fallen away from Christ, Bonhoeffer says that they must acknowledge their guilt through the practice of confession.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 134-145.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 135.

Drawing his reader's attention yet again to the importance of church community, Bonhoeffer asserts that "the place where this acknowledgement of guilt becomes real is the church... the church is that community of people that has been led by the grace of Christ to acknowledge its guilt toward Christ."<sup>128</sup> In the next paragraph, Bonhoeffer reiterates that the church confesses because it has been "grasped by the power of Christ's grace."<sup>129</sup> In either case, one gets the sense that confession is an act that the church is moved to perform through the power of the Holy Spirit, which works collectively through the members of the church-community. This understanding supports Bonhoeffer's conception of church as articulated in *Sanctorum Communio* and it underscores my point about the agential empowerment of human beings for ethical action through the Spirit.<sup>130</sup> One might suggest that the confession of individuals who are *moved* to do so cannot possibly be meaningful. Certainly, coerced confessions from botched police investigations may come to mind. However, Bonhoeffer does not mean to suggest that the church community is *forced* to confess so that human action plays no role in the process whatsoever. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer believes that the church can fail to confess, and in fact, his essay functions in part as an indictment of the German church for this exact reason.<sup>131</sup> Where the church fails to confess, however, Bonhoeffer suggests that the church ceases to be the church. He explains that "free confession of guilt is not something that one can take or leave; it is the form of Jesus Christ breaking through in the Church."<sup>132</sup> Insofar as the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Editorial footnote 6 on this page notes that "In his doctoral dissertation had already argued this same point, that the church-community, the new humanity, is a reality in Christ that is actualized by the Holy Spirit." See section on *Sanctorum Communio* for a refresher.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 141. Editorial footnote 32 says that "After 1933, critical statements from the church diminished, due both to greater state and Party intimidation and to the church voices for compromise with the Nazi state; by 1940 the church was virtually silent."

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 142.

church is the body of Christ – that section of humanity agentially empowered by the Holy Spirit – the church will practice confession.<sup>133</sup>

Now that we know that confession (1) is viewed as a prerequisite for responsible action and (2) presupposes Christian community, we may ask how confession is to be performed and what must be confessed. In response to this question, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the significance of both individual and corporate confession. He asserts that the “personal sin of each individual is... a source of poison for the whole community.”<sup>134</sup> Despite this strong language, however, Bonhoeffer does not endorse or advocate any sort of isolation or demonization of ‘individual sinners’ within the church community. On the contrary, he stresses that “there is no search... for the actual guilty person, no demand for the just expiation as punishment for the evil and reward for the good.”<sup>135</sup> So rather than seeking to brand individuals as evildoers, Bonhoeffer is concerned to prevent any self-excusals from the practice of confession. He writes that “I cannot pacify myself by saying that my part in this is slight... I must acknowledge that my own sin is to blame.”<sup>136</sup> This is true of all individuals in the church community, Bonhoeffer says, who are “joined together in the collective I of the church. The church confesses and acknowledges its guilt in and through them.”<sup>137</sup> In other words, every single individual’s confession is drawn into the collective confession of the church-community or, alternatively, the collective confession of the church is drawn into each individual’s confession. In any case, the significance of both individual confession and corporate confession is preserved – in fact, they are mutually reinforcing.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

In looking to the confession of particular acts, Bonhoeffer offers several examples over the course of “Guilt, Justification, Renewal.” As if offering a model for personal confession, Bonhoeffer writes:

I am guilty of inordinate desire; I am guilty of cowardly silence when I should have spoken, I am guilty of untruthfulness and hypocrisy in the face of threatening violence; I am guilty of disowning without mercy the poorest of my neighbors; I am guilty of disloyalty and falling away from Christ.<sup>138</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s confessions here demonstrate a deeply ethical concern for the importance of caring for one’s neighbors, for loyalty, for speaking the truth apart for the consequences for oneself, and for participation in Christ. Without offering a blueprint for ethical behavior, Bonhoeffer is illustrating, at least to some degree, what he takes to be some of the primary ethical obligations of the Christian. Indeed, at another point in the essay, Bonhoeffer offers a particularly potent confession when considered in the light of his context in Nazi Germany. He asserts:

The church confesses that it has witnessed the arbitrary use of brutal force, the suffering in body and soul of countless innocent people, that it has witnessed oppression, hatred, and murder without raising its voice for the victims and without finding ways of rushing to help them. It has become guilty of the lives of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.<sup>139</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s words read like a direct indictment of the German Church and its failure to resist Nazi oppression of Jews. In fact, they are – an editorial footnote on this section of the text notes that “the phrase ‘brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ’ was added... in order to make the reference,

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 139.

especially to the Jews, unmistakably clear.”<sup>140</sup> Bonhoeffer was adamant that the church had an ethical obligation to speak out against Nazi oppression, cruelty, and genocide even though many of his contemporaries in the German Church actively supported the Nazi Regime. What’s more, ‘speaking out’ against Nazi oppression should have been paired with concrete action; Bonhoeffer clearly perceives a positive obligation of the church and its members to find ways of “rushing to help” Jews and other victims of Nazi violence.<sup>141</sup> For Bonhoeffer, this looked like illegally training pastors in a confession that refused to adopt the Aryan Paragraph and active participation in *Abwehr* resistance efforts.<sup>142</sup> All this is to say that Bonhoeffer’s discussion of confession reveals particular conceptions of ethical obligations, including an affirmation of the obligation to take political action in the face of an oppressive state.

*Political Action.* One of the problems of Christian ethics identified at the outset of this paper is that a Christian could seemingly justify a complete divestment from this world. Bonhoeffer not only rejects this reading but also develops an account of Christian ethics that includes robust political action.<sup>143</sup> Bonhoeffer denies that Christian ethics excludes political ethics and instead asserts that “*only where the becoming human of God’s love is taken seriously can it be understood that God’s love for the world also includes political action*, and that the worldly form of Christian love is therefore able to take the form of a person fighting for self-assertion, power,

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 140. Editorial footnote 25.

<sup>141</sup> For more on this, see Bonhoeffer’s “The Church and the Jewish Question.” DBWE 12, 361-370.

<sup>142</sup> Aryan Paragraphs were introduced in organizations to exclude “non-Aryans” from participation in those organizations. See Schlingensiepen, 124-143. On a separate note, the Barmen Declaration of 1933 is perhaps an example in which *credal* confession was important to Bonhoeffer, as well. See Ferdinand Schlingensiepen’s biography, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance,” 161-164, 177-209, esp, 177. Also see DBWE 6, 407, editorial footnote 67, or the Editor’s Afterword.

<sup>143</sup> Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer had intended to write a section in the essay “History and Good [1]” dedicated to the concept of a political ethic, but he was not able to complete it before his arrest and imprisonment.<sup>143</sup> However, segments from his introduction to this intended section are quite fruitful for consideration.

success and security.”<sup>144</sup> In other words, the revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of God in Jesus Christ raises the possibility for understanding and engaging in political action. The importance of this point for my argument cannot be overstated: Bonhoeffer is rooting Christian political action in the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ, i.e., revelation that fundamentally transforms one’s understanding of reality and political action in the world.<sup>145</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s essay “Ultimate and Penultimate Things” illuminates how the revelation of God in Jesus Christ transforms and frames the Christian’s understanding of political action in the world. In particular, it provides a helpful framework for understanding how a Bonhoefferean Christian ethics holds together the worldly and the otherworldly. Through the use of the corresponding concepts ‘ultimate’ and ‘penultimate,’ Bonhoeffer suggests that worldly (penultimate) action is structured with reference to the reality of God in Jesus Christ (ultimate).<sup>146</sup> In an especially poetic passage, Bonhoeffer explains how the ultimate functions to fundamentally alter the Christian’s perception of the penultimate:

The dark tunnel of human life, which was barred within and without and was disappearing ever more deeply into an abyss from which there is no exit is powerfully torn open; *the word of God bursts in*. In this saving light, *people recognize God and their neighbors for the first time*. The labyrinth of their *previous lives collapses*. They become *free for God and for one another*. They realize that there is a God who loves and accepts them, that alongside them stand others whom God loves equally and that *there is a future with the triune God and God’s church-community*.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> DBWE 6, 245. Emphasis mine.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> At the risk of oversimplification, the penultimate and the ultimate may be understood as the ‘worldly’ and ‘otherworldly’ dichotomy I have been concerned with over the course of this paper.

<sup>147</sup> DBWE 6, 146.



In this passage, the apocalypse of God in Christ (1) enables one to recognize both God and their neighbor, (2) frees one for the service of their neighbor, and (3) thrusts one into a new future with God and God’s church-community. In other words, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ thrusts one into radical engagement with both God and neighbor in the world of penultimate things. Indeed, the penultimate refers to all of the aspects of day-to-day human life – family life, politics, church, and work (also ‘mandates’).<sup>148</sup>

Bonhoeffer asserts that human beings have a concrete role in “preparing the way” for the ultimate, where preparing the way means taking concrete, “creative” action in the world of penultimate things. Though Bonhoeffer says that “Christ comes, to be sure... whether one is ready... or not,” he points out that human beings can “make difficult” the reception of God’s ultimate word.<sup>149</sup> Bonhoeffer is concerned to point out that “it is hard for those thrust into extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness to believe in God’s justice and goodness.”<sup>150</sup> It should not be difficult to see how hollow preaching about God’s goodness, love, and provision for human beings must sound to those undergoing or witnessing unspeakable suffering. Attentive to this issue, Bonhoeffer says that preparing the way for God’s ultimate word requires feeding the hungry, housing those without shelter, maintaining discipline where there is disorder, freeing those in bondage, and as we may have anticipated, the extension of loving community.<sup>151</sup> Bonhoeffer characterizes these activities as positive obligations of the church-community aimed towards preparing the way, demonstrating a firm commitment to Christian-ethical behavior in the world.

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<sup>148</sup> It is important to note that the mandates represent Bonhoeffer’s modified conception of the traditional Lutheran orders. Being aware of this fact can help to make sense of some of Bonhoeffer’s theological interlocutors and why resistance to the Nazi Regime was not more prevalent in the German church at the time. I also discuss this in further detail below.

<sup>149</sup> DBWE 6, 162.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 160-170.

Importantly, just as J. Louis Martyn identifies the church as “*the corporate, newly competent and newly addressable agent*,”<sup>152</sup> Bonhoeffer identifies the church as a “distinct corporate entity” that “serves to fulfill” the ultimate word of God in the world of penultimate things.<sup>153</sup> Indeed, the church-community must ask every day whether the penultimate mandates of the family, state, work, and church are fulfilling the function of preparing the way (i.e., ensuring that all human beings enjoy freedom from poverty, bondage, and oppression) for the ultimate.<sup>154</sup> This view firmly situates the source of one’s actions not in the penultimate mandates themselves, but rather, in the word of God in Jesus Christ on which the mandates depend.<sup>155</sup>

A critical part of preparing the way for the ultimate word of God through the mandates, then, is to reject the absolutizing of the mandates themselves. Bonhoeffer sees this problem in the German Protestant church where people tend to focus “on the static element of order [i.e. mandate]” without regard for the *purpose* of the mandates so that it leads “to a divine sanctioning of all existing order per se, and thus to a romantic conservatism.”<sup>156</sup> It is not difficult to see how this view explicitly enabled, at least in part, German Christians to reconcile the contradiction between their identities as Christians and as supporters of the Nazi Regime. To illustrate the point, we may note that pastors in the German church were required to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler beginning in 1938.<sup>157</sup> Bonhoeffer writes specifically about the “frightening confusion or arrogance” of Protestant Christians regarding conscientious objectors to this oath, ultimately arguing that the attitude towards conscientious objectors was the result of a church that

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<sup>152</sup> Martyn, J. Louis. “Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Meta-Ethics.” 180. Emphasis Martyn’s.

<sup>153</sup> DBWE 6, 404.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 389.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. Unlike his contemporaries and forbears who referred to these human institutions as “orders of creation” or even “offices” (both of which imply an independent, even fixed authority to them), Bonhoeffer identifies our institutions as “divine mandates.” Their legitimacy is entirely dependent on the fact that God has commanded them.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 407. See editorial footnote 66.

fundamentally misunderstood its commission, and therefore obligation, to proclaim the word of God to the world.<sup>158</sup> That obligation included – even required – outspoken resistance of the injustices of the Nazi regime as Bonhoeffer argues that in the “church’s encounter with the government... [the] government should be challenged about very specific problems whose remedy is part of its divine mandate.”<sup>159</sup> In other words, a necessary part of Bonhoeffer’s conception of responsible Christian-ethical behavior is the willingness to hold political institutions and the individuals situated in positions of power within them responsible.

Arriving at this point in my discussion of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* has required the adoption of Bonhoeffer’s sometimes technical and even idiosyncratic vocabulary. I will conclude, then, by retracing in plain terms some of the key contours of the argument. First, Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* demonstrates an awareness of one of the main problems for Christian ethics, namely the dichotomy between ‘this world’ and the ‘otherworldly.’ Bonhoeffer argues that this dichotomy is resolved, or perhaps reconciled, within the person of Jesus Christ, exhibiting the intense Christological focus of apocalyptic theology. For Bonhoeffer, Christ becomes the epistemological starting point for all Christian ethics. Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on conformation to the person of Jesus Christ is especially indicative of this Christocentric epistemology.

Second, Bonhoeffer’s conception of ethics presupposes an ethical collective, i.e., the church. Anywhere there is a discussion of Jesus Christ in Bonhoeffer’s work, there is also an implicit, if not an explicit, discussion of the church. According to Bonhoeffer, the church is the place in the world where, by virtue of Jesus Christ’s vicarious representation of humanity on the cross, human beings are empowered to be vicariously representative of, and therefore responsible

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 408.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. 399.

for, one another. Just as in the work of Martyn, for Bonhoeffer the church is the place in which Christians find renewed agential status and empowerment.

Third and finally, Bonhoeffer's approach to vicariously responsible action is well-illustrated in two concrete practices: confession and political action. Bonhoeffer's attention to these practices underscores his belief in the agential empowerment of the individual in church-community and consequently, their capacity for preparing the way for the ultimate word of God. Confession, both individual and corporate, is portrayed as a concrete means for participation in the reality of God by conformation to the person of Jesus Christ. It is also a practice for identifying how and where one has *failed* to prepare the way for the ultimate word of God, i.e., has failed to feed the hungry, free those in bondage, etc. In this function of confession, one can detect Bonhoeffer's commitment to Christian political action. From Bonhoeffer's confessional examples it is clear that his Christian ethics supports, or perhaps even requires, robust socio-political action. At a minimum, Christian-ethical behavior necessitates that one be actively and critically engaged with the world around them, ever attentive to the manifold ways in which the church, family, culture, or state may fail to prepare the way for the ultimate reality that is proclaimed daily by the church: that God became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, and in doing so, has empowered human beings to love and serve one another so that no one goes hungry, no one is oppressed, and no one is left outside the bounds of loving community.

### ***Conclusion***

Over the course of this paper, I have endeavored to argue that the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, particularly Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, is thoroughly apocalyptic and concerned with resolving the problem of Christian ethics. This problem, which Bonhoeffer names more or less explicitly, may be characterized roughly as follows:

Either one directs their attentions to the reality of God at the expense of meaningful engagement with the world *or* one directs their attentions to the world at the expense of meaningful engagement with the reality of God.

Apocalyptic theology – which at some fundamental level is *all* Christian theology – complicates this issue even further by virtue of its emphasis on divine agency and intervention in human history. Depending on how one understands apocalyptic theology, the apocalypse of God seemingly draws one’s attention completely away from the world and towards the otherworldly realm of God. Emphasis on the action of God distracts from, or perhaps even eliminates, the importance of human action.

Turning to the work of Douglas Campbell, Leander Keek, David Shaw, and especially J. Louis Martyn, I argued against this understanding of apocalyptic theology in favor of a reading in which the human being is transformed and empowered for robust engagement in the world through the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ. The human being undergoes an epistemological transformation where all previous forms of knowing – knowledge according to wisdom, good and evil, etc. – are replaced by the all-encompassing and world-shattering knowledge according to Jesus Christ, i.e., apocalyptic knowing. In the words of J. Louis Martyn, the cross of Christ is “the absolute epistemological watershed.”<sup>160</sup> Jesus Christ’s status as the epistemological turning point, Martyn argues, also has important implications for human agency. Imbued with knowledge according to Christ, the human agent has been reconstituted into a corporate agent – the church – that is collectively empowered to act in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Rather

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

than disabling or vacating the responsibility of the human agent, the apocalypse of God in Jesus Christ *empowers* the human agent for meaningful, collective action within the world.

Bonhoeffer's theological work tracks this story of revelation, epistemological transformation, and agential empowerment quite clearly. In Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, we are offered a clear presentation of the epistemological break and transformation that is accomplished through the person of Jesus Christ and his call to discipleship. Importantly, Bonhoeffer says that Jesus Christ's call to discipleship also calls the individual into a loving community, namely, the church. *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer's dissertation on the church, illustrates the agential restoration of the individual in church-community empowered by the Holy Spirit. Here Bonhoeffer asserts that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ establishes new 'social-basic relations' between human beings. These new social-basic relations are rooted in the love of God, a love that empowers human beings in community to love one another and serve one another. Bonhoeffer also introduces his concept of 'vicarious representation' here, where vicarious representation is taken to be a key element of acts of love. It is not a stretch to argue that vicarious representation *is* love in Bonhoeffer's work. In any case, Bonhoeffer suggests that the church-community's vicariously representative action of intercessory prayer is an act in which the prayer of one member of the community draws the whole of the community into its prayer. Through this example, Bonhoeffer illustrates how the ethical significance of one person's action is preserved amidst the collective action of the community and vice versa. In other words, Bonhoeffer demonstrates how the individual human agent is empowered through the church-community in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Following my analysis of *Discipleship* and *Sanctorum Communio*, I argued that Bonhoeffer's account of epistemological and agential transformation in Christ culminates in a

novel interpretation of Christian ethics in his work by the same name. Bonhoeffer effectively shows us the application of J. Louis Martyn's work in *Ethics* by describing how the church, i.e., “*the corporate, newly competent and newly addressable agent*,”<sup>161</sup> is thrust into concrete engagement with the world in loving service and care for the neighbor. In doing so, Bonhoeffer develops a thoroughly apocalyptic Christian ethics. Two practices that Bonhoeffer identifies, political action and confession, are particularly demonstrative of his apocalyptic ethics. Bonhoeffer's conception of confession, on the one hand, presupposes the church-community empowered by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer believes that confession lays the groundwork for responsible action insofar as it enables one to see where one has failed to act responsibly in the past. Through Bonhoeffer's example of confession, it is clear that responsible action also involves political action.<sup>162</sup> Political action is a key part of ‘preparing the way’ for the ultimate word of God, as Bonhoeffer puts it. If one is to hear the gospel, let alone hear it as *good news*, then that person should be free from hunger, bondage, oppression, and other forms of immense human suffering. Bonhoeffer's attentiveness to this issue speaks not only to his historical location in Nazi Germany but also to the care and love for human beings that Bonhoeffer believes a hearer of the gospel should possess.

Ultimately, in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer develops a “theological ethics of God's apocalypse,” offering a solution to the problem(s) of Christian ethics that framed this paper. For Bonhoeffer, the revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of God in Jesus Christ reconciles the reality of God and the reality of the world, thrusting one into active engagement with the world for the sake of the reality of God. The two realities are not exclusive of one another, but rather, held together in the person of

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<sup>161</sup> Martyn, J. Louis. “Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Meta-Ethics.” 180. Emphasis Martyn's.

<sup>162</sup> I'm referring to Bonhoeffer's confessions, namely: “I am guilty of inordinate desire; I am guilty of cowardly silence when I should have spoken...” DBWE 6, 137.

Jesus Christ, who transforms human beings' ways of knowing and being in the world. Of course, it is obvious that Bonhoeffer was writing for a Christian audience and that I am dealing with a problem of Christian ethics. At this point in the discussion, I would like to consider what, if anything, Bonhoeffer's 'theological ethics of God's apocalypse' has to offer the non-Christian individual.

To say that Bonhoeffer's approach to ethics is Christocentric would be an understatement. Bonhoeffer finds the solution to the problem of knowledge, agency, and the limits of human action in the person of Jesus Christ. Key concepts in *Ethics*, such as vicarious representation and responsibility are derived from Jesus Christ. If Christ is central to an account of Bonhoefferian ethics, are Bonhoeffer's ethics completely exclusionary? I think the answer to this question must be no. Bonhoeffer's ethics, though Christologically based, do not result in an isolationist or insular Christian ethic. This 'retreat from the world' is, in part, what Bonhoeffer is trying to avoid. Instead, Bonhoeffer's acts of love and service extend from the church community *out* to the world. Bonhoeffer does not suggest that 'preparing the way' for the ultimate word of God means feeding only the Christian hungry, freeing only Christians in bondage, or easing the suffering of only fellow Christians. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer's notion of preparing the way has clear implications for all of humanity. Bonhoeffer believes in a Christianity that is cosmic in scope, in which Christians are called to serve *all* human beings. Just as Bonhoeffer suggests that Jesus Christ was vicariously responsible for all of humankind, so Christians are called to be vicariously responsible not just for other Christians, but for the whole of humanity. Anything less would be irresponsible and may be rightfully called a retreat from the world. Bonhoeffer's own life reflected this Christian concern for all of humanity. From very early on, Bonhoeffer opposed the National Socialist Party and Hitler's leadership. He argued against Nazi oppression and disenfranchisement of Jews and



condemned the German church for not doing enough to aid victims of the state. In Bonhoeffer's ethics, then, Jesus Christ does not function as an exclusionary figure, but rather a figure who directs Christian acts of love and service decisively *outward* to the world shared by all human beings regardless of gender, race, or religion.

Putting the question of exclusivity aside, Bonhoeffer's ethics are still conceptually rich even for the non-Christian ethicist. Bonhoeffer's notion of vicarious representation, for example, is a form of substitution, an important ethical concept distinctively articulated by Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>163</sup> Some scholars have argued that, in Levinas's work, substitution is the description of subjectivity (i.e., of being a subject) necessary for ethics to be possible.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, for Levinas, the subject is individuated in the other's call for help.<sup>165</sup> The call of the other for help makes the subject uniquely responsible. Substitution is the basis for responsibility because it enables one to put oneself "in the place of the other by taking responsibility for their responsibilities."<sup>166</sup> Similarly, Bonhoeffer's notion of responsibility is based upon vicarious representation or substitution.<sup>167</sup> Substitution is required for responsible action and, in some sense, is a reality regardless of whether the subject is conscious of it or not.<sup>168</sup> The same is true of Levinas's conception of substitution, which appears to be a primordial reality, prior to consciousness or subjectivity itself.<sup>169</sup> In any case, the parallels between Levinas's and Bonhoeffer's work on these concepts are enough to show

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<sup>163</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. "Otherwise than Being." Chapter 4. See also Bernasconi, Robert. "What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?" 234-251.

<sup>164</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. "What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?" 235.

<sup>165</sup> See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

<sup>166</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. "What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?" 235.

<sup>167</sup> DBWE 6, 257.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. 258. Bonhoeffer writes, "[A father] is not an isolated individual, but incorporates the selves of several people in his own self. Every attempt to live as if he were alone is a denial of the fact that he is responsible... Even those who live alone live as vicarious representatives... their lives are lived in a vicarious representative way for human beings as such, for humanity as a whole."

<sup>169</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. "What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?" 238-239.

that Bonhoeffer's Christian ethics be brought into meaningful dialogue with non-Christian ethicists.

Another concept rich for exploration in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is guilt [*schuld*]. For Bonhoeffer, the church can, through its act of confession, take on the guilt of humanity. The one engaged in Christian ethics, Bonhoeffer says, must accept guilt willingly; the willingness to take on guilt is a fundamental part of responsible action.<sup>170</sup> Bonhoeffer's discussion of guilt bears similarities to Martin Heidegger's account of guilt, and it would not be a stretch to suggest that Heidegger influenced Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the subject. For Heidegger, a necessary prerequisite for living authentically – taking responsibility for one's being and helping others to do the same – is acknowledging one's ontological constitution as being-guilty. Notably, Bonhoeffer uses the same word for guilt, *schuld*, as Heidegger does in *Being and Time*. The significance of this should not be understated, for Bonhoeffer certainly read Heidegger, even citing Heidegger's discussion of conscience – a subject intimately related to guilt – extensively in his second dissertation, *Act and Being*.<sup>171</sup> Indeed, Bonhoeffer and Heidegger seem to share a lot of ground here, making the topics of guilt and conscience fruitful for future comparative research.<sup>172</sup>

Although my main contention throughout this paper has been that Bonhoeffer develops a 'theological ethics of God's apocalypse,' I hope to have shown that Bonhoeffer's works are rich sources for *any* scholar interested in ethics. Bonhoeffer's concepts of vicarious representation (substitution), guilt, and responsibility may be brought into conversation with secular and non-Christian thinkers in a way that illuminates and enriches an understanding of both Bonhoeffer and

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<sup>170</sup> DBWE 6, 275.

<sup>171</sup> DBWE 2, 67-70, 98, 147. Bonhoeffer is critical of Heidegger, yet he also writes "The *everydayness* of human beings in Adam is guilt."

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. See Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. §56 "The Character of Conscience as a Call" and §58 "Understanding the Summons, and Guilt."

his interlocutor(s). Bonhoeffer was a scholar, among other things, and situated his theological work in dialogue with his intellectual heritage and contemporaries. It is my hope that by bringing Bonhoeffer further into conversation with the work of contemporary Pauline apocalyptic scholarship, perhaps religious scholars might continue to find new ways of challenging, probing, and learning from the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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