

proper relation to the beginning by accepting its unsurpassable limit. This distinction must guide our thoughts and actions in all that follows, for it is only out of the anxious middle that we can learn the truth about the beginning.⁷⁷ The beginning marks humankind's mortal habitation and inescapable condition. "We do not know of this beginning by stepping out of the middle and becoming a beginning ourselves." The boast that we are masters of new beginnings is "accomplished only by means of a lie," although there are deceptions far graver than this. Humankind would love to turn back to its origins, to a "land of magnificent rivers and trees full of fruit."⁷⁸ But we cannot, and the realization that we are finally powerless against the absolute beginning, that despite the cunning of warriors and demigods we cannot master the origin—that is the great humiliation. That is terror's exile, the thought that cannot be tolerated in silence.

The students in the lecture hall could not have easily missed the political resonances and defiant notes in these brooding meditations on sin. He had opened the Bible to unleash the living Word against a church and nation on the threshold of catastrophic heresy.⁷⁹ The joyful and unscripted sojourns of people cleaving to Christ in an idolatrous age—this theme was the one remedy to egotism and delusion. Bonhoeffer said that in addition to reading the Bible as God's Word to us, the time had come for learning to read the Bible "against ourselves as well."⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer never discussed his spiritual life from the pulpit or podium. He regarded self-revealing talk in sermons as a vanity. But he had undergone a profound change in the past two years. "I no longer believe in the university," he said on the eve of the horrible year 1933. "In fact I never really have believed in it."⁸¹

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 30–31.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 81.

⁷⁹de Gruchy, "Editor's Introduction," p. 3.

⁸⁰Bonhoeffer, cited in Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 93.

⁸¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933–1935*, DBWE 13:217.

8

BONHOEFFER AND THE END OF THE CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

KEITH L. JOHNSON

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S VISION MAKES HIM an especially interesting conversation partner. He just seems to see things differently than the rest of us, as if he instinctively knows something about God that most of us spend our lives seeking, but can never quite find. This unique vision can make reading his work both an enriching and unsettling experience. My task in this chapter is to bring Bonhoeffer's vision of Christ, reality and history into conversation with the Christian academy to see if it might equally enrich and unsettle us. I am using the phrase "Christian academy" here in a particular sense to identify the network of professors, students and staff gathered at schools dedicated to Christian higher education in the liberal arts and the sciences, particularly at the undergraduate level. I have chosen the term "academy" rather than "college" or "institution" because my focus is more on the *people* than the places. And for the purposes of this chapter, I also am distinguishing the "Christian academy" from those scholars and students one might find at a seminary and from Christians serving faithfully in non-affiliated institutions, such as state schools. By definition, the Christian academy seeks to be both Christian *and* academic: its scholars and students aim to be faithful to Jesus Christ while also seriously engaging truth claims offered by the wider world of scholarship within the liberal arts and sciences. At many

Christian liberal arts institutions, this engagement is described as the “integration of faith and learning,” which is defined as the attempt to show how the truth claims of academic learning correspond to the truth claims that arise from Scripture. The question working behind this essay concerns the character and purpose of this endeavor. *Why* do we integrate faith and learning? What is the end, or goal, of the Christian academy?

While Bonhoeffer himself never participated in the Christian academy as defined here, he makes an interesting conversation partner for it, because he spent his professional life living within the tensions that define it. He was trained to be a theologian in a state university by teachers who instructed him in the highest tradition of critical scholarship. He later taught at and led a seminary designed to train pastors for the church, and there the instruction focused as much on worship and prayer as it did on critical inquiry. So, over the course of his life, he lived and worked as a student and professor between the worlds of the academy and the church. And interestingly, Bonhoeffer seems to have become *more* rather than less faithful as a result of living within this tension. By his own recollection, he began his career as an ambitious, somewhat self-centered scholar from a family of scholars; however, by nearly all recollections, he became a scholar whose life and death were shaped determinatively by Christ, Scripture and the church.¹

What might we learn from him? What might Bonhoeffer have to say to those of us who live and work in the Christian academy today? What would he say is the proper goal or purpose of our efforts? Bonhoeffer himself never asked or answered these questions directly, so my task in this essay is to work constructively to articulate what he might say were he to address the question. The goal is to stay faithful to his claims in their original context while translating and appropriating them into our own time and place. Of course, translating someone’s thought to address

¹Bonhoeffer himself remarked on this transition in a 1936 letter to Elizabeth Zinn, a distant relative: “I plunged into my work in a very unchristian way, quite lacking in humility. I was terribly ambitious, as many people noticed. . . . Then something happened which has tossed about and changed my life to this day. For the first time I discovered the Bible. . . . I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and written about it—but I had not yet become a Christian. Instead, I had been my own master, wild and undisciplined.” Cited in Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: T & T Clark, 2010), p. 95.

questions he himself never considered is by its very nature a risky and somewhat speculative endeavor, but it also, I would argue, is a very Bonhoeffer-like thing to do. To this end, I have summarized what Bonhoeffer might say to the Christian academy in the form of three positive claims. These claims work cumulatively, with the first two operating at a more theoretical level to provide the foundation for the third, which presents what I would take to be his vision for the purpose of the Christian academy. After working through these claims, I will offer reflections about what we might learn from them and how we might apply them concretely.

CHRIST THE CENTER

First, the Christian academy must begin from the presupposition that the person and work of Jesus Christ intrinsically defines all created reality and human history. This may sound like a fairly straightforward and uncontroversial claim, but that is only if it is misunderstood. In Bonhoeffer’s hands, this claim entails the death and resurrection of all forms of human knowledge in light of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. For him, to think about the world in a Christ-centered way is a very particular endeavor: it involves making Christ’s justifying work on the cross the absolute basis and criterion of disciplined knowledge in all its forms.

Working behind Bonhoeffer’s approach is his conviction that humanity does not inhabit nature, but *creation*—and creation is ordered from start to finish by God’s plan for it in Jesus Christ. “When God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world,” he says, “even space in a stable because ‘there was no other place in the inn’—God embraces the whole reality of the world in this narrow space and reveals its ultimate foundation.”² Created reality and human history should not be understood as the context into which Christ enters, therefore, as much as they should be seen as the space and the place *contextualized* by God’s plan in Christ, a plan that extends beyond the horizon of the natural world and the limits of human knowing. The “whole reality of the world has al-

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:63.

ready been drawn into and is held together in Christ. History moves only from this center and toward this center.”³ Christ is not auxiliary but basic to reality and history, and anything that is real and knowable has its meaning only in and through its relationship to him and his particular work of salvation.

This way of seeing reality and history challenges views that would define them in distinction from the particularities of the biblical narrative about Christ’s life, death and resurrection. For example, Bonhoeffer would not embrace the approach that takes truth claims derived from the “book of nature,” combines them with truth claims derived from the book of Scripture, and then tries to explain how the two books fit together. From his perspective, this approach starts from the mistaken assumption that there is a “preexisting historical space”—the book of nature—that can be defined first in distinction from the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁴ This assumption is problematic because creaturely reflections on nature and human being—reflections that Bonhoeffer thinks adhere to the “temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics”—have already defined what is true about reality and history *before* Christ himself enters the scene.⁵ This preexisting definition thus restricts what Christ can reveal from the outset, and it often does so in ways that blunt the depth of human sin and God’s judgment against it. For similar reasons, Bonhoeffer rejects the idea that natural and theological knowledge can exist as two distinct yet complementary ways of knowing the truth about God and God’s relationship with the world, as if there were two avenues by which we can know one and the same subject matter.⁶ Bonhoeffer calls this approach a retreat to “a general theory of being,” and he argues that it blocks “the road to the genuinely theological concept of sin and grace.”⁷ Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran approach to justification is driving his argument here. As Bonhoeffer sees it, Jesus

³Ibid., p. 58.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, DBWE 12:325.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:364.

⁶For this view, see John Henry Newman’s remarks that “all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is one,” in *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 45.

⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, DBWE 2:75.

Christ’s death on the cross is definitive for the whole of reality and history, and there is no way to think about human being apart from this event and the fact that it reveals to us both that we are sinners under God’s judgment and that Christ’s grace and righteousness are our only hope. Any approach that brings what humans can know by creation together with what humans know by grace without accounting for Christ falls into abstraction, because it proceeds as if it were possible to talk about human being in distinction from the story of human sin, God’s judgment against it and Christ’s justifying death for it.⁸ Bonhoeffer draws a stark line on this point: “There is no ontological specification of that which is created that is independent of God being reconciler and redeemer, and human beings being sinners and forgiven.”⁹ In other words, there is no way to talk about creation, humanity or history apart from the biblical story that finds its center in Jesus, the crucified one. “In the Christian doctrine of being,” he insists, “all metaphysical ideas of eternity and time, being and becoming, living and dying, essence and appearance must be measured against the concepts of the being of sin and the being of grace or else must be developed anew in light of them.”¹⁰

In concrete terms, Bonhoeffer’s approach means that the Christian academy must see the world through a holistic lens of creation, sin, judgment and grace, so that no truth claim about reality or history stands apart from them. “Theological thought goes from God to reality, not from reality to God.”¹¹ The Christian academy has to see reality and history through a biblical lens rather than reading the Bible through the lens of their preexisting assumptions about reality and history. To fail to do so is to proceed with an idealistic rather than truly realistic view of the world. Or, as Bonhoeffer puts it: “Apart from Christ as the origin, essence, and goal of life . . . and apart from the fact that we are

⁸Ibid., p. 74: “We must ask, in other words, where there is in fact a being of human beings in general that is not already determined in every instance as their ‘being-in-Adam’ or ‘being-in-Christ,’ as their being-guilty or being-pardoned, and only as such could lead to an understanding of the being of human beings. But then, a priori, the possibility of a guarantee of the divine continuity of being loses any basis.”

⁹Ibid., p. 151. “Only in Christ do human beings know themselves as God’s creatures.”

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 89. He continues: “Human beings must be placed by God into reality if there is to be room for reality in their thought” (p. 90).

creatures who are reconciled and redeemed, we can only arrive at biological or ideological abstractions.”¹² This means, he says, that Christology “is the invisible, unrecognized, hidden center of [all] scholarship,” because human knowing proceeds rightly only when it is ordered in and through Christ himself, the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3).¹³ On a practical level, Bonhoeffer would say that this means that the Christian academy must immerse itself in a Christ-centered study of Scripture, reading and speaking the text to one another again and again so that it becomes the foundational story for their lives. Our primary task, he insists, is to be “attentive listeners and participants in God’s action in the sacred story, the story of Christ on earth. God is with us today only as long as we are there.”¹⁴ When Christians begin to see themselves and the world in this way, they will see that they live and work in the time “between promise and fulfillment,” a time between the ages.¹⁵ They also will recognize that the unity of Christian thinking about God and the world—the very unity that exists as the presupposition of the integration of the claims of the faith with the claims of academic learning—is strictly “an eschatological possibility,” because this unity lies in God himself.¹⁶ The goal of the academic life lived in a world defined by Jesus is not to figure out how everything fits together, but to seek after God, and this occurs by grace through the power of the Spirit as we think and live faithfully as Christ’s disciples.

THE ACADEMY AND THE CHURCH

Second, *the Christian academy must see its own life and work as intrinsically connected to the life and work of the church*. For Bonhoeffer, this second claim would follow as a corollary to the first. If reality and

¹²Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:251.

¹³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:301.

¹⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, DBWE 5:62.

¹⁵Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:325. See also his earlier remarks: “We can never comprehend our existence as a whole, because it is entirely founded on God’s word—and God’s word demands faith. Only to faith, in revelation, do we have access to knowledge that we are sinners in the wholeness of our being, since it is only then, by God’s word, that the wholeness of our being can be placed into the truth” (Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, DBWE 2:137).

¹⁶Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, DBWE 2:89.

history find their center and meaning in the person and work of Jesus Christ, then to understand and participate in reality and history rightly, we must be aligned with what Christ has done, is doing, and will do in them. Bonhoeffer argues that this alignment happens in and through the church, which is the community defined by Christ’s work in all three of its tenses. Christ judged humanity and justified the church on the cross, he lives in and for the church in the present through the church’s practices, and he leads the church toward its promised future through the church’s life in the power of his Spirit. The church is the community shaped by Christ’s costly grace who lives in the pattern of the cross for the sake of the world in the hope of the resurrection. By living in this way, Bonhoeffer thinks, the church testifies to God’s plan for history, fulfilling Paul’s claim in Ephesians that God will make his divine wisdom known to the rulers and authorities “through the church” (Ephesians 3:10).

For Bonhoeffer, the question would not be *whether* or *if* the Christian academy should be connected to the church, as if that connection were optional or severable. Independence from the church—at least in terms of the Christian academy’s distinct identity and mission—is not optional for the academy if it claims to be *Christian*. Rather, the question is *how* it should be connected to the church. What concrete shape should the relationship between the Christian academy and church take? Bonhoeffer’s answer would correspond to his account of how we come to know and follow Jesus Christ. If Christ himself is the center of reality and history, then knowledge of reality and history must begin with the particular and concrete way Christ reveals himself to us. And one of Bonhoeffer’s central convictions is that there is no neutral standpoint from which we can begin to ask about or have access to Christ without being confronted *by* him and called to live in responsibility *to* him. We cannot know and follow Christ on our own terms, as if there were a way to be Christian other than the specific path of discipleship to him. Christ comes to us and personally demands a response of obedience—and both his call and our obedience take place in the church.

This account of how we know and follow Christ distinguishes Bonhoeffer’s approach from both the presuppositions of the academy in

which he was trained and the most prominent theological trends of his day. Bonhoeffer's teachers, which included Adolf Schlatter and Adolf von Harnack, taught him to view Christ through the lens of historical-critical methods and to consider him objectively as a historical figure in distinction from the church's faith and practice. Despite his respect for them, Bonhoeffer never sat easy with his teachers' instruction, and this was partly due to his attraction to Karl Barth's critique of their method. Barth argued that the historical-critical approach left Christ as little more than an object under human scrutiny and control. Bonhoeffer shared these worries, arguing that to approach Christ primarily as a figure from the past is to treat him more as a power than a person, as if he could be assessed in terms of the "influence he has had in history."¹⁷ This approach, he insists, "leads in the direction of trying again to get behind Christ's claim, and to ground it in our own."¹⁸ It assumes the distinctively modern conviction that God has been "pushed out of the world" and must be reinserted into it by our efforts.¹⁹ Yet the fact that Bonhoeffer would adopt these Barthian critiques of his teachers does mean that he was satisfied with Barth's alternative to their view. Barth had developed a theology of revelation that focused on the transcendent God's breaking into history through his Word, which is Christ himself. Christ remains "wholly other" from the world, always beyond history even as he enters into history to judge and justify it. Bonhoeffer worried that this approach so strongly emphasizes Christ's *distinction* from the world that his revelation *in* the world never takes on concrete historical form. Among other things, Bonhoeffer thought that Barth undermined the relevance and the efficacy of the church's practices. If Christ always remains distinct from the world, how could the church truly be his body *in* it?

Facing these two unsatisfactory alternatives, Bonhoeffer sublated them into a higher synthesis. Along the trajectory of his teachers, he argues that Christ must be approached in historical terms; yet with Barth, he insists that Christ is not "the object of religion, but something

¹⁷Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:310.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 304.

¹⁹Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, DBWE 8:455.

else entirely, truly Lord of the world."²⁰ So Bonhoeffer views Christ historically, yet not merely as a figure of the past, but also as the resurrected, ascended and living Lord of the present. "Christ's ascension," he argues, "means that, with Christ's distancing, his presence everywhere becomes possible."²¹ He does not come to us "as timeless truth, but rather as truth breaking into a concrete moment, as God's speaking to us . . . God's Word personally addressed to the human being, calling him to responsibility."²² Jesus is present to humans here and now precisely as "the Crucified and Risen One."²³

Christ's personal address occurs in and through his church, which exists as the means and the form of his revelation to human beings in present reality and history. This proclamation takes place in both Word and deed through the church's preaching and sacraments. The sermon is "the form of the present Christ" speaking through the proclaimed Word,²⁴ while the sacraments enact a visible word, as "God hallows the elements of bread and wine by speaking the divine Word" through them.²⁵ "If we want to hear [Christ's] call to discipleship," Bonhoeffer insists, "we need to hear it where Christ himself is present. It is within the church that Jesus Christ calls through his word and sacrament. The preaching and sacrament of the church is the place where Jesus Christ is present. To hear Jesus' call to discipleship, one needs no personal revelation. Listen to the preaching and receive the sacrament!"²⁶ Note how Bonhoeffer pushes against the notion of an independent revelation, ruling out the idea that Christian existence is severable from the concrete practices of the church, as if Christians could be free agents who might just as well function independently of the com-

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 364.

²¹Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:312.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 317. Or his earlier remark: "There is only one possibility for me to be truly searching for God—that I already know who God is. There is no such thing as blindly setting out to search for God. I can only search for what has already been found" (p. 303).

²³*Ibid.*, p. 310.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 318.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 319. On this point, he argues: "The sacrament, in the form of nature, engages human beings in their nature" (p. 318).

²⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4:202. Also see his earlier remark: "Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ" (p. 59).

munity. As he sees it, the church is central to God's plan for the world, and if believers are to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, their discipleship must occur in and through Christ's community. The proclaimed and visible Word they receive in this community is none other than the word of the cross, the word of their justification. This Word declares God's judgment against their sin, their freedom in Christ's righteousness, and Christ's call to repent and obey on the path of discipleship. As a result, it "places the church community into a relationship of responsibility for the world."²⁷

Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, Christ's presence in the church means that the church plays a pivotal role in reality and history: "The space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ."²⁸ Or, as he puts it elsewhere: "The church should be understood as the center of history."²⁹ This means that the church's way of living and being must take a particular form. Christ speaks and acts in the church "for me," Bonhoeffer argues, "he stands in my place, where I should be standing. He stands there because I cannot, that is, he stands at the boundary of my existence and nevertheless in my place."³⁰ Christ binds himself to the people judged and justified by him and forms them into his community, and this act frees them to follow after him in obedience. This is why "the righteousness of Christ should not just be taught [in the church], but *done* [by the church]."³¹ Jesus Christ saves and forms a community that lives in his image: "The presence of Christ as Word and sacrament is related to Christ as church community, just as reality is related to form."³² Christ "takes action as the new humanity," and the church is the concrete and specific "form he takes."³³ And since Christ himself lived and died for the sake of the world, the community that bears his image also lives and dies for the world.

²⁷Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:357.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁹Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:326. See also his remark in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, "The church stands not at the point where human powers fail, at the boundaries, but in the center of the village" (DBWE 8:367).

³⁰Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:324.

³¹Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4:120.

³²Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:323.

³³*Ibid.*

This insight puts us in position to assess the place and role of the Christian academy in relation to the church. The life and work of the Christian academy is intrinsically related to the life and work of the church because its confession that Christ himself defines reality and history arises in and through Christ's revelation through the church and its practices. The claim to be *Christian* is inseparable from these practices and thus inseparable from the community that confesses Christ and lives in his image for the sake of the world. The key question involves the nature of this connection. From Bonhoeffer's perspective, this connection would have to center on each believer's personal responsibility to obey Christ within the context of the larger church community. This is where our focus on the *Christian academy* rather than *Christian institutions* becomes helpful. Institutions do not receive the Word and the sacrament, but people do. Being a Christian scholar or student does not mean simply being a part of a Christian institution; it means being responsible to Christ within the concrete reality of one's particular life and calling in the academy in connection to the church and its mission. On Bonhoeffer's terms, this would mean living as a researcher, teacher and student through the church for the sake of the world. But what does it actually look like to live in this way? How do the members of the Christian academy, in their intrinsic relationship to the church, live as obedient disciples of Christ for sake of the world within the context of their academic vocation?

ACADEMY FOR THE CHURCH

Third, *the Christian academy exists in and for the church in order to help the church exist in and for the world*. Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian academy's relationship to the church would follow from his account of the church's relationship to the world. If the church stands in the center of history because Christ makes himself present in and through it—and if the church is committed to following after Christ through its confession and obedience—then the church will exist for the world by living in obedience to Christ in both word and deed. This way of being for the world is the being of a disciple. Yet this way of being runs counter to the church's "natural instinct for self-preservation," because it

calls the church to live for the sake of others rather than for itself.³⁴ So, the church needs to be both encouraged and held accountable so that it actually will live in this pattern. The Christian academy participates in the life of the church in precisely this way: by encouraging the church and by holding it accountable.

To unpack what this looks like, we can turn to Bonhoeffer's claims about religionless Christianity in a world come of age. The key to understanding these claims is to recognize that they are not about religion as much as they are about Christ. Bonhoeffer insists that the crucified and risen Christ cannot be constrained by a priori assumptions that bind him to particular cultural expressions, because these assumptions place Christ on our terms rather than the other way around. In the modern world, he thinks this happens in one of two ways: either Christ is thought to work strictly in the inner spiritual life of the Christian—"he lives, he lives, he lives within my heart," as the old hymn goes—or he is thought of as a metaphysically transcendent being who acts beyond history rather than in it.³⁵ "Neither [assumption] is appropriate," Bonhoeffer argues, "either for the biblical message or for people today," because both assumptions relegate Christ to a spiritual plane divorced from reality and history.³⁶ If Jesus Christ is the center of reality and history, then he lives and works in them *as they are*. Only when we see reality and history in light of him do we see *how* he lives and works in reality and history today.³⁷

This is where Bonhoeffer's unique vision comes into play: from his prison cell, he began to realize that several centuries' worth of assumptions about religion had been stripped away, and now the world was finally in position to see Christ as he truly is: "Our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God."³⁸ Bonhoeffer's worry, however, is that while the world may be ready to see Christ anew and afresh, the church is not, because the very changes that make the world ready for the gospel leave the church vulnerable before the world. "The

³⁴Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:359.

³⁵See Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, DBWE 12:313 and *Letters and Papers*, DBWE 8:455.

³⁶Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, DBWE 8:372.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 362. The meaning of Bonhoeffer's famous question: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" becomes more clear from this perspective.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 478.

foundations are being pulled out from under all that 'Christianity' has previously been for us," and in this situation, the church's instinct is to fight for its survival by claiming God and Christ as the church's possession over against the world.³⁹ This manifests itself in the church's withdrawal from the world and its act of closing off its intellectual and spiritual life to the world because of the threat it perceives. Yet Bonhoeffer argues that to withdraw from the world in this way is to betray the church's mission. It is a "counsel of despair, a sacrifice made only at the cost of intellectual integrity,"⁴⁰ an abandonment of the world "to its own devices."⁴¹ A church that focuses on its own "self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself," is a church failing to live in the pattern of Christ.⁴² The faithful church will be one that embraces the world in confidence that Jesus Christ has already gone before it. "In Christ, we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other."⁴³ It is in this particular Christ-centered sense that the church exists for the world: "The church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God. . . . The church can only defend its own space by fighting, not for space, but for the salvation of the world."⁴⁴ In other words, if the church really is the space and the place where Christ proclaims and visibly demonstrates himself as the center of all reality and history, then the church cannot be an end in itself, but rather it must be a community ordered toward an end *outside* itself. It lives in this way when it follows in line with Christ and adopts the pattern of his life, proclaiming the gospel of the judgment and justification of the cross to the world for the sake of the world's salvation.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 363. Also see p. 426.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 478.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 373. This is the mirror image of the same mistake Protestant liberals made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Bonhoeffer notes: "The weakness of liberal theology was that it allowed the world the right to assign to Christ his place within it; that it accepted, in the dispute between the church and the world, the—relatively mild—peace terms dictated by the world" (p. 428).

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁴³Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:55.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

This account of the church and its mission puts us in position to see how Bonhoeffer would understand the role of the Christian academy. Like the church, the Christian academy is ordered beyond itself, because its scholars and students' primary task is to engage the ideas, claims and arguments of the wider world of the liberal arts and sciences in the name of Jesus Christ. This task requires discernment: sometimes it means standing over against the world by proclaiming judgment against ways of thinking that run contrary to the gospel; at other times, it involves seeing God's hand at work in the world in new and unexpected ways. From Bonhoeffer's perspective, this task lines up perfectly with the church's mission. The church can live for the world only when it sees the world as it truly is, because only then can it engage the world honestly and faithfully. The Christian academy is uniquely positioned to equip the church for this task by modeling what it looks like to discerningly yet honestly embrace the world in its concrete particularity. This is what the integration of faith and learning is all about: it is the task of figuring out how to engage the world *as it is* from the perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This task is not an act divorced from the life of the church or an act in tension with the church's mission; rather, it is a concrete and living act of witness *to* the church, a testimony about *how* Christ is working in the world and how the church can join him there faithfully.⁴⁵ Through the integration of faith and learning, the Christian academy thus bears witness both to the world and to the church: it testifies to the world about the gospel and to the church about what the world is really like.

Bearing dual witness in this way is no easy task. How might the Christian academy go about it faithfully? Although Bonhoeffer himself does not look in this direction, perhaps we can take the events of Acts 15 as reflective of his line of thinking. Paul and Barnabas have been working as missionaries on the far reaches of the empire, and Gentiles are being converted in great numbers. Controversy soon arises over whether

⁴⁵Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, DBWE 8:406: "We should find God in what we know, not in what we don't know; God wants to be grasped by us not in unsolved questions but in those that have been solved." The church's task is to *unveil* to the world how God in Christ is working by proclaiming Christ's work in the world through its preaching and sacramental life.

Gentile converts should be circumcised. So Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem to report to the church there about the conversion of the Gentiles and to ask about the question of circumcision. The church in Jerusalem debates the issue thoroughly, and it is not an easy debate: this question cuts to the heart of what the church believes about Christ and the gospel. As the text presents it, their eventual decision to accept uncircumcised Gentiles does not signify the church's capitulation to cultural pressures, but rather, it marks the church's movement more deeply into the gospel, because it leads the church into a fuller understanding and proclamation of the true nature of Christ's justifying grace.

Bonhoeffer sees the church's engagement with a world come of age through an Acts 15-style lens. From his perspective, the church knows that it is living out its mission faithfully when it is being confronted with the same types of questions and decisions the church in Jerusalem faced. If the church is to embrace a world come of age, he argues, "all Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew."⁴⁶ The Christian academy, by its very nature, exists on the frontier of this renewal, and so it is uniquely positioned to participate in the process. It functions in the role of a contemporary Paul and Barnabas: as those sent from the church out into the world, who then are called to report back to the church about what God is doing in the world. As Bonhoeffer would see it, the goal of this back-and-forth exchange is to equip the church for its mission, and this may involve enriching and unsettling the church in equal measure. Often the church might be encouraged in its thinking and better able to engage the world through what it learns from the integration that goes on in the Christian academy. Sometimes, however, the church might be challenged by the academy's insights, and it may have to consider reforming its ways of thinking, speaking and acting in light of what God is doing in the world. The Christian academy may call the church to act against its self-preserving instincts, to test its speech and thought in light of new developments, and to raise questions about its methods and practices in light of the world around it.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 389. In a later letter, Bonhoeffer remarks that this means that the church's preaching and action "must now be interpreted in a way that does not make religion the condition for faith" (p. 430).

From Bonhoeffer's perspective, the chief benefit of this kind of exchange would be that it checks any desire either the Christian academy or the church might have to be self-sufficient in its relation to Christ. To engage the world as it is, the church must empty itself and pattern its mind after the mind of Christ who did not consider his own status as something to be held onto but took the form of a servant, humbling himself in obedience even to the point of death (Philippians 2:5-8). The church that embraces a world come of age is a church who adopts this cross-shaped pattern of life.⁴⁷ It is a church that lives a life of continual repentance, Bonhoeffer says, of "not thinking first of [its] own needs, questions, sins, and fear but allowing [itself] to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks" in the world.⁴⁸ The Christian academy exists in this same way, not only because it has to model what it looks like to be faithful to the gospel within the liberal arts and sciences, but also because it does so from *within* the church. That is, the members of the Christian academy are also members of the body of Christ, and so they are held accountable by the body as a whole. The Christian academy proceeds in their integrative task as people who, together with their brothers and sisters outside the academy, hear the judging and justifying Word, receive the sacrament, and are called to participate in the church's mission in faith and obedience. So, at one and the same time, the church holds the academy accountable by helping its members hear and adhere to the gospel, which helps the academy's members know when and how to exercise their discernment in relation to their disciplines; and the academy, in turn, equips and challenges the church about when and where to embrace the world in confidence that the living and active Christ already has gone ahead of it. "The renewal of the West," Bonhoeffer says, "lies completely in God's renewal of the church, which leads

⁴⁷On this point, Bonhoeffer argues that the church gains a hearing in the world, not by "dominating, but helping and serving," which means that it must confront "first within itself and then without the world, the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy, and illusionism as the roots of all evil," so that it might gain "power not through concepts, but by example." See *ibid.*, pp. 503-4. In an earlier letter, Bonhoeffer had remarked: "That is the opposite of everything a religious person expects from God. The human being is called upon to share in God's suffering at the hands of a godless world. Thus we must really live in that godless world and not try to cover up or transfigure its godlessness somehow into religion" (p. 480).

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 480.

[the world] into community with the resurrected and living Jesus Christ."⁴⁹ The Christian academy exists precisely to go out into the world in order to use the insights it gains there to fuel the renewal of the church for the sake of the church's mission, so that the world might know Jesus through the church.

ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

So goes Bonhoeffer's vision for the Christian academy, at least according to this analysis. How might we assess and apply it? I will offer five observations. First, working behind Bonhoeffer's approach is a particular account of nature and grace. Debates about the relationship between nature and grace concern the connection between the being and capacities humans have by virtue of their creation and those they have as a result of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer's approach to this relationship is distinct, because in his view, there is no way to understand created human being and capacities rightly apart from the fact that humans are totally rather than partially sinful in their being and that God has judged and justified their sin at the cross. This means that knowledge of the crucified and risen Christ is determinative for *any* claim we might offer about human being and capacities. We cannot talk about human being in *ideal* terms, as if it could be considered in light of its creation alone; rather the only human being we can talk about is the concrete, fallen human being who actually exists, the one who stands under judgment and in need of grace. A strength of this approach is that it prevents us from abstracting human being and life from the story of Scripture. It also challenges the sometimes unreflective embrace of certain types of natural theology within the Christian academy and rules out the instinctive deism that governs much of the wider academy's and sometimes even the church's account of God's relationship to creation. These things help make our thinking about God and the world less self-referential by prompting us to look to Christ and Scripture rather than ourselves in order to speak rightly about God and God's relationship with humanity. The question this approach leaves us with,

⁴⁹Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:142.

however, involves how it might relate to other approaches to the relationship between nature and grace, particularly Roman Catholic accounts, if it can relate to them at all.

Second, does Bonhoeffer's account—and especially the idea of the back-and-forth exchange between the academy and the church—place the Christian academy in some kind of elevated position within the church? Not really. In fact, the translation and application offered here—where I applied Bonhoeffer's theology to the context of the Christian academy—could be made, with some adjustments, to nearly every area of the church's life. Bonhoeffer would argue that every single member of the body of Christ has a responsibility to see the world through the lens of the crucifixion and resurrection, to live in intrinsic connection to church's being and mission, and to go out into the world and then return to the church to equip and challenge it to see the world as it is. The Christian academy is just one member doing what the *entire body* should be doing. We might even make the case that Bonhoeffer's approach gives us an idea of what the teaching office of the church looks like within the context of the priesthood of all believers. From the very beginning, Christians have believed that the Holy Spirit works to keep the church accountable as it reads Scripture, worships and follows Christ in the world. But there has been room to say that the Spirit works by gifting particular people within the church both to speak for the church and to call the church to reform if need be. Bonhoeffer's approach gives every Christian a way to participate in this process, because every Christian has the responsibility of calling the church to account, at least with respect to the church's mission in the world. Not everyone is in a position to instruct the church about its interpretation of Scripture or its worship, but every single believer, if he or she is obeying Christ's command to go out in the world, has the responsibility of keeping the church accountable to the reality of the world so it can truly live for the sake of the world. So, while everyone does not participate in the same way, every Christian has a role in teaching the church and calling it to account. The Christian academy certainly has a unique place in this process. The diversity of disciplines represented within it—as well as the fact that it is designed to train students to bring together their faith with their academic learning—

puts it at the forefront of the intersection of Christ and culture. But it does not stand at this intersection alone.

This connects to the third point. If Bonhoeffer is right, there is no way to for the church to be the church without seeking to know the world as it truly is, and the Christian academy is one way—although certainly not the only way—that the church gains this knowledge. This means that the Christian academy's work is valuable and important for the life and mission of the church. At the same time, if Bonhoeffer is right, then the Christian academy cannot do what it does faithfully apart from its intrinsic connection to the church and its mission. Serious academic learning goes hand in hand with a life of obedience to Christ *within* the church, and the aim of this life of obedience is to build up the church for the sake of the church's mission in the world. This conception of the relationship between the Christian academy and the church challenges the way that the academy thinks about its task. The academy's goal cannot be merely to offer a Christian perspective or worldview on higher education; rather, the goal has to be to form disciples who think and live faithfully *in* the church for the sake of the world. This means that academic instruction has to go hand in hand with concrete Christian practices such as worship, prayer, Bible study and service that take place on campus. But these practices on campus should be aimed toward prompting students to connect with and enrich the same practices off campus in their churches rather than serving as a replacement for the practices of their churches.

This brings us to the question of the fourth point: What church are we talking about here? Who is "the church" in Bonhoeffer's account? Bonhoeffer's answer would be: it is *Christ's* church, the church in which he proclaims himself in Word and sacrament. So, "the church" in his account conceivably could be any church in which believers hear Christ's Word and receive his sacrament. There is room for some flexibility here, given the fact that we are translating Bonhoeffer's thought to our own time and place. For example, one could talk about ordinances rather than sacraments and still fit Bonhoeffer's vision as outlined here, as long as one could talk with Paul about proclaiming the Lord's death every time one eats the bread and drinks the cup (1 Corinthians 11:26). In fact,

having a Christian academy whose members have differences within a larger gospel unity could enrich Bonhoeffer's vision, since this diversity would feed into exactly the kind of honest exchange that marks the academy's mission more generally. No one church is going to fit Bonhoeffer's vision of "the church" perfectly, and in many ways, that is the point: it is the ideal toward which we strive, and every member of the universal body is responsible for moving their local body in this direction in some way or another.

Fifth, and finally, what might Bonhoeffer's vision for the Christian academy actually look like in practice? Here goes an attempt: Imagine a student studying the natural sciences at a Christian liberal arts college. She approaches the content of her discipline fearlessly, refusing to shut herself off from any theory, idea or fact in it. She is confident that this world is *God's* world, and that whatever she finds there will be consistent with who he is and what he has revealed. And yet figuring out *how* it is consistent is not immediately obvious; it takes disciplined effort and a long-term commitment. She has to proceed in the process with discernment, honesty and courage. She does so in community with her fellow students, faculty and staff, and also in community with her local church. She worships, reads Scripture, prays and obeys within both of these communities, with the life of each community enriching her experience of the other. Her academic studies do not pull her away from Scripture, but rather, they prompt her to go more deeply into it, searching it to see whether or not what she is learning in her discipline corresponds to it. Perhaps at times she lives in tension, unable to find immediate answers. Sometimes she has to challenge her discipline, rejecting its claims and explanations in light of the claims of Scripture; other times, she brings what she has learned from her discipline back to her church, asking questions and challenging her church to think anew and afresh about what it is doing in light of what she has learned. This does not detract from her faith in Christ or her commitment to her church; rather, it prompts her to hold more tightly to them, because she sees the very task of working through these questions as an act of obedience to Christ and his mission. Now imagine a business student doing the same thing in the same church. An anthropology professor. An artist. A psychologist.

Now imagine people from outside the academy doing the same thing in that church: a foster care case worker, a local businesswoman, a nurse, a retiree, a politician, a server at a restaurant, an recent immigrant, the list goes on. Imagine all of them living in the pattern of bringing the questions and experiences of their lives in the world back to the church to ask questions of the church. Now imagine the church listening to these testimonies, accepting the challenges these questions pose instead of closing its ears to them; turning to Scripture and prayer for discernment; working together to figure out what Christ is calling them to do as a church; and then going out to meet the world that it now understands more clearly as it *really* is, and doing so in the name of Jesus Christ. *This* is Bonhoeffer's concrete picture of how those inside the Christian academy live with those outside it within one church. It is a picture of a community with one hand firmly grasped onto the world, refusing to let it go, while its other hand is firmly grasped by Christ himself, sitting at the right hand of the Father. In this position the church stands between two worlds, its arms stretched out across history, its very life bearing witness to the crucified one for the sake of the world's salvation.

BONHOEFFER, CHRIST AND CULTURE

**EDITED BY KEITH L. JOHNSON
AND TIMOTHY LARSEN**

 **IVP Academic**
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois