

## **Raised in newness of life: Religionless Christianity and the sacraments in Bonhoeffer's baptismal letter to Dietrich Bethge**

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### **Abstract**

In the last days of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer struggled to understand how the church was meant to live faithful to Christ in this catastrophic setting. In a letter written for his godson's baptism, he connects themes of religionlessness and the sacraments – in particular, baptism, confession, and the Eucharist – to explore what this faithfulness might look like. In five reflections, Bonhoeffer considers and the legacy of Germany and his generation and confesses their sins and failures in hopes of creating an opportunity for the coming generation to begin their life of faith with a religionless disposition more fitting to the time and the calling of Christ. Concluding with examples of how some in subsequent generations have lived in a manner reflective of Bonhoeffer's hopes, this article asserts that Bonhoeffer's vision of a life transformed through reception of the sacraments remains a compelling and honest vision for Christian fidelity to both God and the Christian's worldly context.

### **Keywords**

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer; religionless Christianity; sacraments; baptism; confession of sin*

In the opening salvo of the Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer's central point is clear: an encounter with the genuine Christ undoes me. Despite my best attempts to contain that encounter, to bring it back under my control, my power is eclipsed, and I am unmade. By that same encounter, though, I am remade.<sup>1</sup> I am un-made as a rebellious sinner in Adam and I am remade as a loving creature in Christ. I die and am raised in newness of life. As the Second World War winds towards its brutal end, after over a decade of Nazi tyranny and Christian capitulation, the world in which Bonhoeffer dwells has certainly died. Been laid to waste. As he muses, then, on the possibility

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1 *DBWE* 12:302-307.

of a religionless Christianity—whether in letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge, as he fiddles with the drafts that would have become *Ethics*, or as he plots out the content of a new book meant to be published as a forerunner to *Ethics*—Bonhoeffer is trying to discern what it might mean for the church of God to be born anew in this place and time. He is concerned with how the coming generation will live.

That the church would and could be born anew is actually not a foregone conclusion. The German church, at least in many of its forms, had been in decline even before the war. And during the Nazi period, its resistance, when it even offered resistance, was often minimal and delayed and divided.<sup>2</sup> Such a weak response in the face of unrelenting political pressure had fractured the German churches considerably, leading to the possibility that the churches would be entirely overcome by National Socialist efforts.<sup>3</sup> So what was the way back? For Bonhoeffer, however, the question was not “what was the way back” to power or influence or high baptism rates. The question was what the path looked like to faithfulness. Where did God desire to be found *now*, and how did Christians best serve God alongside God? But all of these epistolary ponderings about a new fidelity to Christ seem to omit a heretofore defining element of Christian praxis in faithfulness: the cultic and ritualistic. Particularly, what is to be done with the sacraments? A letter from Bethge to Bonhoeffer assures contemporary readers that Bonhoeffer was not unaware of this concern. Bethge writes:

So how are we to concretely claim our “ground” in the world?  
What is the role of ritual, and what is the role of the prophetic?

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- 2 The divides in the German church are thoroughly documented in both Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Revolt Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Mary Solberg, *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement, 1932-1940* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). Together, these works importantly trace the German Church Struggle from alternate sides. Bonhoeffer, too, talks about the weak and uncoordinated efforts of the Confessing Church movement, making it clear that the movement’s weaknesses were not visible merely by hindsight, and its future unclear to many leaders of the resistance. *DBWE* 13, 135-36. Eberhard Bethge also documented how the Confessing Church failed to recognize and carry out the full implications of its confessions. Eberhard Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995).
- 3 Schulz goes so far as to argue that only the outbreak of war prevented the final Nazi assault on Christianity. Dirk Schulz, “Editor’s Afterword to the German Edition,” *DBWE* 15:564-65.

And ultimately, what importance does the Christ[ian] tradition in which we stand have? The “ideas” that people have of it, with which they should be nourished and have been nourished? But all that is precisely what you are thinking about.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Bonhoeffer doesn't think much out loud about ritual, or at least not in those letters that were preserved. To the minds of some this has been proof enough that religionless Christianity was religionless at least in part because it dispensed with such antiquated and senseless practices. However, it is more plausible—and more consistent with Bonhoeffer's larger theological program—that the opposite conclusion is true.<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity is only possible among a people who go to font and table expecting to meet Christ. Tracing the themes of Bonhoeffer's first public thoughts on religionlessness, disclosed in the reading sent on the occasion of his godson's baptism, demonstrates that the stuff of religionless Christianity is actually the fruit of an encounter with Christ in the traditionally three Lutheran sacraments of baptism, the Lord's supper, and confession. The argument proceeds in four parts. First, what is this religion that Bonhoeffer is dismissing? Second, a brief historical setting of the baptismal reflections helps provides needed context. Third, Bonhoeffer's five reflections will be taken in turn to explain their content as it pertains to religionless Christianity and this as a fruit of encountering Christ in the sacraments. Section four concludes by suggesting how responsibility for the future therefore requires the church's ongoing, urgent attention to Christ as he makes himself known in these ancient sacramental practices.

## Religion and religionlessness

When Bonhoeffer diagnoses religion and deems the age of religion dead and gone, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer has a particular sense of religion in mind. Across Bonhoeffer's writings his understanding of and regard for religion varies greatly. Certain trends may be tracked, however, not the least of which is a growing disillusionment with what religion he

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4 DBWE 8:414.

5 A conclusion also argued in Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to His Thought* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2007), 200.

sees around him. Commonly, at least in many Western environs, that disillusionment may be expressed in a sense that Christianity is about a relationship and not a religion. Bonhoeffer would certainly agree with the language, but not necessarily with its hidden premise. Beneath the language of “relationship v. religion” there is often an assumption that so long as one loves Jesus enough then one does not need all the institutional or corporate trappings: sermons, readings, and sacraments are the decorations to a relationship, and one is free as needed to switch the decor out or even remove it altogether using one’s own keen sense of spiritual interior design. Yet for Bonhoeffer, religion is not automatically the same as the cultic or ritualistic. Or, to say it better, religion is not merely the cultic and ritualistic. Religion as Bonhoeffer observes and rejects it is primarily a disposition. The essence of this religious disposition is the desire to secure oneself against the claims of God and neighbour.<sup>6</sup> The religious disposition is the default human position of possessing a *cor incurvatum in se* and then using (or attempting to use) God and those around one to preserve oneself against life’s uncertainties. One makes oneself *sicut deus*, like God, but at a great cost: “those who create their own god and their own world, those who allow their desire to become their god, must inevitably hate other human beings who stand in their way and impede their designs. Strife, hatred, envy, and murder all have the same source: they spring from our own selfish desire.”<sup>7</sup> This selfish use of others is the essence of religion and must be undone.

Only Christ can turn one’s heart outward. Christ, present as he wills and promises, in word and sacrament orients believers away from trying to be lords of their own destinies and orients them towards a loving, creaturely, faithful habitation of the world.<sup>8</sup> This new orientation compels believers to work together to discern where precisely Christ can be found suffering today and to work by prayer and action to suffer alongside God in a godless world as they participate in and await the redemption of all things.<sup>9</sup> It is

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6 DBWE 3:122-23.

7 DBWE 4:265.

8 DBWE 3:78-79.

9 DBWE 8:389-90.

this reorientation that Bonhoeffer takes as a subject when his godson is born.

## The impetus to the baptismal reflections

Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge was born February 3, 1944. On February 4, Bonhoeffer's own birthday, Maria von Wedemeyer delivered the news.<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer was already writing to Eberhard Bethge, and continued by expressing both joy and anxiety about the new child: "I hope I can promise you to be a good godfather and "great"-uncle (!) to him, and I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't say I'm really tremendously pleased and proud that you have named your firstborn after me."<sup>11</sup> Before the child had been born, Renate hoped that Dietrich would be able to be present to baptize his namesake.<sup>12</sup> But this was not to be. Instead Bonhoeffer wrote a letter for the ceremony.<sup>13</sup> Eberhard baptized his son on May 21, 1944, while home on leave, and Bonhoeffer's "Thoughts" was read aloud.<sup>14</sup>

Bonhoeffer first began writing Eberhard about "religionless Christianity" during this time.<sup>15</sup> During this time, Bonhoeffer's trial was pending intermittently. Berlin endured severe air raids, bringing at least one casualty to the prison population. The times were uncertain and precarious, and Bonhoeffer was the more inspired for it. Bethge had previously asked permission to circulate some of the fruits of this period to fellows from Finkenwalde seminary. Bonhoeffer had written about his own disease at the thought. But here, at the moment of baptism, Bonhoeffer wrote about religionless Christianity as if the sacrament evoked the theme. And, indeed, many of the themes of the reflections are themselves derivative of sacramental themes.<sup>16</sup>

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10 *Ibid.*:289.

11 *Ibid.*:290.

12 *Ibid.*: 274.

13 *Ibid.*:383-90

14 *Ibid.*:383, fn. 1. For discussion of how the other prison letters survived, see Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance*, 38-57.

15 *DBWE* 8:364.

16 This history is previously traced in Chris Dodson, *The God Who is Given: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Sacramental Theology and Religionless Christianity* (London: Lexington

## The sacraments in the baptismal reflections

Bonhoeffer's letter to his godson comes in a series of five reflections.<sup>17</sup> In the first, Bonhoeffer talks about generational progressions. The second focuses on generational legacies. The third discusses the changing landscape of rural, urban, and suburban that baby Bethge will grow up navigating. The fourth explores how that changing landscape among others will hopefully permit Bethge's generation to experience and conduct their lives differently than their predecessors. The final suggests just how the church into which Bethge is being baptized may also have to inhabit this new world in a new way.

Only the last of these reflections, with its open connection to baptism, seems overtly to originate in or appeal to the witness of the sacraments. The last reflection is also the most overtly tuned to Bonhoeffer's developing theology of religionlessness. Yet closer inspection reveals how each of the reflections does, in fact, reflect both the content of Bonhoeffer's sacramental and religionless theology, ultimately building towards the overt declarations of the final reflection.

In the first and second reflections, Bonhoeffer effectively speaks to what it means for a new Christian to be included in a community that is passing on a legacy of faith. Bonhoeffer is not speaking directly about the church, but he is speaking about what happens in the church when one is baptized. Formed distinctly by his own family life, Bonhoeffer is keenly aware of the impact this community and its legacy can have.<sup>18</sup> He is also aware that the particular forms of community life in which he and Eberhard Bethge were raised are unlikely to survive the war: "The old village parsonage and the old middle-class house belong to a world that will have vanished by the time you grow up."<sup>19</sup> Yet the values carried from that concrete form of life

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Books/Fortress Academic: 2021), 173-174.

17 These reflections are also previously discussed in my book *The God Who is Given*, 175-184. While this analysis of all five reflections is reflective of the prior analysis, particularly so regarding the first two reflections, an effort has been made to expand on this prior work and redirect it to attune with the arguments of this article more closely.

18 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 13-21.

19 *DBWE* 8:385.

into the new forms being established will nevertheless prove invaluable for faithful Christian living: “[t]he devotional life of your home will not be noisy or wordy, but it will teach you to pray, to fear and love God above all, and to do the will of Jesus Christ gladly.”<sup>20</sup>

Still, the family lives about which Bonhoeffer is speaking are themselves expansions of divine formative activity that belongs first to the transformative encounter with Christ that takes place within the church. Bonhoeffer makes use of language which elsewhere in his writings is applied to the sociological entity that is Christ-existing-as-community. Phrases suggesting these legacies provide a “firm foundation for living with others” and will instil “responsibility” both require that the work these families are doing is itself work rooted in a prior community where through baptism Christ has undone selfish sinners and turned them into loving and responsible creatures.<sup>21</sup> This is because the foundation cannot be firm except that it is built on Christ, and one cannot be responsible for one’s neighbour except that one’s heart is first turned outward by Christ in baptism to receive that neighbour in freedom. Yet here the *actus reflectus* and *actus directus* begin to do their work. For in being received by the family and church communities, and by himself receiving the family and church communities, this child is included into communities of loving hearts that will teach him to live rightly and for whom he will live rightly in response. Bethge will, Bonhoeffer expects, become the bearer of nearly 250 years of the family’s oral history, but he will bear that history not for himself but for the sake of others.<sup>22</sup> By being baptized, this Christian is inducted into communities of faith and given the faith that will sustain his care for others. Faith may not be easy to bear in the coming decades. There may be “dangers,” “impoverishment,” “sorrows,” and “confusion.” But there will also be “joy,” “clarity,” and “refuge.”<sup>23</sup> Bethge’s baptism therefore is this-worldly: it will immerse him fully in the world with all its troubles

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20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*:384.

22 *Ibid.*:383.

23 *Ibid.*:385.

and joys, but there he will take what he has been given to love and serve the world into which he is placed.<sup>24</sup>

This world will clearly not be the pre-war world in which Bonhoeffer himself came of age. So Bonhoeffer turns his attention to urban development. He believes that even though cities are dying, that is, their appeal and promise have been unmasked as pretense, they are nevertheless in their dying reaching out into the countryside and absorbing it in a vain attempt to preserve their own lives. Bonhoeffer seems to be discussing the emergence of the suburban community. Bonhoeffer views this new community negatively, which is only fitting when he has set up the argument by describing the city as having its heart turned in on itself and yet selfishly and destructively is reaching beyond itself to *sicut deus*, like God, accomplish everlasting life. However Bonhoeffer does find one aspect of suburbia to be worthwhile: its community members “will gain from having a plot of land under their feet from which to draw strength for a new, simpler, more natural and contented life of daily work and evening leisure.”<sup>25</sup> With this ground under their feet, perhaps this community will yet find a way to overcome the transgression of Cain, the murderous founder of cities.<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer offers what almost seems a toss-away line that “Cain was the original founder of cities.”<sup>27</sup> Cain is the *homo sicut deus contra deus* trying to secure life by destroying it and thereby revealing his total godlessness. The city participates in the sin of its father. But even cursed to live in the midst of sin, the curse bears the promise of life.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the curse bears the promise of eternal life through and with God.<sup>29</sup> *Creation and Fall* reveals just how hope can be found in the midst of Cain’s deadly assault: crucifixion. If crucifixion is the murderous Cain’s “last desperate assault on the gate of paradise,”<sup>30</sup> then Golgotha can become that “plot of land from

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24 This accords with the description of religionless Christianity that Bonhoeffer outlines July 18, 1944. *Ibid.*:480.

25 *Ibid.*:386.

26 *DBWE* 3:145-146

27 *DBWE* 8:386.

28 *DBWE* 3:132.

29 *Ibid.*:136.

30 *Ibid.*:145.



which to draw strength.”<sup>31</sup> As Bonhoeffer continues in *Creation and Fall*, “The trunk of the cross becomes the wood of life, and now in the midst of the world, on the accursed ground itself, life is raised up anew. In the centre of the world, from the wood of the cross, the fountain of life springs up. All who thirst for life are called to drink from this water, and whoever has eaten from the wood of this life shall never again hunger and thirst.”<sup>32</sup> The language here is evocatively sacramental: baptism is evoked by the fountain of life springing up, as is the Lord’s Supper in the eating of the wood of this life. Even as cities participate in Cain’s murdering and reveal the world’s godlessness, residents of those cities can encounter Christ in the sacraments and find the strength and contentment to live in the world with love, without the compulsive need to live at the expense of others.

In the fourth reflection, Bonhoeffer must confess that his own generation had not lived in the manner just described. Rather, each person expected to “plan, develop, and shape his own life.”<sup>33</sup> Fretting about tomorrow, they built selfishly without regard for their neighbours. Only the war was able to convince those like Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators to stop, as “After Ten Years” described it, “worrying about tomorrow.”<sup>34</sup> According to “After Ten Years,” it was important that the lack of worry one ultimately adopts should have a certain, godly form. Cessation of worry may prove an invitation to escapism and frivolity. This is vanity. Yet there is also the faithful practice of “taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future.”<sup>35</sup> In Bonhoeffer’s fourth reflection, he confesses that his generation had partaken of a kind of godlessness both ambitious and consumptive and are only now learning how to live the kind of responsible, trusting faithfulness he describes. So it is this kind of faithful life Bonhoeffer hopes Bethge and his generation will know to inhabit from the start. Bonhoeffer’s confession is, in part, what makes this hope possible. Confession gives space for free, creaturely life to begin. By giving his confession in this reflection,

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31 DBWE 8:386.

32 DBWE 3:146.

33 DBWE 8:387.

34 *Ibid.*:50.

35 *Ibid.*

Bonhoeffer can hope that this new generation will “only think about what you have to answer for in action.”<sup>36</sup> In this way Bethge and his peers will know that they are responsible for engaging the world freely, that is, from their own selves that have been liberated from the selfishness of sin but can only do so as creatures who recognize the contingent character of their action and submit it to the judgment of their Creator. In this way they will not selfishly expect to build their lives but will work towards the world’s genuine future: the reconciliation of all things.<sup>37</sup>

But for reconciliation to occur, the old must die and be raised in newness of life. For this reason, Bonhoeffer’s fifth reflection consists of his letting go. Speaking for Germans as a whole, he believes that “we can give up our privileges without a struggle, recognizing the justice of history”<sup>38</sup> so that “we shall prove ourselves worthy to survive by identifying ourselves generously and selflessly with the whole community and the suffering of our fellow human beings.”<sup>39</sup> The church of Bonhoeffer’s past, imperial and bourgeois as it was, will likewise be let go.<sup>40</sup>

The church and Germany both will wait on their restoration. Bonhoeffer is too keenly aware that before and during the war the church had focused on saving itself. To take the response to the Aryan Clause for example, while some had spoken out against this as in principle an affront to all Jews, more had objected solely on the grounds that it would interfere with the ministries of some Jews who were Christian pastors, and many hadn’t

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36 *Ibid.*:387.

37 They may expect, however, that the world will resist its reconciliation of God’s own terms, preferring to seek its own salvation. For this reason, Bonhoeffer hopes that while his generation sought vainly to shape the world using reason and justice (the world’s hostility to both of these being exposed by the senseless and injustice of the war), the new generation will be more sober and therefore more successful by being prepared to endure the hardship at the hands of and for the sake of the world. As baptized persons born by Christ, they will suffer and bear the world. *Ibid.*:388.

38 *Ibid.*:389.

39 *Ibid.*

40 More concrete indications of what it looked like for the church to let go may presumably have been forthcoming if the book he was writing in prison had carried on. In the book’s outline, Bonhoeffer calls at least for the church to give away its property and for its clergy to give up state stipends to live off freewill offerings; *ibid.*:503.

objected at all.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, the very language of the baptismal liturgies uttered over Dietrich Bethge—words like redemption, reconciliation, and love—have been twisted beyond recognition by self-interest. This language and indeed all of creation must be renewed. But it cannot be renewed by itself. The church cannot make its own language credible again. This takes an act of God. So, for now, there is only the waiting. And while the church waits its witness is by “prayer and doing justice among human beings.”<sup>42</sup> When the church encounters Christ again and there Christ exists as community again then the church’s language will receive new life and force and competency. But until then there is prayer and action, quietly and unassumingly living out that baptismal promise to be turned to Christ, reject evil, and pursue the good.

### **How is the coming generation to go on living?**

Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the occasion of Dietrich Bethge’s baptism offer many helpful suggestions for how the coming generations may go on living. Those suggestions express a religionless form of life which appears to owe itself to the transformative work accomplished by Christ when he encounters his people in the sacraments. As baptized persons who find grace and fellowship at the Lord’s table and reconciliation and repentance in confession, the coming generation of Christians can be those who soberly acknowledge the world’s godlessness but nevertheless recognize that godlessness as the ground from whence salvation will spring.

It is impossible to say for sure, of course, whether or not the generation about which Bonhoeffer specifically wrote – Dietrich Bethge’s generation – was able to fulfil the hope of Bonhoeffer’s reflections. Indeed, Bonhoeffer believes that saints will never recognize the holiness of their actions.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, those who observe the saints may often see what the saints do not.<sup>44</sup> If one looks back on the last half of the twentieth century, one can

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41 Klaus Scholder, *The Churches of the Third Reich*, vol. 1 of 2, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1977), 254-79.

42 *DBWE* 8:390.

43 *DBWE* 4:149-51, 266-67, 279.

44 God makes visible the fruit of the saints’ self-forgetting love. *Ibid.*:151-52.

identify places where this work of sober acknowledgment of the world's evil was paired with hope for the world's redemption. This half-century was tumultuous, and yet in the midst of that tumult numerous Christian communities around the world raised voices to combat (among so many other sins) systemic racism, sexism, and war lust. Each of these forms of worldliness reflects the desire to secure oneself through the subjugation of others. Each are expressions of hearts turned inward. In racism, whiteness is secured by the forced subservience of persons of colour. Sexism secures male through the domination of female. The violence and destruction of war is generally justified by a perceived need (i.e. "Our country will not survive without the resources that this other country refuses to provide.") or a perceived threat (i.e. "They're coming for us, and we won't survive if we don't fight.") that elevates the sustenance of one's own being over that of another's. Yet Septima Poinsetta Clark and Frank Chikane would stand in the face of abuse, knowing the world was godless, and point towards a promised land of reconciliation and equality.<sup>45</sup> In the hope that peace could spring from this worldly killing ground, this Golgotha, anti-war groups like Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam struggled not only against the war in Vietnam, but after the war continued to work against arms proliferation, nuclear build-up, and the violence of South African Apartheid. Of course, the work to resist Apartheid was already being done in South Africa by, among others, the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, and a desegregated Catholic Church.

Each of these individuals and organizations were flawed, of course, and their own work sometimes incomplete or inconsistent. Yet they were all driven in part by theological objections to the godlessness of the world around then and a hope that creaturely fidelity to God and neighbour could, by the grace of God, be restored as they prayed and sought justice. As Clark stated, "I just tried to create a little chaos. Chaos is a good thing. God created the whole world out of it. Change is what comes of it."<sup>46</sup> There

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45 Clark famously resisted at the intersection of both black and female marginalization, contending with Ralph Abernathy's (among others') resistance to female leadership in the American Civil Rights Movement. Chikane was arrested multiple times and targeted for assassination as a result of his resistance to Apartheid.

46 Helen L. Bevel, *The Nonviolent Right to Vote Movement Almanac* (The Peace Fellowship, 2018), 558.

in the midst of the worldliness, faith found God at work. Faith suffered the call to join God at work. Confession and reckoning with the sins of racism, sexism, and violence during the latter half of the twentieth century opened up the possibility for far greater equality and more substantial justice than had theretofore been possible even if a lot of work remains to be done.

Yet precisely because work remains to be done Bonhoeffer's reflections remind the contemporary generation that they cannot survive apart from the grace that comes from Christ through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and confession. Old forms of life are passing away, but these practices form communities that bear a crucial witness for sober and responsible Christian habitation of a godless world. The church continues to need confession in order to recognize sin and open itself up to alternative possibilities. Confession is the gateway to theological imagination. While the temptation is always there to say that "There's sin and that's just the way the world is," that kind of forgetting about tomorrow is godless escapism. Tolkien's wisdom is more responsible: "Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule."<sup>47</sup> While Christians cannot think they might eradicate evil forever, there is still a responsibility to address the evil that they can see. The first step in addressing those evils is confessing them as such.

Baptism ushers Christians into a community capable of both confessing and carrying out confession's imaginative fruits. The possibility conceived of in confession can be practiced in the baptized community. That is not to say the community will be perfect. Yet the community can live by grace and practice a love that is inconceivable apart from that grace. As Bonhoeffer insists:

Where the world despises other members of the Christian family, Christians will love and serve them. If the world does violence to them, Christians will help them and provide them relief. Where the world subjects them to dishonour and insult, Christians will

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47 J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 861.

sacrifice their own honour in exchange for their disgrace. Where the world seeks gain, Christians will renounce it; where it exploits, they will let go; where it oppresses, they will stoop down and lift up the oppressed. Where the world denies justice, Christians will practice compassion; where it hides behind lies, they will speak out for those who cannot speak, and testify for the truth. For the sake of brothers or sisters – be they Jew or Greek, slave or free, strong, or weak, of noble or of common birth – Christians will renounce all community with the world, for they serve the community of the body of Jesus Christ. Being a part of this community, Christians cannot remain hidden from the world. They have been called out of the world and follow Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Such a called-out community does not survive on its own. It is sustained by reception of Christ in the Lord's Supper, there to eat the fruit of the cross and find salvation. There to die to self and truly live again.<sup>49</sup> Christians will need to come to the table time and time again in order to have their hearts turned back outwards to freedom and love when the world's wrath tempts them again to selfishness. In this way, Christians responsibly stop worrying about tomorrow by focusing on doing what good they may today in the face of a godless world, recognizing that they do not always know that what they do is good (much less the best) but confessing all that they do – the good and the bad – trusting it all to the mercy of God. And in faith, they know that God is already there enabling and redeeming that work.

Christ does not meet the world in its holiness; he meets the world at its most callous and brutal and selfish and there, at the cross, he redeems the world. Those he redeems will join him there. The path will not be easy, but they will have the community of faith to guide and sustain them, and they will have Christ with and for them in the sacraments in order to give them the grace and strength to carry on. As free creatures, they will serve the world. They will make mistakes, but they will confess these mistakes and turn them over to the judgement and mercy of God. As baptized persons sustained by the Lord's Supper and reassured by confession, they will offer

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48 *DBWE* 4:237.

49 The Christian community requires the Lord's Supper, Bonhoeffer believes, in order to maintain the free sacrifice of a community that is grounded in the gospel. *Ibid.*, 233.

their prayer and service as they wait for all of creation to be as it shall be: raised in newness of life.

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