

The Christian scholar today and Bonhoeffer's legacy of the transformative gospel



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This article seeks to draw some useful guiding principles for Christian scholars from Bonhoeffer's work, applied primarily in the US context. These take note of: (1) the power and relevance of his contextual expression of the gospel message; (2) the intellectual and academic responsibility of his scholarship; (3) the distinctive elements of his ethics; and (4) his expression of the transformative symbiosis of the divine will and human agency. Based on these principles, recognised in Bonhoeffer's historical and theological legacy, the article will explore the current legacy of Bonhoeffer's work and contextualise it in the current battle for Christian values in society.

Contribution: Within the current US political polarisation between forms of Christian nationalism and the anti-racist movement in the US, this article is a special contribution to the debate of Bonhoeffer's theological or political momentum.

Keywords: Dietrich Bonhoeffer; ethics; scholarship; social justice; Bonhoeffer legacy.

Introduction

Many consider the ministry and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) to be a modern-day embodiment of how the gospel message should be made relevant, intellectually responsible, prophetically vibrant, and ethically transformative for both the church and society. As a disciple of Christ in perilous times, Bonhoeffer was led to adopt certain seemingly unorthodox beliefs and practices that were grounded not only in objective and normative principles, but also in the ethics of formation by the concrete and immediate will of God. Of course, relevance and contextuality contributed largely to this attitude. I maintain that Bonhoeffer's legacy, and its possible reinterpretation can inspire and strengthen teachers, scholars and activists in a renewed exploration of their prophetic role, as well as their search for social relevance and contextuality as moral Christian leaders in the 21st century.

In its first part, this article seeks to draw some useful guiding principles for Christian scholars from Bonhoeffer's life and work, noting: (1) his powerfully relevant and contextual expression of the gospel message; (2) the intellectual and academic responsibility of his Christian scholarship; (3) the concreteness and thickness of his ethics, based on his prophetic insight into the immediate will of God, yet without denial of the ethical, normative principles; and (4) his expression of the transformative initiative (a symbiosis of the divine will and active human agency) that brings about genuine spiritual revival and moral change.

In the second part, the current legacy of Bonhoeffer's work within the current religio-political climate will be investigated and a case for the renewed activism of the Christian scholar today will be made.

The relevance and contextuality of Bonhoeffer's proclamation of the gospel

Charles Marsh (2014), a notable Bonhoeffer biographer, in his *magnum opus*, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, observes:

So many horrors had transpired in the course of human history precisely because Christians had turned their eyes upward or, worse, abandoned the narrow path – the way of the cross – for some imagined ladder of ascent. Bonhoeffer determined now to teach how a Christian dissident should think about his sojourn *on earth*. (p. 264)

From *Life Together* (1954), via *Cost of Discipleship* (1995b) and *Ethics* (1995a), towards *Letters and Papers From Prison* (1997), Bonhoeffer constantly stressed the necessity of reinventing, rereading,

reviving and reenergising the gospel story in the *relevant* immediate context of the *earthly* battle against evil in its particular and concrete form. The undercurrents of this approach Bonhoeffer found in the reality of the *incarnation of Christ*. He (Bonhoeffer 1995a:74) wrote, 'Jesus Christ is not the transfiguration of sublime humanity. He is the "yes" which God addresses to the *real man*.' God was the first one who became relevant and contextual. The reality of *real* humanity was confirmed by his incarnation, confirming that we should neither despise nor deify human beings (Bonhoeffer 1995a:76).

Therefore, the incarnation of Christ and his involvement with the earthly realities and concerns of human beings teach us, the church, that Christian faith is not only an upward look towards heaven, but also a downward look towards the context in which we live (Bonhoeffer 1995b):

Let the Christian remain in the world, not because of the good gifts of creation, nor because of his responsibility for the course of the world, but for the sake of the Body of the *incarnated* Christ ... (p. 264)

In his battle against the Nazi regime and the *Nationale Reichskirche* (the pro-Nazi State Protestant Church), Bonhoeffer always maintained the principle of the relevance of Christ's message and the contextuality of the gospel. Despite the immediate danger and threat, he proclaimed the only true gospel in times when the German *Volk*, inspired by the apostate state church, claimed that the *Führer* was the 'bearer of a new Revelation' and 'Germany's Jesus Christ' (Marsh 2014:271) and:

... that anyone who is called to a spiritual office is to affirm his loyal duty with the following oath: I swear that I will be faithful and obedient to Adolf Hitler, the *Führer* of the German Reich and people, that I will conscientiously observe the laws and carry out the duties of my office, so help me God. (pp. 268-269)

In these perilous times, Bonhoeffer made a conscious decision to stay faithful and obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ, his values and principles, and to publicly side with and lead the Confessing church (the only community of faith that challenged the Nazi regime and interceded for the oppressed). Unfortunately, even this church had a large percentage of Christians who had taken the oath to Hitler (Marsh 2014:271). In these times full of risk, Bonhoeffer lived out the contextuality of the power of the gospel by praying for the Jews when intercession was forbidden for the enemies of the State, and by fighting against the pro-Aryan paragraph in the State Church policy. The message he preached was a socially relevant and contextual gospel that aimed at meeting the immediate need of the world. 'The secularity of the church follows from the incarnation of Christ. The Church, like Christ, has become the world' (Bonhoeffer 2005:178).

Faithfulness to the gospel implies *Nachfolge*, as Bonhoeffer explained in his *Cost of Discipleship*. *Nachdenken* [contemplation and reflection] without *Nachfolgen* [discipleship] is a beautiful castle built on sand (Bonhoeffer 2005:445). Discipleship, unlike mere theological reflection, is always revealed in the reality of

enduring the cross. 'It is the suffering which is the fruit of an *exclusive allegiance* to Jesus Christ' (Bonhoeffer 1995b:88). The proclamation of the contextual gospel led Bonhoeffer (1995b:89) to affirm the basic *Christ-suffering*: 'Every man must experience the call to abandon the attachments of this world ... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.'

Therefore, Bonhoeffer, in his struggle against the Nazi ideology and the prevalent worldly-religious culture of his age, confirmed the principle of living out the gospel in its immediate context and following Christ as *real man, real church, real body of Christ*. Christ has re-emerged in the conscience of the faithful as the true *Führer*, the Lord. The power of Bonhoeffer's conviction inspired many of his students to abandon the project of the *Reichskirche* and to suffer the consequences, long before his own death. He was truly a relevant preacher of the gospel.

Bonhoeffer's intellectual and academic responsibility as a scholar and activist

Bonhoeffer had a very promising theological career. He was a brilliant researcher, lecturer and speaker. Students in Berlin loved him and appreciated his demeanour, scholarship and enthusiasm. Bonhoeffer had many powerful connections, because his family was influential in Berlin (his father was a renown psychiatrist in pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany). However, because of his leadership in resistance to the prevailing Nazi culture, he was forced to leave his teaching post in Berlin. He demonstrated exceptional intellectual and academic responsibility as a scholar who did not just teach students some theological material or exegete ancient sacred writings, but, as an activist, he epitomised real and responsible change in the church and society. He went to the desert of *Finkenwalde* (the secluded seminary of the Confessing Church) (Marsh 2014:216), because he believed that the responsibility of every scholar was to cry out in the wilderness against the social and spiritual abuses of the prevailing Nazi regime, as well as to exemplify this responsibility by creating followers and leaders of the future generation.

Bonhoeffer claimed that the summer of 1935 had become the 'fullest time' of his life, 'both professionally and personally' (Bethge 2000:419). The reason for this is the formation of the 'small intimate circle of students' (Bethge 2000) which represented the first independent seminary in Germany. Finally, Bonhoeffer was able to implement his vision of communal life and practical piety (Bethge 2000). In those perilous times, when theology was controlled and endorsed by the State Church, seminaries have become the innovative way of implementing the principles of radical discipleship. This was Bonhoeffer's dream, and *Zingst* and *Finkenwalde* seminaries became the embodiment of this dream's realisation. Finally, he could apply principles of his *Life Together* (Bonhoeffer 1954) in the concrete circle of his disciples. *Life Together* was the manifesto of a scripturally-grounded life together 'under the Word' (Bonhoeffer 1954:17).

All communal life aspects from *Life Together* (community, the day with others, the day alone, ministry, and confession and communion) were integrated into the everyday life of the seminarians whose aspiration was to create the kingdom of God on earth by strictly following the Sermon on the Mount. *Finkenwalde*, after the initial success, remained 'a mostly improvised community' (Marsh 2014:239). Apart from spiritual activities, manual labor was required (Marsh 2014).

However, seminaries of that type have not become isolated monastic groups that withdrew from actual social problems. Bonhoeffer himself explained this important balance in genuine discipleship. Between the extremes of the secular, Protestant and monastic callings, Bonhoeffer reminds us that a vocation to responsible Christian scholarship says 'yes' to worldly institutions and, at the same time, says 'no' in sharp protest against their abuses (Bonhoeffer 1995a:251). This vocation is determined exclusively by the calling of Jesus Christ and the immediate will of God.

Bonhoeffer's ethical-prophetic insight into the immediate will of God

Bonhoeffer always emphasised the *simplicity of obedience to the will of God*. He (Bonhoeffer 1995a) wrote in his *Ethics*:

To be simple is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted, and turned upside-down. It is to be single-hearted and not a man of two souls, an *αληθῆ διψυχος* (Ja 1.8). Because the simple man knows God, because God is his, he clings to the commandments, the judgements and the mercies which come from God's mouth every day fresh. Not fettered by principles, but bound by love for God, he has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision. They no longer oppress him. He belongs simply and solely to God and to the will of God. (p. 70)

From his early recognition of the hostility of the Nazi regime towards the true Christian faith, from his own struggles whether to publicly proclaim his love for Jews or not, from his decision to resist the *Reichskirche* and fight against his own official German church on all grounds, including searching for help in the international ecumenical community, from his decision to join the German international intelligence organisation *Abwehr* (Metaxas 2010:369–371) as a double spy, to the final decision that to serve the will of God one had to plot against Hitler, Bonhoeffer claimed that his conscience and his duty of faithfulness to Christ was driving him to believe 'that only by believing in God could one be a total opponent to the Nazis' (Metaxas 2010:393).

The man who is not double-minded but simple, is the one who believes and thinks beyond conflicting ethical principles. Bonhoeffer confirmed that the 'ethics of the will of God' implies the immediate *prophetic* insight into God's concrete will in the concrete crisis situation. This simplicity of obedience to the immediate will of God led him to experience the joy of God's presence and approval in his last moments at the gallows, even when he wept (Metaxas 2010:393).

However, the implementation of the simplicity of obedience to the immediate call and will of God was not done without Bonhoeffer's internal conflict. In the classic biography written by his disciple Eberhard Bethge (2000), this inner tension is explained *in extenso*:

From this point on [1933], Bonhoeffer displayed two different sides. One was a man who was prepared to risk far more for the sake of the church than most of his friends, and who took the decision of the German church opposition – from which the Confessing church would soon evolve – more seriously than did most of his fellow activists. He behaved as though the ideas of tomorrow were the realities of today; when the inevitable setback came, he was prepared to renew the attack. The other side was of a man who sometimes seemed reserved, almost a stranger to these struggles. He could become irritated by the constraints of his confession; he was driven by visions of an entirely different realization of the Gospel. (p. 328)

Bethge, as his closest friend, captured here a contradiction that is almost unknown in the broader literature about Bonhoeffer's life and struggles. After all, Bethge was his student and personal friend, and if we need to trust one person for a genuine description of Bonhoeffer's inner life, that should be Bethge. Speaking in London on 22 October 1933 (after the Nazis gained power in Germany) about the Ambassadors for Christ, Bonhoeffer (2012) pours out his soul to the congregation:

Who can fulfill this commission? Who can carry this burden without breaking down under it? No human being can, not even the most devout. Nobody would presume to demand such a commission. But because it is a commission, because Christ must be preached, and woe to us if we do not preach his Gospel [1 Cor 9:16], we are carried by this obligation, this commission. We cannot do otherwise, even when we do it badly and not as we should, even when we keep breaking down under this burden and making mistakes. (p. 92)

Although he remained committed to the *prophetic* call of preaching the gospel in the context of resistance and obedience to the immediate will of God (contextually understood), because of his lonely struggles, he was tempted to give up on the single-minded idea of resisting the beloved traditional German church he grew up with. We are all thankful to divine providence for his ultimate decision to remain faithful to his original call to the radical discipleship he demonstrated in the crisis context. This was possible only because he simply loved God. This love was a strong personal motivational factor and the content of his theological construct.

Bonhoeffer's transformative initiative: The symbiosis of divine love and human action

In his sermon 'The answer to a perplexing question', Martin Luther King Jr. asked the key question: How can evil be cast out? He recognised the inadequacy of both the *optimistic* anthropology of the Renaissance that praised the power and ingenuity of human beings, and the *pessimistic* doctrine of human nature that was emphasised in the Reformation,

completely eliminating the ability of humans to do anything regarding their eternal destiny and salvation, and putting the stress on divine redemption only (King 2010:134–137). He (King 2010) concludes:

Neither God nor man will individually bring the world's salvation. Rather, both man and God, made one in marvellous unity of purpose through an *overflowing love* as the free gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin. (p. 140)

Like Martin Luther King, Bonhoeffer completely understood this principle of symbiosis. Being receptive to the divine mandate of love and a sense of justice and righteousness, Bonhoeffer opened himself to the power of God's love that shaped his life and led him towards radical change in his life and the lives he impacted. As a recipient of this divine gift of love, Bonhoeffer understood that the love necessary for this radical change did not originate in his faithfulness to his theological convictions, moral mandate or emotional aspiration, but in the glorious presence of God's ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ. He wrote (Bonhoeffer 1995a):

God is love that is to say not a human attitude, a conviction or a deed, but God Himself is love. Only he who knows God knows what love is; it is not the other way round; it is not that we first of all by nature know what love is and therefore know also what God is. No one knows God unless God reveals Himself to him. And so, no one knows what love is except in the self-revelation of God. Love, then, is the revelation of God. And the revelation of God is Jesus Christ ... (1 Jn 4:9) (p. 53; also see 1997:303)

The powerful presence of God's love makes the human agent of love capable of loving God and neighbour perfectly and able to fulfil the immediate will of God. This symbiosis of divine and human love is what helped Bonhoeffer (2012) to move forward despite the unbelievably strong opposition that culminated in his death. Love, as a motivating factor, helped him to endure (Bonhoeffer 2012):

Anyone who believes and hopes all things for the sake of love, for the sake of helping people stand tall again, must be patient and suffer. The world will take him or her for a fool, and perhaps a dangerous fool, because this foolishness challenges the malicious forces and brings them out. (p. 152)

The transformative gospel he believed and defended at all costs was the gospel of ultimate sacrificial love in Christ Jesus.

Bonhoeffer's legacy

Bonhoeffer's legacy since 9/11, at least in the United States, has been transformed into a search for the 'populist Bonhoeffer' (Haynes 2018:2). Building on the 'Bonhoeffer phenomenon' concept, Haynes (2018) recognised that this German pastor-theologian was labelled 'radical', 'liberal', 'evangelical' and 'universal'. Eventually, Bonhoeffer's populist portrait started to dominate the 21st century polarised political climate today. Haynes goes on in explaining the role of Bonhoeffer's legacy during the past few US presidents and strives to portray the conflicting legacies of this influential pastor-theologian. The work presents

complex political theological constructs based on claiming Bonhoeffer's legacy.

In fact, in my opinion, neither 'conservative' Bonhoeffer during the Obama presidency nor 'liberal-democratic' Bonhoeffer during the Trump presidency can exhaust the complexity of religio-political interpretation and implementation of the Bonhoeffer phenomenon. The 'Bonhoeffer moment' in America is probably yet to come.

Bonhoeffer's legacy has, of course, been recognised outside of US. John de Gruchy (1984), in his *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue*, tried to emphasise the liberation of the oppressed as the key theological contribution of the Bonhoeffer momentum in South Africa. The church in South Africa, as in the US, failed to recognise the value of the theological and political liberation of the oppressed and become a witness against the mainstream theological and political justification of apartheid.

My goal in this article is not to go deeper into the investigation of the complex Bonhoeffer legacy or 'Bonhoeffer moment' (Metaxas in Haynes 2018:85) in terms of current conservative values (peace, pro-life) or liberal Christian-political agendas ('Black Lives Matter' [BLM], anti-Trump). Although some aspects of this conflict will partially become unavoidable, the primary goal of this research is to recognise the principles of Bonhoeffer's scholarship and personal activism within the context of Christian scholarship today.

Therefore, I will not speak of Bonhoeffer's legacy in terms of *Christian movements* and/or *current Bonhoeffer momentum political trends*, but in terms of the personalised 'incarnation' of the values endorsed by this Christian scholar and martyr. After all, every Christian movement starts with inspired and motivated individuals, and only rarely with enthused Christian scholars (Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Wesley, etc.) who understood the momentum of God's calling and action.

Bonhoeffer's legacy and the Christian scholar today

Firstly, what we can learn from Bonhoeffer is that Christian scholarship should be more *relevant* and *contextual*. Listening to the needs of the church and the community around us, we would be able to address the theological, ethical and anthropological issues that are pertinent and critical. Preaching and teaching in our schools should reflect willingness to engage in contemporary theological and moral issues, as well as problems of the church and society. Therefore, traditional Christian approaches that are purely theistic and otherworldly using outdated language and theological constructs that do not match the immediate existential needs around us, are not sufficient to contribute to new vision, renewed reflection and perpetual change. The Christian scholar needs to be a down-to-earth 'secular' seeker of patterns and models that faithfully express the gospel of Jesus Christ always in new and fresh ways. This attitude will

always be inspired by the vertical relationship with divine grace and love.

This article, nevertheless, does not undermine the role of the theological thinking in our activism. On the contrary, our theology *shapes* our activism. Our theological constructs provide the underpinning for most of the engagement of faith in the public sphere. Larry Rasmussen (1972) in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* explains this vital connection in Bonhoeffer's way of thinking and acting:

... Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance activity was his Christology enacted with utter seriousness. Bonhoeffer's resistance was the existential playing out of Christological themes. Changes and shifts in his Christology were at the same time changes and shifts in the character of his resistance. (p. 15)

If we understand this principle correctly, we can assume that Bonhoeffer's inclination toward tyrannicide was grounded in his Christological 'incarnational' worldview. 'Killing the madman' (see Marsh 2014:319–347), for Bonhoeffer, was justified theologically:

The heavenly peace is not won through a paralyzed acquiescence to villainy for the sake of an ideal. The Kingdom is to those who take action: for these reasons, Bonhoeffer concluded that in the face of Hitler and the prevailing brutalities, only the violent shall bear it away. (p. 347)

Therefore, a Christian scholar today should still be a *scholar*. Understanding the Christological principle in theology is the groundwork for personal and social Christian activism. There is no short-cut in social engagement. Relevancy of Christian social justice is always preceded by careful theological reflection, thinking and continuing spiritual communion with God.

Secondly, every Christian scholar should be a Christian activist in the church and social setting. 'Crying out in the wilderness' against any form of even nascent injustice and discrimination, whether by the church structure or social institutions, is not an optional agenda; it is an imperative for the survival of the essence of Christian faith for the sake of the all-inclusive love of God expressed as justice. Decentralisation is not a new commodity of the innovative, progressive, open-minded and liberal elements of the church; it is a spiritualised democratic new form of Christianisation of the existing Christian community of faith for the purpose of revival and reformation. Opposing the two-facedness of the church's religious establishment and its constant stress on compliance, is not a presumptuous and arrogant way of dealing with the fragile community of faith, but the very mode of spiritual survival for all structures in the church against the unfortunate lack of trust and the kinds of corruption that can make the church totally ineffective in the wider society.

In the United States, at least, rigid centralised church governance is usually tied to the conceptual 'white supremacy' identity. The decentralisation I speak about is also recognition of the people on the margin and the disadvantaged. I do not know to what extent Bonhoeffer

would support all the aspects of the political social movement 'Black Lives Matter', but I can affirm that his Christological 'incarnational' model of social activism propelled him to recognise the need of the oppressed to voice their concern and become liberated. Recently, a black scholar and activist who is also an expert in Bonhoeffer studies and my friend from the International Bonhoeffer Society, Reggie Williams (2014), wrote a book entitled *Bonhoeffer's black Jesus: Harlem renaissance theology and an ethic of resistance*. Williams' point is that, during Bonhoeffer's visit to Union Theological Seminary (1930–1931), he also was a regular visitor in the Abyssinian black church in Harlem. Bethge (2000) explains Bonhoeffer's immersion into the Harlem district life and spirituality in detail:

The only real commitment he made was to the black neighborhood district in Harlem, not far from the Union Theological Seminary. He spent nearly every Sunday and many evenings there. He participated in guided visits to the area including a 'trip to Negro Centers of Life and Culture in Harlem' ... he collected publications of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and began to collect gramophone records of spirituals, which he used five years later to introduce his students to this world that was practically unknown at the time. (p. 150)

Bonhoeffer sided with the oppressed in the United States and started to understand that, from their point of view, Christology looks differently. The 'black Jesus' has become an inspiration for Bonhoeffer to continue with his resistance to the oppressive regime in Germany. In fact, partially learning this principle from the oppressed black people in Harlem, Bonhoeffer matured in his theological thinking that obedience to Jesus requires active action of resistance and obedience to the immediate will of God.

Today, building on the legacy of Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., de-politicised non-violent active resistance to an oppressive evil regime remains a viable option for the public activism of the Christian scholar. Bonhoeffer's legacy is non-violent resistance. Bonhoeffer was 'attracted' and unsettled by the example of non-violent resistance by Ghandi (Bethge 2000:148). His prospect to visit India never materialised, but he was deeply committed to a passive form of resistance, and he also wanted to explore Eastern forms of religion. Therefore, Bonhoeffer's legacy provides the rich background for passive and non-violent resistance which are so needed today when we are witnesses of the violent and retributive forms of expressing anger at an oppressive regime.

Thirdly, the Christian scholar needs to learn to think and act not just in terms of theological and spiritual or even ethical reflections, but in terms of prophetic insight into the immediate will of God. For instance, the global church, fatigued and burdened by endless discussions, theological paradigms and bureaucratic policymaking over the ordination of women, is craving for the simplicity of the divine will based on the prophetic insight of church activists (scholars, ministers, administrators) who should epitomise this struggle for simplicity in their lives. The simplicity of the

will of God is always apparent to those who seek his Word and Spirit in justice and righteousness.

The status of subjugated women, for example, all around the world calls for the recognition of the *immediate will of God* based on equality, equity and justice principles. The simplicity of the gospel, which includes the liberation of the oppressed women, is wrongly complicated by the institutional theological constructs with all types of justifications for the continuation of the wrong understanding of gender role in the church's mission. The legacy of Bonhoeffer's work is teaching us to simply be obedient to the prophetic Word. Without the liberation within the community, communal life 'under the Word' is impossible.

Finally, there is no better way to live simply than to love. Christian scholars should not just talk about Christ's love, but should love their spouses and children, colleagues, peers, supervisors, students, community, and even their enemies. The divine love poured out abundantly on us in Christ calls us to live a life characterised by a symbiosis of the divine Spirit and our own willpower. Not speaking about redemption and regeneration, but in the context of social justice, human nature is neither totally corrupt nor totally capable. It is an instrument of the powerful Spirit of Christ who would like to see change and bring genuine love at every level of our community of Christian scholars. Transformation in love, as an ultimate goal, will not come spontaneously by using the same methods and believing the same principles that never gave a satisfactory result. God's Word and Spirit in the surprisingly ever new and fresh gospel with its comforts to and demands on every new generation, are the only powers that can bring about permanent spiritual change and transform us scholars to love all human beings first, especially the church we faithfully serve.

For the sake of love and life in the community through love, Bonhoeffer was deeply committed to the world ecumenical movement (Bethge 2000:238–255). For him, it was the expression of divine love in unity. Not all Christian churches and denominations developed the ecumenical vocation through a deeper understanding of unity in love. However, Bonhoefferian legacy is teaching us that if we really want to exercise the depth of Christian love, we have to remain committed to the ecumenical understanding and practice of unity in love without the complexities of a visible institutional unification process. Christian scholars, after all, understand each other not always on the basis of their beliefs, but on the grounds of Christian charity.

This Bonhoefferian 'polyphony of love' – divine love that does not harm, but ennobles earthly loves – is what Christian scholars desperately need in their incarnational, responsible and ethical 'secular' spiritual vocation.

In Bonhoeffer's (1997) own words:

We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer. The only

profitable relationship to others – and especially to our weaker brethren – is one of love, and that means the will to hold fellowship with them. God himself did not despise humanity, but became man for men's sake. (p. 10)

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