

Taking the antidote: Bonhoeffer's prescription of Kierkegaard and its theological and political implications for the church

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Abstract

In the Second World War's complex political and theological climate, Dietrich Bonhoeffer prescribes to his fiancée the antidote of Kierkegaard in response to her reading of Paul Schütz's *Das Evangelium*. In context, Bonhoeffer opposes forms of gospel deliberation that lead to confusion between the church and the world at the expense of the mediation of Christ. To unpack this view, this article considers Schütz's work and its emphasis upon the victory infused in creation through Christ's work. Following this, it looks to Kierkegaard's radically counter vision of the need to dwell alone with the crucified Christ in *Practice in Christianity*. Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* more effectively encapsulates how the crucified Christ mediates the church community and the world back to the individual, affirming and elaborating on Kierkegaard's work. Bonhoeffer's understanding of Kierkegaard as an 'antidote' is then applied to a Kierkegaardian critique of 'Trumpism' by Curtis Thompson. If a believer cannot hold political opinions before the crucified Christ, before entering public political discourse, they must renounce their political posture.

Keywords

Bonhoeffer; Kierkegaard; Christ crucified; Christendom; Church

1. Introduction

In February 1944, Maria von Wedemeyer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's fiancée, wrote to him, during his time in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, about her budding theological reading:

The fact is, I'm in the middle of a theological tome! What's more, I don't find it half as boring as I expected ... It's "Das Evangelium", by Paul Schütz. (If you don't like the book, that'll be the last straw).¹

The reply was perhaps not what she desired:

I'm delighted that you're reading Schütz. But ... I've seldom inveighed against any book as fiercely ... However, I'd welcome it if you took a strong dose of Kierkegaard ("Fear and Trembling", "Practice in Christianity", "Sickness unto Death") as an antidote.²

This exchange exposes Bonhoeffer's regard for Kierkegaard. Bonhoeffer considered Kierkegaard "in the same line of genuine Christian thinking" as Paul, Augustine, Luther and Barth.³ Bonhoeffer's "Discipleship" appears to mirror the tone, style and content of Kierkegaard's "Practice in Christianity" under the pseudonym of Anti-Climacus. In addition, they provide an essential place for Matthew 11:28 and exist within a similar national church background.⁴ Such a small reference allows a touchpoint to chart the course between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard's thinking. The letter's context within the Second World War and the political embroilment of the German Church make it even more intriguing. In what way does Bonhoeffer perceive Kierkegaard to be an antidote in such a setting? What kind of theological cure might the great Dane contain that would suffice for such an era?

When it comes to the theological and political implications of this discussion, the key question is whether there is a vision of Christ that makes the Church more susceptible to being drawn into false political and social positions. In my mind, I have the German church in Nazi Germany, as well as Kierkegaard's Danish Christendom and how these are echoed in modern versions of Christian nationalism. Where does the antidote lie? As

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, *Love Letters from Cell 92*, ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz, trans. John Brown (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 176–77.

2 Bonhoeffer and Wedemeyer, 185–86.

3 Geoffrey B. Kelly, Kierkegaard as "Antidote" and as Impact on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of Christian Discipleship, in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 145.

4 DBWE 4, 38–40.

always, the church runs aground when it takes the death and resurrection as merely symbolic in value.⁵ In contrast, Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard maintain the radical *promevity* of Christ to the believer; Christ approaches the believer on his terms, unmediated by any human reality.⁶ Kierkegaard's antidote lies in the need to stand individually before the crucified Christ rather than be swept into the triumphant social order of Christendom.

To make sense of Kierkegaard's antidote, I will first consider Schütz's apocalyptic reading of Mark's gospel in *Das Evangelium* and pay particular attention to his spiritual interpretation and relegation of the cross. The loss of Jesus as a person, subsumed into the spiritual reality underpinning his ministry, leaves the church searching for the divine in the world. Second, I consider how Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* is antithetical to Schütz's vision. Kierkegaard insists on the need to exist as a contemporary of the crucified Christ. Only in this posture can the church remain militant rather than triumphant. Third, I will show how Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* picks up the same insistence on existing before the crucified Christ. But contrary to the radically individualistic vision of Kierkegaard's *Practice*, a believer must exist alone before the crucified Christ, and then Christ will mediate back to the church community and world. To be an individual before Christ is a check on the political and ecclesial positions of the church to prevent its diversions from Christ's purposes. Fourth, I will apply "the antidote" to Curtis Thompson's Kierkegaardian critique of Trumpism, which seems to reduce Christ to a symbol in unpacking a way through modern political trouble.

5 Brian Gregor names the danger of this pattern when interpreting the cross, when it ceases to be an event in history and instead becomes symbolic of a truth. Hegelian thinking lies behind this interpretative stance. Brian Gregor, *A Philosophical Anthropology of the Cross the Cruciform Self* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 6–7.

6 Philip Ziegler, 'Christ for Us Today – Promevity in the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 no. 1 (2013): 28–29.

2. The apocalyptic victory of Christ in Paul Schütz's *Das Evangelium*

Paul Schütz's role fighting in the First and Second World Wars for Germany was formative for his theology.⁷ He became the pastor of St. Nikolai Church in Hamburg before he was called up to duty, returning in 1946. He also took up a role in lecturing on systematic theology at a church university founded in 1948. His work *Das Evangelium* was published in 1940. In the work, Schütz seeks to apply the gospel to the “people of his time”, as the subtitle suggests (*Dem Menschen unserer Zeit dargestellt*). Interestingly, *Das Evangelium* undertakes a reading of Mark's gospel along apocalyptic lines, that is, envisioning the coming of Jesus within its higher cosmic and spiritual setting. Schütz seems to make sense of the wars within that wider cosmic lens. Indeed, when he considers Mark 13 in *Das Evangelium*, he suggests the need for an apocalyptic and spiritual reading of the gospels following the First World War.⁸

Schütz's apocalyptic theology appears as an alternative to the spiritual options before him in Germany. He had pietist preachers for parents and grew up in the romanticism of the early 20th century. Following the war, neither the pietist nor the romantic nor the “dialectic theology” of the years between the wars seemed worthwhile to him.⁹ Schütz opposed theology which stressed the divine-human difference and the useless nature of rational thought; he considered it “too orthodox, dogmatic and distant from the people.”¹⁰ Reflecting on the First World War, he suggests there is a realisation of the historical nature of being human and of faith.¹¹ Schütz deeply mistrusted the church's return to a confessional standing after the war. In a letter explaining his mistrust, he directs attention to Kierkegaard: “What we have been experiencing for decades from Kierkegaard is anything

7 Rudolf Kremers, Der Lebens- und Erkenntnisweg von Paul Schütz, *Zeitschrift Für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 46, no. 3 (1994): 260–64.

8 Paul Schütz, *Das Evangelium: Dem Menschen unserer Zeit dargestellt* (Berlin: Hans von Hugo Verlag, 1940), 331. Hereafter, DE.

9 Kremers, 260.

10 Ralf Retter, *Theological-Political Resistance: The Role of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans-Bernd Von Haefen in the German Resistance Against Hitler* (Logos Verlag Berlin GmbH, 2008), 66.

11 DE, 330; 341.

but health.”¹² Schütz preferred a focus on the nature of human life informed by the apocalyptic standpoint of Jesus’ ministry.

Schütz’s book is a theological commentary on the book of Mark, focusing on the divine invasion of the spiritual darkness of the earth. “This is what the gospel says: In Christ, the heavenly forces invade this earthly world. Christ is life from the heavens lived out on earth. Given to us in her (the earth’s) form.”¹³ Schütz is not interested in any other vision of Jesus that does not involve this divine incursion into the world’s darkness. There is a piercing of time with the coming of Christ – a breaking in of divinity into humanity. The incarnation pierces the band of time – the whole of time is altered and remade:

With this word “the beginning”, God virtually puts a wedge with a pike on the rolling belt of time. He touches it at this point – and he penetrates it. *The pointer (as in a clock hand) that points here really becomes a wedge that pierces, which punctures the infinite belt.*

Religious implications exist for the relationship between humanity and divinity: God and man now face each other without needing mediation.¹⁴ All religions, images, and ideas of divinity are broken down. God is defined as the one who has come to be with his creatures, no longer an abstraction of philosophy.

After the descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism, “the earth is full of heaven, the flesh with the Spirit and Adam with the new creature.” God’s coming in the flesh leads to a complete healing of creation, down to the very dark depths of its reality.¹⁵ Christ’s incarnation has a broader scope and effect for all humanity without distinction. The baptism of Jesus interpenetrates the divine and human, bleeding two realities into one.

*In the entry into the history room, Christ becomes Spirit as the one who fights, suffers, and conquers with us, building onto us as pneumatic life.*¹⁶

12 Kremers, ‘Der Lebens- Und Erkenntnisweg von Paul Schütz’, 263.

13 DE, 37; 77.

14 DE, 12.

15 DE, 37 see also, 77.

16 DE, 38.

It is the form of this “pneumatic life”, which is challenging to work out as God’s people. So, to know the power of Christ again, the church needs to hold in high regard the working of his Spirit.¹⁷ The gospel is about the human race and not isolated individuals. The centre of the gospel is not God but humanity, who are in great danger.¹⁸ Christ is baptised with the Spirit to fight against demonic armies arrayed against humanity and so summons his disciples to follow him into conflict.¹⁹ To have the Spirit and battle the powers is to wage war for the image of Christ in the world.

When Schütz considers Jesus’ announcement of his path to the cross (Mk 8:31–33), he sees the cross as the moment when a broader power is released. The cross does not lay down a path to be followed. To interpret the course of the passion, he considers the words of Jesus from John: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (Jn 12:24) The cross must occur to produce the fruit, which is the power of the kingdom that will follow. The cross is essential in the ministry of Jesus; it is the “breakthrough point” and the “release of a power”. Schütz is clear that the way of the cross is the way of Jesus Christ. It is however the Holy Spirit who is the “world-powerful spirit” whose power makes real change in the world’s order possible.²⁰ Christians are summoned to walk in the power unleashed by the cross rather than the path of the cross itself. At the third passion prediction, Schütz again maintains: “The new way is the charismatic transformation of the world.”²¹ Christ’s path to the cross is a pneumatological path that he alone is summoned to walk, the fruit of which will be enjoyed by the disciples and the world. The work of the Spirit compels Christ to this end.²² Disciples are summoned to operate under the same power of the Spirit.²³ The final cry of Christ from the cross echoes through the spiritual domain; Christ no longer spoke “in

17 DE, 41.

18 DE, 67–68.

19 DE, 68.

20 DE, 205.

21 DE, 290.

22 DE, 291.

23 DE, 293.

earthly tongues” and with the power of Pentecost.²⁴ The centurion who watches the scene and hears Christ’s charismatic cry is awakened to the true figure of Christ [*Christusgestalt*]: “It is the true figure of Christ as the believer can only see him: as the resurrected Christ.”²⁵ The cross of Christ is pivotal, but it is swallowed up into Schütz’ pneumatology. We could say that pneumatological consequences of Christ’s cross are more essential to discipleship than the need to take up our own cross.

Subsequently, Schütz emphasises the resurrection from which the Spirit comes rather than the cross. Schütz claims that the cross was not a “cult-symbol” of the ancient church, nor a part of ancient Christian art. Christ appears as the “crucified victor”, not as the defeated and humiliated Christ.²⁶ The resurrection is the gospel’s “heart” and “final word”. It is, in essence, a “royal proclamation”: “Christ conquers – Christ reigns... Christ Victorious”²⁷ The emphasis is upon the “birth, baptism, transfiguration, resurrection, ascension”, where the affirming voice of the Father is heard.²⁸ The subject of early preaching was the appointment of Christ to his royal office, and so the apostolic witness was to the resurrection of Christ. The Christian faith stands or falls on Christ’s resurrection, so it is the proper centre of the gospel faith. There is a world-changing power (*weltumwendende Macht*) that emanates from the resurrection of Christ.²⁹ The world is drawn into the dynamics of transformation; thus, there is an irresistible motion to Christ’s victory.³⁰ Transcendence is now a part of the world and is found in the “world’s transformation.”³¹

Schütz’s apocalyptic view reduces Christ’s death and resurrection to merely symbolic spiritual importance, and Christ is “dissolved” into the world of people in the Spirit.

24 DE, 424.

25 DE, 425.

26 DE, 435.

27 DE, 437.

28 DE, 438.

29 “Der Geist, der vom Auferstandnen ausgeht, der Geist, der er selbst ist, reißt die Welt in ihre Verwandlung.” (DE, 443)

30 He says: “die Welt in ihn hineingerissen der Dynamik der Verwandlung zufällt.” (DE, 450)

31 DE, 451.

The Holy Spirit is the sacrificed Christ; the Christ that has been dissolved into the person(al) world of the human being Christ still is: given into and dissolved into the human world, he lives and floods through the times.³²

Schütz's focus upon the Holy Spirit appears to blur the lines between divine and human realities. Such a vision of the gospel leaves the believer seeking evidence and confidence of divine victory in the world, leaving them open to trusting in political realities in which Christ's victory appears to be present. Schütz speaks of the "overwhelming power" by which the Spirit of God overturned the Roman world through the early Christians.³³ Such a reading of history becomes necessary; if Christ has been dissolved into the world, then the reality of his power needs to be recognised with the events of history. Schütz's dismissal of the person of Christ has vast political implications for the church. The vision of spiritual victory in the darkness of the war years rightly summons believers to find themselves in the Spirit's power. However, without a Christological centre, believers can wander to find the Spirit in merely human realities.

3. The Kierkegaardian antidote: The individual before the Crucified Christ

How does Kierkegaard provide an Antidote to Schütz's apocalyptic vision? In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard critiques a "victorious vision" of the church by articulating how the ascended Christ draws us, individually, to his cross. We come to see that the political posture of the church is determined by its Christology. The theme of "Christ as victor" comes to the fore in the final section of *Practice in Christianity*, written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. It is worth distinguishing the voice of one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms from his own, a point we will return to.³⁴ The opening prayer looks to Jesus as "the great victor" and begins his critique of Christendom.

32 DE, 452.

33 DE, 361.

34 Kierkegaard declares: "A pseudonym is excellent precisely in order to identify a standpoint, an attitude, a position. He is a poetic personage." (KJN 6, 84, [NB11:150] / SKS 22, 88)

Just as you keep us from all other error, keep us also from this, that we delude ourselves into thinking ourselves to be members of a church already triumphant here in this world. The place of your church is not here in the world; there is room for it only if it struggles and, by struggling, makes room for itself to exist. But if it struggles, it will never be displaced by the world either.³⁵

An interesting paradox is that if the church considers itself “triumphant”, it will lose its place in the world, “confuse itself with the world”, and be “obliterated from the earth.” The church can only retain its place in the world by joining Christ in his sufferings on the cross.

Kierkegaard further suggests that there is a way to misinterpret Jesus’ words about his ascension: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself.” (Jn 12:32). These words could be taken as: “... he has been victorious, and we have only to join up with him and share victory with him.” Kierkegaard perceives this as a problematic understanding of the “truth” in Christianity. He draws a comparison with gunpowder. The creation of gunpowder may have been arduous, but humanity could enjoy the result once it had been discovered. There is no need to go back and follow the path of invention again. If Christ’s victory were like this, an achievement that could just be basked in, his life could be left behind in favour of his victory. However, Christ is *the way*; his life was a demonstration of a reality that was to be repeated or redoubled in the believer:

For here the truth is a result, here the emphasis is not on *the way* and on *each individual* who, responsible before God, must make his own decision whether he wants to walk along the way or not.³⁶

The church “triumphant” takes Christ’s life and victory as a *yield* that all enjoy, rather than a “way” that makes requirements of all people. The “Church militant is related, feels itself drawn to Christ in lowliness; the Church triumphant has taken the Church of Christ in vain.” He clarifies

35 Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 201 / SKS 12, 198. Hereafter, PC.

36 PC, 210 / SKS 12, 206.

that only “a Church Triumphant in eternity is entirely in order.”³⁷ The notion that “all are Christians” makes the reality of Christ as the *way* to be followed by all foolish and unnecessary.³⁸ Here, Kierkegaard wants the individual to view themselves in relation to the cross. The suffering way of Jesus is the path to freedom.

The Church Triumphant is linked to the “impatience” ... to take in advance that which comes later and so “abolish Christianity”. When “Christ’s kingdom makes a compromise” and “becomes a kingdom of this world, Christianity is abolished.”³⁹ The deeper reality behind this confusion is the “incessant observation of world history and the history of the human race”, leading to a loss of Christ’s person: “It has been totally forgotten that Christ’s life on earth ... is sacred history, which must not be confused with world history and the history of the race.”⁴⁰ Here, Kierkegaard thinks of the Hegelian sublation of history. In Hegelian thinking: “the ‘mystery’ of God ... ‘unfolds’” as “an actualisation in social shapes that transcend yet include individual freedom.”⁴¹ The fruition of this comes in the Christian states of Christendom. Anti-Climacus flatly denies this: “The world is going neither forward nor backwards; it remains essentially the same.”⁴² Anti-Climacus denies the “entirety of the Hegelian Philosophy of history.”⁴³

The “antidote” to the problems of the church and Christendom is simple: to live as a contemporary of Christ. Earlier in *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard establishes the need to live as Christ’s contemporary:

And so it will always prove to be becoming a Christian truly comes to mean becoming contemporary with Christ. And if becoming a Christian does not come to mean this, then all this talk about becoming a Christian is futility and fancy and vanity, and in part

37 PC, 209 / SKS 12, 206.

38 PC, 211 / SKS 12, 207.

39 PC, 211 / SKS 12, 207.

40 PC, 221 / SKS 12, 216.

41 Peter Crafts Hodgson, *Shapes of Freedom: Hegel’s Philosophy of World History in Theological Perspective*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60.

42 PC, 232 / SKS 12, 226.

43 Millay, *The Abased Christ*, 70.

blasphemy and sin against the second commandment of the Law and sin against the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴

A vision of contemporaneity is at the heart of Kierkegaard's vision of the Christian life. He considers contemporaneity (*samtidighed*) “the decisive point” and “my life's thought.”⁴⁵ The difficulty with “contemporaneity” is whether to take it simply as a self-reflexive “imaginative experience”⁴⁶ or a type of self-transcendence⁴⁷ or receiving the same reaction as Christ.⁴⁸ However, Anti-Climacus means mediated access to Jesus Christ. The vivid and lively experiences of Christ constitute the means and power of becoming like Christ in the world.⁴⁹ As Anti-Climacus says, if this is denied, it is a “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”. It is the reality that Christ is “pneumatologically extended through time” to be contemporary to every generation.⁵⁰ Rather than self-transcendence or mediation of the imagination, contemporaneity concerns a real relation to Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The need to live as a contemporary of Christ has a necessary corollary: “the only possible rescue for Christianity: rigorousness.”⁵¹ The “rigour” is living

44 PC, 63 / SKS 12, 75.

45 Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Moment' and Late Writings* (Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 290 / SKS 13, 348.

46 Patrick Stokes, See for Yourself: Contemporaneity, Autopsy and Presence in Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology, *British Journal for History of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2010): 314.

47 Merold Westphal, Kenosis and Offense: A Kierkegaardian Look at Divine Transcendence, in *Practice in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, vol. 20, International Kierkegaard Commentary (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2004), 37–38.

48 Millay, 93.

49 Kierkegaard pictures this transformation: “So the youth goes out into the world with this image before his eyes ... his whole deepest inner being is transformed little by little, and he seems to be beginning to resemble, however imperfectly, this image that has made him forget everything – also the world in which he is, which now regards him with astonishment and alienation.” (PC, 193 / SKS 12, 192) Again he says: “so the young man is transformed in likeness to this image, which imprints or impresses itself on all his thought and on every utterance by him”. (PC, 189 / SKS 12, 188.)

50 Murray A. Rae, The Forgetfulness of Historical-Talkative Remembrance in Kierkegaard's Practice in Christianity, in *Practice in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, vol. 20, International Kierkegaard Commentary (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2004), 90.

51 PC, 228 / SKS 12, 222.

out the suffering likeness to Jesus Christ. The shift away from “rigour” was a ruse of Satan to pull the church away from its health:

Yes, this rigorousness helped ... This was the militant Church; Satan himself accomplished nothing against it, except to give the heroes of faith the desired opportunity to be surrounded with the incorruptible radiance of martyrdom ... Then Satan said to himself: I shall not conquer in this way; and he changed his method. Little by little, he deluded the Christian Church into thinking that now it had been victorious, now it should have a good rest after the battle and enjoy the victory.⁵²

By contrast: “he came into the world to suffer; *that* he called being victorious.”⁵³ As such, “the militant Church [...] is related to Christ in his abasement even if drawn to him from on high.”⁵⁴ The antidote is the way of the cross lived as a contemporary of Christ. The church must consist of individuals willing to suffer, imitating their saviour. If “the abased Christ is the standard, then everything Christendom evaluates as good – security, good health, riches, dominance, family, land” must be denied “to retain fidelity to the prototype.”⁵⁵

Anti-Climacus’s theological insistence on contemporaneity for the individual leaves his eschatological ecclesiology unrealised. The present is a time of spiritual testing for individuals and requires “self-denial, to deny oneself.”⁵⁶ Kierkegaard presses the category of testing the “individual” particularly far. It is difficult to see whether he has space for a corporate Christian church on this side of eternity:

... “fellowship” is a lower category than “the single individual”, which everyone can and should be ... Thus, the congregation does not really come until eternity; “the congregation” is at rest what “this single individual” is in unrest ... therefore “the congregation” does not belong in time but belongs first in eternity, where it is at rest, the

52 PC, 229–230 / SKS 12, 223–224.

53 PC, 224 / SKS 12, 219.

54 PC, 232 / SKS 12, 226.

55 Millay, *The Abased Christ*, 50.

56 PC, 222 / SKS 12, 217.

gathering of all the single individuals who endured in the struggle and passed the test.⁵⁷

The Church is always “militant” for Kierkegaard, existing in the struggle. There is only a proper final gathering when they have all passed the test and come into eternity. Here, Kierkegaard may press his argument to the extreme: there is no such thing as the church – only co-struggling individuals. The priority now is the believer’s test; the final reality will be the church. Perhaps the church triumphant then exists in some ideal way but cannot be realised this side of Christ’s return. We must return to the reality that Kierkegaard did not write this under his name but under a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, the “super-Christian” voice in his authorship. Anti-Climacus’s job is not to show the way but to make us feel that the way is impossible.⁵⁸ Kierkegaard begins *Practice* by suggesting the “extreme ideality” of Anti-Climacus, which occurs so we might “take refuge in grace.” So, Anti-Climacus emphasises the *individual* task of Christian faith at the expense of the corporate as a reaction to Christendom’s insistence upon everyone belonging to the faith.

If Kierkegaard provides an “antidote” here, it is perhaps the theological equivalent of electric shock therapy. The church is in danger when individual believers cannot tell themselves from the crowd and take responsibility for their “time of trial” before the crucified Christ. Kierkegaard warns us against theological concepts of Christ, which take us away from our task of looking to him as our example. To lose the cross in our relation to Christ is to lose Christianity. When individual believers start to sense in a collective political or social movement the victory of Christ or expect the church to “conquer”, then the way of the cross is lost. The issue we have identified with Anti-Climacus is Kierkegaard’s failure to articulate any proper ecclesial form for the church. If Schütz overemphasises the Spirit,

57 PC, 223 / SKS 12, 218.

58 Kierkegaard positions himself lower than Anti-Climacus but higher than Climacus, a less overtly Christian voice in Kierkegaard’s corpus: “...one seems to sense that Anti-C. considers himself to be a Christian on an extraordinary degree ... I positioned myself above J.C., below Anti-C.” KJN 6, 127 [NB11:209] / SKS 22, 130. Kierkegaard, in another place, reflects on the advent of Anti-Climacus: “the new pseudonym is a higher pseudonymity”. Søren Kierkegaard, *On My Work as an Author: The Point of View for My Work as an Author and Armed Neutrality* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6 / SKS 13, 12.

then Kierkegaard perhaps focuses too heavily upon the relation to Christ. We must turn to Bonhoeffer's appropriation of Kierkegaard's thinking to resolve and balance these issues.

4. Bonhoeffer's integration of the Cruciform Individual into the Human Community

While there is a remarkable resonance between *Discipleship* and Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*, Bonhoeffer provides a clearer vision of the individual's relation to the corporate church. Bonhoeffer tactically begins in the same way as Anti-Climacus, shocking believers into their responsibility to live before Christ as individuals. The difference between cheap and costly grace approximates Kierkegaard's distinction between the militant and triumphant church. He suggests this in terms of the "secularisation" of the church:

The expansion of Christianity and the increasing secularisation of the church caused the awareness of costly grace to be gradually lost. The world was Christianized; grace became the common property of a Christian world.⁵⁹

The presence of monastic orders in the catholic church "became a living protest against the secularisation of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace."⁶⁰ However, this failed to create a crisis in the church. Instead, monasticism became the place for "extraordinary individuals" and allowed the rest of the church to not engage in the issues of rigour and costly grace. Monasticism, too, became a form of "meritoriousness for itself" Luther broke from this world to take hold of Christ. Bonhoeffer, like Kierkegaard, sees how this resulted in the world being "justified by grace" and a

⁵⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, English Edition* (Edited by Geoffrey Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 46. Hereafter DBWE 4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Nachfolge* (Edited by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1989; 2nd ed., Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994, 32). Hereafter, DBW 4.

DBW 4, 32.

⁶⁰ DBWE 4, 47/ DBW 4, 33.

baptising of the kingdom of Christendom.⁶¹ The result was a liberation “from following Jesus”.

Bonhoeffer, like Kierkegaard, emphasises the need for individual discipleship but suggests that the endpoint is returning to the fold of church and society.

There is no true knowledge of God’s gift without knowledge of the mediator, for whose sake alone they are given to us. There is no genuine gratitude for nation, family, history, and nature without a deep repentance that honours Christ alone above all these gifts.⁶²

Believers need to repent alone before the crucified Christ. In addition, Christ is the mediator of all the communal realities of human life. These are twin realities. When we come alone to Christ, he mediates for us the gift of all human relationships:

But it is precisely this same mediator who makes us into individuals, who becomes the basis for an entirely *new community*. He stands in the centre between the other person and me. He separates, but he also unites. He cuts off every direct path to someone else, but he guides everyone following him to the new and sole true way to another person via the mediator.⁶³

At times, Kierkegaard speaks like this –his book *Works of Love* is a particular occasion where God is the “middle term” in relationships and there is a “triadic” set of dynamics.⁶⁴ For example: “Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between person-God-person, that is, that God is the middle term”.⁶⁵ But Bonhoeffer is more precise on how our meeting with Christ individually leads to our corporate connection to others.

61 DBWE 4, 50/ DBW 4, 37.

62 DBWE 4, 96/ DBW 4, 91.

63 DBWE 4, 98/ DBW 4, 94.

64 Koert Verhagen demonstrates the interconnected way that Bonhoeffer’s account of Christ’s mediation is mirrored in Kierkegaard’s use of God as the ‘middle term’ in *Works of Love*. Koert Verhagen, ‘God, the Middle Term: Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and Christ’s Mediation in Works of Love’, *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 11 no. 2 (2020): 78, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020078>.

65 WL, 107/SKS 9, 111. See also: WL, 57–58/SKS 9, 64 and WL, 121/SKS 9, 124.

“Those who dare to become single individuals trusting in the word are given the gift of church-community.”⁶⁶

Bonhoeffer’s transition from the earlier part of discipleship to the later picture of the church is where complications arise. Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer end their respective works by focusing on the image of Christ as it is pressed onto the believer. Bonhoeffer considers the church between the opening polemic call to discipleship and this final picture of discipleship, a clear advance on the unrealised ecclesiology of Kierkegaard. However, Bonhoeffer does not appear to have distinguished the tone of Anti-Climacus from the voice of Kierkegaard, leaving him in danger of overemphasis. He seems to recognise some of this in retrospect, though he stands behind his writing.⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer suggests that we cannot hear the voice of Jesus as the first disciples did; here, he draws back from the radical contemporaneity of Kierkegaard. “If we want to hear his call to discipleship, we need to hear it where Christ himself is present. It is within the church that Jesus Christ calls through his word and sacrament.”⁶⁸ Here, “Bonhoeffer ties ecclesiology and Christology so closely to each other that one cannot but consider it an identification, an asymmetrical identification, but nevertheless an identification.”⁶⁹ The present Christ who summons is replaced by the body in which he is present. The question is whether Bonhoeffer creates confusion by quickly moving between the raw call of Christ articulated by Anti-Climacus and Christ’s call mediated by the church. There is danger in over-identifying Christ’s person with the church’s ministry. Bonhoeffer presents an “irresolvable tension” in his twin identification of the church with Christ and his vision of the ascended Christ who will return.⁷⁰ However, we can take the advice of Michael Mawson, who shows a careful picture of divine mediation by Son and Spirit

66 DBWE 4, 99/ DBW 4, 95.

67 DBWE 8, 269 / DBW 8, 542.

68 DBWE, 4 202 / DBW 4, 215.

69 Kirsten Busch Nielsen, *Community Turned Inside Out: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Concept of the Church and Humanity Reconsidered*, in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (ed. Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 94.

70 Tom Greggs, *Ecclesiology*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 227.

in *Sanctorum Communio*, which gives confidence to read discipleship within the same frame.⁷¹

Despite this, Bonhoeffer remains clear in his relation of the believer to Christ and how the cross brings about a spiritual break between the world, the past and the self of the believer.

Baptism implies a *break*. Christ invades the realm of Satan and lays hold of those who belong to him, thereby creating his church-community. Past and present are thus torn asunder... Long ago, Christ himself had already brought about that break. In baptism, this break now also takes effect in my own life.⁷²

Notice the apocalyptic nuance; the baptism of Christ brought about a spiritual break, but it needs to be personally appropriated by faith. As a result of this “break”, the world is now only approached in and through Jesus Christ. Christ must return the world to the believer through his sovereign work. Our baptism is into his death and causes the death of the self: “Those who become Christ’s own must come under his cross. They must suffer and die with him.”⁷³ The baptised make up the “visible church-community” of believers.⁷⁴ Believers do not “re-enact” the death of Christ but “live out of the once-and-for-allness” of Christ’s death.⁷⁵ To participate in the “break” brought about by Christ is to participate in his cross. There is no connection with his victory outside of participation with his cross and graciously receiving his death for us.

The Holy Spirit mediates Christ to the individual and draws them into the community, keeping a distinction between Christ and the world. “In our death in baptism, the Holy Spirit thus appropriates to us personally what Christ in his body has gained for the whole of humanity.”⁷⁶ We come to Christ by his sovereign freedom and in the power of his Spirit. Bonhoeffer

71 Michael Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 149.

72 DBWE 4, 207/ DBW 4, 221.

73 DBWE 4, 208/ DBW 4, 222

74 DBWE 4, 210/ DBW 4, 224.

75 DBWE 4, 211/ DBW 4, 225.

76 DBWE 4, 216/ DBW 4, 230.

continues: “It is true that all human beings as such are ‘with Christ’ because of the incarnation, since Jesus bears the whole of the human nature [...]. Nevertheless, Christians are ‘with Christ’ in a special sense.”⁷⁷ The Incarnation brings about a general relation to Christ, but the relation of faith is still unique. Bonhoeffer is also more precise than Kierkegaard on how the Holy Spirit constitutes individuals in their particularity and communion with his church. It has been suggested that Kierkegaard has a “low pneumatology”; however, as we’ve seen, he gestures in the direction of the Holy Spirit without articulating it fully.⁷⁸

It is the Holy Spirit who brings Christ to individuals (Eph. 3:17; 1 Cor. 12:3). It is the Spirit who builds up the church by gathering the individuals ... the Holy Spirit creates the community (2 Cor. 13:13) of the members of the body ... The church of Christ is Christ present through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁹

Bonhoeffer thus maintains the corporate and individual nature of faith and a clear divine and human distinction. Christ is never dissolved into the world; the incarnation brings humanity into a relationship with Christ, but the Spirit uniquely knits believers together into his body. The world, the church, and the individual all have a particular place in the Spirit’s mediation of Christ. Contra Schütz, Christ draws us to himself as individuals and as the church through the cross. Any triumph we experience is to be tethered by the cross, and we are never to conflate the rise of political or social power with the cruciform power of Christ. The radical summons of Anti-Climacus is here tempered and proven within the Church and the Holy Spirit’s mediation. Kierkegaard’s “antidote” can more readily guide the church as it discerns a place in the world. Perhaps then we find in Bonhoeffer, Schütz and Anti-Climacus held in tension: the powerful work of the Spirit is found in and through our relation to the crucified Christ.

77 DBWE 4, 217/ DBW 4, 231.

78 Andrew B. Torrance, *The Freedom to Become a Christian: A Kierkegaardian Account of Human Transformation in Relationship with God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 193–194.

79 DBWE 4, 221/ DBW 4, 235.

5. Taking the antidote in modern political discourse

Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer probe the fault lines of Christendom's relation to the person and achievements of Christ. The Christian church needs to be tempered to Christ's cross in the power of the Spirit. Without this, there is confusion between Christ's victory and any human agenda or ideology. Yet, we still have not quite shown how Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer aid us in diagnosing and responding to incorrect political positions the church is drawn into. Curtis Thompson's book *Kierkegaard Trumping Trump* will prove a test case in how the Kierkegaardian Antidote, as prescribed by Bonhoeffer, is best applied. Despite providing a Kierkegaardian critique of popular political movements, I will demonstrate how Thompson falls into the theological trap of Schütz's theology. The loss of the cross and the use of the resurrection symbolically lead to confusion about Christ's relation to the world and the believer's task.

Thompson's book uses the Kierkegaardian corpus to critique so-called Trumpism, in which he sees patterns familiar to the Danish Christendom of Kierkegaard's day. He summarised the critical issue as a generation "losing themselves" to "abstract cultural norms" and "relinquishing their personal responsibility to give voice to their own thoughts" to what Kierkegaard terms "the crowd".⁸⁰ The advent of social media has remarkably accelerated the powerful forging of one solitary "public". Along with this comes "Christ, Inc.," an incorporated political vision that "permits a faith" of "external trappings without interiority".⁸¹ In this way, Thompson demonstrates that the same "levelling forces" at play in Danish Christendom are the same in modern political populism.⁸² Church becomes part of the political transactional play rather than a personal appropriation of the individual. Thompson then seeks to discern the difference in six conceptual places where Kierkegaard discerns the presence of divinity in the actuality of existence.⁸³ These conceptual points provide a map for a mature self to discern its course. For example, "Trump's Church of Christ, Inc.," like

80 Curtis L. Thompson, *Kierkegaard Trumping Trump: Divinity Resurrecting Democracy* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), 3.

81 Thompson, 53.

82 Thompson, 4.

83 Thompson, 6.

Kierkegaard's Christendom, permitted a "faith that can be lived in the external trappings without interiority," which "habitually [went] through the prescribed motions without being passionately engaged."⁸⁴ However, following a Kierkegaardian course into deeper "interiority" leads to an ability to live free from social constraints.

A genuinely free and independent individual, full of passionate existence and dialectical reflection, does not need to unreflectively capitulate to the crowd or uncritically accept society's deliverance of what is right and wrong, good and bad, proper and improper.⁸⁵

Thompson shows how Kierkegaard's writing frees individuals from merging with abstract political positions or parties. Thompson seeks to free the agency of the individuals from the forces that might engulf them.

At the heart of Thompson's critique of Trumpism is a theological vision of how "divinity donates a desire for love to human creatures", which is only "fulfilled in loving."⁸⁶ In addition, the title seeks to lean heavily on the "resurrection" of democracy. Thompson suggests that Kierkegaard "can help to acquaint us with many clues for discerning divinity's dawn in our time and for recognising the prospects of divinity resurrecting democracy."⁸⁷ Here, we are seeking God's infused work, bringing transformation.

Divinity is ever about its task of eliciting the creative advance, utilising its power of creative transformation to move the creation toward greater wholeness.⁸⁸

Divinity, divine love, is at work in every cranny of life to creatively nurture the lives of creatures toward greater wholeness.⁸⁹

These comments begin to sound closer to Schütz's vision of the world-transforming power set loose into the world.⁹⁰ Because of the desire

84 Thompson, 52.

85 Thompson, 54.

86 Thompson, 10.

87 Thompson, 9–10.

88 Thompson, 131.

89 Thompson, 154.

90 Thompson, 163.

“implanted within the human”, God seeks to actualise this potential with God’s help.⁹¹ Hence, there is a need for individuals “to discern which leaders are going to serve the creative advance” because:

We’ve got significant responsibility ... there is a divine expectation for us to be competent, compassionate co-creators with divine love. Kierkegaard’s upbuilding admonition in our time would be to keep in mind that divine love forcefully urges us every day to get involved, to exercise our freedom, and to make a difference.⁹²

In the end, Thompson seeks these core ideas not from Kierkegaard but from Schelling and Meister Eckhart.⁹³ It leaves the believer dependent upon discerning the presence of the divine person within time.

As a corollary, there is only a small place for Christ and his cross in Thompson’s account. Thompson rightly traces the movement towards “the paradox expressed in the figure of Jesus as the Christ” as expressed by the pseudonym Climacus.⁹⁴

This message, centred on Christ, claims that the eternal, which is the opposite of the temporal, has entered time in the historical figure of Jesus. Thus dialectically, this paradox is an affront, for it cannot be comprehended by the understanding. But the message asks not that the paradoxical Christ be understood but affirmed in faith.⁹⁵

There needs to be a “break” in the self because of the paradox of Christ. There is to be a clear distinction between the immanent capacity of people and their new self-forged before Christ. He looks to Anti-Climacus’s other work, *The Sickness Unto Death*, for the need to be “a self directly before Christ.”⁹⁶ The fullness of potential for the human self exists in someone before Christ.⁹⁷ Here, Kierkegaard emphasises Christ as “the Word, the

91 Thompson, 157–158.

92 Thompson, 154–155.

93 Thompson, 154–155.

94 Thompson, 77.

95 Thompson, 77–78.

96 SUD, 113–114 / SKS 11, 225.

97 Thompson, *Kierkegaard Trumping Trump*, 80.

prototype” to be followed.⁹⁸ There is a need for a direct relation to the person of Christ and a recognition of the lack of human rationality to comprehend the divinity revealed in Christ’s incarnation. Only in Christ’s presence and this experience of “nothingness” before him can someone fully come to themselves.⁹⁹ The person of Christ is here essential, but strangely, his cross is absent.

Furthermore, the overwhelming metaphor of the book is resurrection with a focus on its symbolic meaning rather than the resurrection of Christ. “Divinity resurrects. Divinity brings new life into people’s lives and into conflictual situations.”¹⁰⁰ Again: “To possibilize is to love. Possibilizing carries within it the divine power of resurrection.”¹⁰¹ The nature of “resurrection” in the book thus takes on an ideal form, which is detached from Christ and speaks more generally of a power which is out in the world:

First, while it is the resurrection of this one that this religion celebrates, within that religion, the term resurrection came to apply as well to the new resurrection life this living one was engendering within communities of followers.¹⁰²

Thompson speaks parallel to Schütz at this point: in an age where Christendom lays siege to the people of faith, the way forward is to lay hold of a general resurrection power infused into creation. The phrase repeated to make sense of this is “practising resurrection”.¹⁰³ Thompson describes this at the end of the book as “the divine power of creative transformation at work in the world.”¹⁰⁴ Thompson seems to deviate from the Kierkegaardian path into alternate theological territory, abandoning Kierkegaard’s Christological compass, which enables believers to discern their course.

98 Thompson, 53.

99 Thompson, 79.

100 Thompson, 132.

101 Thompson, 156.

102 Thompson, 163.

103 Thompson, 163; 165; 166;167; 168; 169; 170; 171; 173; 176.

104 Thompson, 172.

Thompson's Kierkegaardian critique is thus insufficiently Kierkegaardian. If Maria were reading Thompson's book, Bonhoeffer would prescribe Kierkegaard as an antidote. The answer to political detours into confused versions of triumphant Christian nationalism lies at the foot of the cross. To free themselves from the deception of the crowd, disciples must bring their political opinions and postures before Christ crucified. Such views must be relinquished if they cannot stand before the crucified one. The church is protected when each dwells on their own before the abased Christ allows him to lead them back into community with the church and the world. The church is militant under the banner of the cross in the world. There is a paradoxical shape to the nature of Christian witness. The only antidote is to be found in the presence of Christ, mediated by the Spirit. The church must live in the Spirit's power, as emphasised by Schütz, but only before the cross of Christ, rendered incompletely by Anti-Climacus and fulfilled in Bonhoeffer's work. All other uses of Christ in symbolic terms denigrate the reality of his person and lead to captivity to the crowd and the political moment.

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