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“Particularity, Incarnation, and Discernment: Bonhoeffer’s ‘Christmas’ Spirituality”

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Then it may be said of us as well as of those shepherds: not only “they returned again” to all the old bitter distress, but also “they praised and rejoiced in God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them,” in the midst of all personal anguish, in the midst of the world’s night, in the midst of war...¹

So too for us, in a dark time...

1. Introduction

“Spirituality” is a much contested term.² For the purposes of this essay I will simply outline key dimensions of Bonhoeffer’s spirituality: his understandings of the formation of the person; of community and spiritual practice; and of particularity and discernment. Bonhoeffer’s is a Christian spirituality, so I will describe it as such. I am especially interested in questions of how spirituality sustains resistance. And I am naming his a “Christmas” spirituality both simply from noticing how central Advent/Christmas feasts are for him (in translation of letters, etc., from 1940 on – much more than Lent/Easter) and from the sense that his is a spirituality marked by deepening Incarnation precisely

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*, ed. Mark S. Bocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (hereafter abbreviated DBWE), vol. 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), I/47, p. 108.

² A burgeoning scholarly literature exists on the definition of *spirituality*, both within and beyond the Christian context I myself inhabit. See, e.g., Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Arthur Holder, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005). For a range of studies of spirituality stretching far beyond the Christian context, see the World Spirituality series (21 volumes) published by Crossroad (New York).

into Jesus’ poverty, emptiness, need, particularity, otherness – and the joy and mercy and intimacy of following.

2. Formation of the Person

All his life Bonhoeffer resisted absolute principles or claims of “universality” in theology or ethics. For him, a Christian understanding of the human person is necessarily particular: “the person in concrete, living individuality.”³ Far from some general human nature grounding individual personhood, it is the experience of running up against some other, he believes, that draws a person into the incarnational ethical-social arena where authentic personhood is formed. He describes this experience of encounter with another (divine or human) using the images of barrier (*Schranke*) or boundary (*Grenze*). This barrier of another person’s concrete and separate being confronts the individual with a reality alien to his or her own, drawing the person into what Bonhoeffer calls the state of “responsibility,” or ethical demand for some response.

Such encounter is what creates the personhood of the individual. He writes, “[Any given] individual exists only in relation to an ‘other’...*for the individual to exist, ‘others’ must necessarily be there.*”⁴ Bonhoeffer characteristically expresses this using the language of encounter between ‘I’ and ‘You.’ For Bonhoeffer, the ‘You’ is any other self who confronts the ‘I’ as a barrier: “by recognizing a You, a being of alien consciousness, as separate and distinct from myself,

³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (SC), DBWE 1, German ed. Joachim von Soosten, English ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51. Italics are Bonhoeffer’s.

I recognize myself as an ‘I,’ and so my self-consciousness awakens.”⁵

Social forms – such as patriotic mass hysteria or romantic fusion – distinguished by feelings of euphoric unity, the blurring of personal boundaries, and long-term instability, are the antithesis of true *Gemeinschaft*; they are forms of what Bonhoeffer calls *Masse*. In such enmeshed relationships, in which neither party perceives themselves or the other on a deep level as truly separate, no authentic formation of personhood in Bonhoeffer’s sense can occur. Thus, any relational or social systems that insist on the fusion or merger of selves, or the submersion of individual personhood into the life of a community, are alien to both authentic community and authentic personhood: “God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of *human beings*. In God’s eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another.”⁶ For all his pioneering grasp of the social as an intrinsic category of Christian experience and thought, he intends no degrading of individuality, the integrity,

uniqueness, and mystery of every created person; in fact, he argues that such individuality can be most truly grasped only in community, and vice versa.⁷

On the heart of this created individuality as an essentially God-directed “solitude,” he writes, “The Holy Spirit of the church-community is directed as a personal will toward personal wills, addressing each person as a *single individual* [and] *leading that person into ‘solitude’*” [before God. This] solitude of the individual...is a structure of the created order, and it continues to exist everywhere [as the Spirit’s gift]...One’s faith and prayer takes place in this singularity and solitude.”⁸

It is important to note as well that for Bonhoeffer, this individual integrity is grounded and preserved by human embodiment.⁹ This Christian appreciation of the body, like his focus on relationality and the world, reflect his Lutheran heritage and point toward trends in later 20th century theology and feminism. They are in line with his emphasis on concreteness as well, the body being, one might say, the very concreteness of the person her- or himself.

⁵ Ibid., 70f. In his introduction to this volume, Clifford Green points out the analogies and distinctions between Bonhoeffer’s and Martin Buber’s usage of these terms. Although Buber’s *I and Thou (Ich und Du)* was published in 1923, well prior to Bonhoeffer’s completion of his dissertation, Bonhoeffer nowhere cites the volume. And although both authors would concur in the usage of I and You “resisting the objectification of persons” generally, nevertheless Buber’s emphasis is one of intimacy between I and You, whereas Bonhoeffer “stresses the ‘other’ as boundary and barrier to the self; he emphasizes ethical encounter rather than intimacy.” Green, “Editor’s Introduction,” SC 5f. Green notes that for Bonhoeffer, “The other transcends the self in ethical encounter – indeed, the human You is a form and analogy of the divine You in precisely this present otherness. This personal-ethical model of transcendence, which is found throughout Bonhoeffer’s theology, distinguishes him clearly from Buber.” Ibid., SC 5-6.

⁶ Ibid., 80. Italics are Bonhoeffer’s.

⁷ In fact, he repeatedly warns against any dissolving of personhood into relational “fusion”: “Whatever kind of unity of will exists, one must never conclude any kind of unity of the willing persons in the sense of fusion; this is impossible considering all that has been said...Between us lies the boundary of being created as individual persons” (SC 56). He will continue developing these motifs of the singularity of the human person, with increasing emphasis on the role of Jesus Christ as precisely the boundary mediating human relationships, in both *Discipleship* (DBW 4) and *Life Together* (DBW 5).

⁸ Ibid., 161, 162, and 181. Italics are Bonhoeffer’s.

⁹ Ibid., 268f.

3. Community of “Persons” and Spiritual Practice(s)

In *Life Together*, we see how Bonhoeffer takes these notions of personhood grounded in the encounter between I and Thou into a more explicitly Christian discourse in the 1930's. He asserts that even in the closest Christian community we do not have immediate access to one another, but all relationships take place only through the mediation of Christ, who stands “between” each person and every other.¹⁰ This corresponds to his earlier conception of the human person as an “I” created by encounter with the *Schranke* or *Grenze* of the “You,” whose otherness is a barrier running up against the divine Other. Thus what he first conceptualized in philosophical terms he is now able to articulate in the personal language of his own experience of Jesus Christ: that I relate to any other person only through or by means of Christ who is the living boundary between us, who stands between human beings and mediates their relationships. The philosophical concept of the boundary, partaking of divine alterity in its person-forming power, has taken on flesh and shape as Jesus Christ himself, the one whose voice and gaze and touch Bonhoeffer now knows personally. He is the mediator, the *Mittler*, the *Mitte*. The person-forming *Grenze* has become the One forming us as Christians and as community.

This Christ-mediation of reality means that the only *immediate* relationship a person has is with God. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer describes how the radical call of Christ severs a person from his or her immediate relations,

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (LT), German eds., Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, English ed., Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, *DBWE 5* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 41, 43ff. Note that Bonhoeffer uses the terms *Mittler* and *Mitte* nearly interchangeably in reference to Christ's role in mediating (or at and as the center of) reality.

those bonds in which the person's created individuality was submerged, i.e., in which social enmeshment made free personhood impossible. Hear these words as written in 1937, in the midst of a highly enmeshed and idolatrous social/political/religious order. He writes,

Jesus' call itself already breaks the ties with the...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 and bound the person immediately to himself.¹¹

Throughout his life Bonhoeffer insists that Christ alone is the one through whom Christians encounter reality – *real* Reality, not Nazi reality: God, one another, the world, even oneself. Thus for him Jesus Christ functions both as the means of healthy self-differentiation and, simultaneously, as the bridge or link opening persons to reality in all directions. “*He is the mediator*, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality.”¹² And this has consequences for how communities are structured and the concrete ways their members treat one another:

Anytime a community hinders us from coming before Christ as a single individual, anytime a community lays claim to immediacy, it must be hated for Christ's sake. For every unmediated natural relationship, knowingly or

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, German ed. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, English ed., Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, *DBWE 4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 93. The entire section of “Discipleship and the Individual” (D 92-96) develops this theme of Christ's mediation of reality.

¹² *Ibid.*, 94. Italics are Bonhoeffer's.

unknowingly, is an expression of hatred toward Christ, the mediator, especially if this relationship seeks to assume a Christian identity.¹³

Again these words have clear political resonance with the nationalistic, blood/*Volk*-rooted “immediacy” of the Nazi world made even more sinister by its cloaking in Christian categories: all of this is to be hated; a Christian’s allegiance is to Christ alone.

Thus for Bonhoeffer, Christian spiritual practices of attending to Christ and following him at all costs are means of living a radically counter-cultural life in a profoundly anti-human culture. He is able to see to the heart of Christianity’s subversive spiritual potential precisely in returning to the core of the tradition itself: insisting on the heart’s undivided attentiveness to Jesus Christ as he is encountered in the Word *for me*, in the community, in the hymns and music of the tradition, in the sacraments, and as he is concretely incarnate in every “Thou,” not only Christian “Thou’s,” and in the world. People sometimes hear *Discipleship* as a “difficult” spirituality, hard, how can I give everything up to follow Christ alone...? Yet in 1937, in a church enmeshed and captive to a vicious cultural-political idolatry and finding no way out, these are words of astonishing power. There *is* a way out of this enmeshment, this all-consuming idolatry of Nazi construction of reality: for Bonhoeffer Jesus’ call breaks through all that, shatters all immediacy, breaks all enmeshment, and *really does* invite Christians into a whole new reality. For alcoholics in the gutter, for women captive to domestic violence and despair, for Christians in Nazi Germany, for any Christians who feel themselves or their world captive to powers that are sucking the very life out of them, Bonhoeffer’s spirituality is good

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94f.

news. It breaks the spell of demonic power to receive the divine Word breaking through, making all things new, and giving people a lifeline: hope and courage to follow a risky new way.

To do so requires practice – practices! – of listening and discerning and following, and it requires others, community, a different world to live in together; and for Bonhoeffer this way is not grim at all compared to the world Hitler rules, or even the world of his own tyrannical ego. This is the way of goodness, of beauty, of intimacy and humor and trust, in a world ruled by madmen: the way of transforming intimacy with God and other human beings, growing capacity for listening to God and turning away from every other voice, radical allegiance to Christ in the face of all the world’s (or his own life’s or church’s) idols, commitment to “the most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ” in the real world: in short, a fundamental re-orientation to reality. Personal and communal prayer is the heart’s movement out of bondage and fear and disorientation, being embraced in Reality. Prayer in and of itself is the heart of resistance, not “prior” to real resistance or something ancillary, a selfish luxury.¹⁴ It is what grounds a person in Reality itself, namely (for Bonhoeffer) Jesus Christ so intimately and powerfully present to each person, and simultaneously saturating and redeeming the whole world. Without prayer, resistance is hopeless; but prayer itself is already resistance and opens a different world created by God. The practices of Christian life provide the means by which authentic resistance, and an alternate vision of reality, can be sustained in the world. Thus a foremost strategy of Bonhoeffer’s resistance to evil is that “arcane discipline”: the practices of daily prayer,

¹⁴ See my essay, “Bonhoeffer and Resistance to Evil,” in the on-line *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, July 2003. <http://www.elca.org/scriptlib/dcs/jle/article.asp?aid=59>.

Scripture reading, community worship, and confession – radical truth-telling – by which he and his Finkenwalde seminarians lived in a very different reality than the one proclaimed in Nazi pulpits, Nazi newspapers, Nazi newsreels. These practices of faith nourish the profound levels of discernment, vision, hope, and courage that can make resistance possible in the world over the very long haul.¹⁵

And this living attentiveness to Jesus Christ and encounter with him is not only interior. Finkenwalde was an experiment in monasticism that expanded all the way to the front lines of the war, the heart of the conspiracy, the grimmest and most “godless” and dangerous places one might ever imagine. And this is all part of his deepening Incarnation, this Christmas spirituality. For in good Lutheran-incarnational tradition, Bonhoeffer sees Christ as the reality of both God and the world, the one in whom both God and world are truly known. Notions of the world or of God that attempt to consider these in separation from one another, or without taking full account of the other and of their union in Christ, are “abstractions.”¹⁶

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and in the reality of the world at the same time, the

¹⁵ For more on Bonhoeffer’s spiritual practices, particularly as these nourished his resistance, see Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, German eds. Ilse Tödt et al., English ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 48ff. For more on Bonhoeffer’s understandings of “concreteness” and “abstraction,” see Mark Brocker, *The Community of God, Jesus Christ, and Responsibility: The Responsible Person and the Responsible Community in Bonhoeffer’s Ethics* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1992), 199ff.

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 purpose of Christian life] is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.¹⁷

Thus Bonhoeffer names “correspondence with reality” as a key touchstone of responsible ethical action.¹⁸ If Jesus Christ is the reality of all things for Christians, then there is no fear and no need for self-protection; we are free to pursue truth and justice no matter the cost, with Christians or non-Christians, for the movement deeper into Christ in prayer opens precisely thus ever more deeply into all that is: God and world, *one reality*.¹⁹

4. Particularity and Discernment

The emphasis on the particular and the concrete shapes Bonhoeffer’s theological project from beginning to end, making him skeptical, as we have seen, of any sorts of universalizing programs or absolutist ethics which would deny the essential variety and concreteness of human life. For instance, his critique of “cheap grace” is formulated as precisely an attack on “grace as doctrine, as principle, as system....forgiveness of sins as a general truth.” As such, it is the “denial of God’s living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God.”²⁰ What is good or right or the will of God

¹⁷ *Ethics*, 55. Italics are Bonhoeffer’s.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 261-69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55ff., esp. 58.

²⁰ *Discipleship*, 43; cf. also 53.

cannot, for Bonhoeffer, be deduced from on high or “formulated as a general principle” to be applied to any and all human contexts.²¹ Rather, the good must be discerned over and over for every new circumstance: “[w]ith every new day, therefore, the question arises, how, today, here, in this situation, can I remain and be preserved within this new life with God, with Jesus Christ?”²² And this essential need for discernment extends even to God. What we think of as “God” is likely to be a projection of our culture, our repressed parental images, longing for some omnipotent validation of ourselves. Even God can’t be known in advance, or assumed; those great prison insights on the coming of age of the world, of living without the *deus ex machina*, vulnerable with God at the hands of a god-less world, stripped of familiar comforting images and notions of “God” that are idols of our own privilege – these move this Christmas spirituality to the very depths of the Incarnation, into the cross. In the letter Bonhoeffer writes to Eberhard Bethge from prison for his birthday, August 28, 1944, he says, “The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine God, could do and ought to do. If we are to learn what God promises and fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus.”²³

Because the will of God cannot be defined in advance by means of general theological, ethical, or spiritual principles, Bonhoeffer’s lifelong emphasis on concreteness necessarily

²¹ SC 168.

²² *Ethics*, 323. This quote from the *Ethics* is typical of Bonhoeffer’s later thinking, showing how this emphasis on particularity and concreteness continues throughout his life.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (LPP), new enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller et al. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1971), 391.

fosters a spirituality radically dependent on discernment, practiced anew in every new situation.²⁴ This becomes most explicit in the conspiracy, where a reliance upon mature discernment makes possible new ventures of public responsibility that may have seemed incredible to him in earlier years of his life.²⁵ “Intellect, cognitive ability, and attentive perception of the context come into lively play here.”²⁶

²⁴ All this emphasis on concreteness and particularity could open Bonhoeffer to charges of relativism, of envisioning a universe in which there are no ultimate truths, but always only merely conditional or provisional ones, different for each individual, shifting over time or in different relational or historical settings – a world unable to hear the Word of God as that echoes through the centuries from an impossibly alien time and place. How then does the concrete relate to the universal? On this see his extensive treatment of the relation of the ultimate to the penultimate (*Ethics*, 146-70). In brief, he correlates the realm of the ultimate with *justification* and that of the penultimate with *sanctification*. The justifying Word of God in which (or whom) we and the world are created, named, loved, redeemed, and borne desires always to be made flesh in the penultimate realm of time and space. Without its concrete embodiment in the penultimate (sanctification), it remains an abstraction; yet without that ultimate vision (justification), there is no hope or animation for the penultimate realm on its own. To merely expect people to break free by themselves, without the Word of grace, is condemning and despairing law, while to preach merely ultimate vision without its concrete embodiment in real situations of brokenness is cheap grace and an abandonment of people to their misery in real life.

²⁵ In his primary explication of discernment, which he terms *prüfen*, that is, “probing” or “examining” the will of God, he writes, “[The will of God is] not a system of rules that are fixed from the outset, but always new and different in each different life circumstance....Heart, intellect, observation, and experience must work together in this discernment. This discernment of the will of God is such a serious matter precisely because... knowing the will of God is not at our human disposal, but dependent entirely on God’s grace; and, indeed, because this grace is and wants to be new every morning.” *Ethics*, 321.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 323f.

One of the great and most insidious forms of distraction from the living presence and discerned call of Jesus Christ is, for Bonhoeffer, the tendency of religious people in particular to think in terms of their own judgments of “good” and “evil.” From his 1933 lectures on *Creation and Fall* through his *Ethics*, he over and over insists on the inapplicability for the Christian life of such categories of evaluation. In fact, the very first lines of his *Ethics* center precisely here:

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 the 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?”²⁷

Further, he describes the attempt to categorize reality into moral spheres as the primal temptation itself. This is the voice of the serpent promising “you shall be like God” precisely in knowledge of good and evil. Christian reflection is not to place such labels on ourselves, one another, or aspects of reality itself according to some abstracted system of evaluation. The faithful Christian stance is one of discernment and obedience to the voice of Christ who alone reveals what is real and who alone is the content of the good.²⁸ This frees the Christian from both arrogation to

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ He develops this insistence on the priority of discernment of the actual will of God, as opposed to judgment according to schemes of good vs. evil, especially in his section on correspondence with reality (*Ethics*, 261-69). Ultimately Christian discernment means learning to perceive the real revealed by and in Jesus, and as his call opens to us our particular vocation in every new concrete situation. This means that an important aspect of the practice of discernment for Bonhoeffer is simply

oneself of the divine capacity for judgment and slavish subservience to social, religious, or self-imposed rules and moral systems. This discernment calls upon the best possible use of one’s intellect, judgment, and conscience²⁹ and places them in the service of prayer and faithfulness.

And in a lovely essay written in the same period, he seems to be proposing gratitude as a positive criterion of discernment. He writes:

...That for which I can thank God is good. That for which I cannot thank God is evil. But the determination whether I can thank God for something is discerned on the basis of Jesus Christ and his word. Jesus Christ is the limit [boundary] of gratitude. Jesus Christ is also the fullness of gratitude; in him gratitude knows no bounds. It encompasses all the gifts of the created world. It embraces even pain and suffering. It penetrates the deepest darkness until it has found within it the love of God in Jesus Christ. To be thankful means to say yes to all that God gives, “at all times and for everything” (Eph. 5:20). Gratitude is even able to encompass past sin and

learning to live in relationship with Jesus Christ: to pay attention to where and how he reveals himself to us, to learn to distinguish his voice from others’ voices and remain within earshot, to turn “toward” him and not be distracted by competing demands, etc.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer develops his understanding of the conscience primarily at *Ethics*, 276-83. This is an extremely interesting section positing the conscience as “the call of human existence for unity with itself” (276, also 281) and “a warning against the loss of one’s self” (276). As such, it is an invaluable tool of discernment and, significantly, it is specifically *not* to be surrendered in service to others. Rather, “the call of the conscience to unity with oneself in Jesus Christ” in any and all concrete situations remains of paramount importance (282).

to say yes to it, because in it God's grace is revealed – O *felix culpa!* (Romans 6:17).³⁰

One might say that Bonhoeffer considers gratitude a (if not the) mark of the well-discerned Christian life, as discernment of and faithfulness to one's actual, constantly-evolving, concrete vocation allows a person to rest continually in gratitude even in the midst of evil and suffering. It is a fruit of that immersion in Christ alone which gradually releases people from the habitual human tendency toward placing categories on reality: "good" or "evil."

And this reliance on discernment pushes Bonhoeffer's incarnational spirituality farther than many Christians find comfortable: not only into risk and danger and sacrifice, but even potentially into guilt. Jesus himself in the Gospels breaks boundaries of us and them, in and out, even making himself unclean; and those following him too may find themselves incarnate in situations where no option seems pure, becoming incarnate even in the guilt of one's time and people, and trusting that the call of Christ is freedom somehow for even morally condemnable action in highly ambiguous territory. Confinement of moral thought to pre-determined categories of good and evil makes complex and living discernment impossible and may, by for instance ruling out from the outset the elimination of Hitler, contribute to the entrenchment of even greater evil. Neither the maintenance of personal innocence nor concerns for one's own safety or privilege have ultimate significance; what matters for the Christian is the attempt to stay close to Jesus Christ

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, "On the Gratitude of the Christian," *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*, German eds. Jørgen Glenthøj et al., English ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, DBW 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 490. For more specifically on gratitude and discernment in Bonhoeffer see my essay, "Probing the Will of God: Bonhoeffer and Discernment," *Dialog* 41/1 (Spring 2002): 42-49.

incarnate in our messy painful world and follow wherever he leads.

5. Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's, I assert, is a "Christmas" spirituality, an incarnate spirituality immersed in the complexity and particularity and messiness of the world – where the God who becomes flesh lives. In his writings he is not primarily interested in the triumph of Easter but in the deepening incarnation precisely into God's own poverty, darkness, emptiness – and joy, mercy, sweetness, love – met for Christians in Jesus Christ. In a world today where Christians in our context too often tend to see ourselves in the place of the victor, the divine agent, the conqueror in the name of "God," his is a refreshingly humble and open perception of divine reality, curious about the world as it is and eager to find precisely in the faces and alterity of *every other* the very face of God. "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"³¹ Not the Lord to be worshiped from afar, but the Jewish brother whose birth and life and death and call invites Dietrich into the heart of his world – into guilt and martyrdom – and into the beauty and createdness and ecstasy and polyphony of all that is: this is his God.

³¹ LPP, 279.